



“A PART OF MY HEART BELONGS HERE AND A PART IN GREECE.”

MARIA BENARDIS,
 author of *My Greek Family Table*

Described by one food critic as “evangelic” about her homeland cuisine, Maria Benardis, 40, was born in Australia, but following the death of her mother Ioanna in 1972, when Maria was three and half, she was sent to live with her grandmother, Katina, on the Greek island of Psara. Maria spends six weeks a year in Greece gathering local recipes. If she smells an interesting dish being cooked, she will knock politely and ask to watch and learn while it is prepared! Her Sydney cooking school, Greekalicious, has become synonymous with the Greek way of preparing and eating food with “love, simplicity, spirituality and intuition”, she explains. *My Greek Family Table* (Penguin, 2009) is her long-awaited collection of recipes, coupled with anecdotes and “the best culinary advice this side of Athens!” For Maria, Australia was a foreign land too, when she relocated back as a young girl.

What were your first impressions of arriving in your new country?

It was a little bit overwhelming in Australia. The island of Psara where I had lived was simple – there were approximately 400 people, there was no electricity and believe it or not, no flushing toilets. The main form of transport was a donkey. We had to grow most things and we relied on the land and the sea for our food.

How challenging was it to set up home and find friends in a brand new world?

It was extremely difficult to adjust and settle in, and I had to learn English. Making friends was not easy. Most other kids thought I came from another planet when they looked in my lunchbox and saw souvlaki or moussaka. I thought their Vegemite sandwiches were equally bizarre. Funnily enough, I now love Vegemite.

How important is it to speak the native tongue? Were there cultural differences you needed to learn?

It is vital. Relying on people’s body language and gestures can be misleading



Maria Benardis found food to be a culture shock after moving back to Australia.

and confusing, as I often found. Adjusting to the food in Australia was a culture shock, too. There was a communal oven on the island and often we would share our food and comment on each others’ dishes. Here, everyone appeared to cook in their own oven!

Has your experience changed your notion of what home means?

I have never been able to completely settle in Australia. A part of my heart belongs here and a part in Greece. I find that I have to travel back to Greece as often as I can to settle my emotions.

Is ‘love in a different climate’ an altogether different experience?

We tend to have wonderful experiences with love when we are away travelling, at peace and more relaxed. My love

for life, people and food seems to heighten when I am travelling around the Greek islands. It must be the food, wine, clear blue skies, the healing sun and the sweet music of the sea.

What has been your most glorious achievement?

There have been many. My most memorable is the release of my first cookbook, *My Greek Family Table*, and of course sharing Greek food with people.

Would you encourage loved ones to take the overseas plunge? If so, what would your mantra for their journey be?

Absolutely – living and travelling overseas broadens the mind and makes you realise what is truly important in life: happiness in simplicity. My mantra would be an ancient Greek proverb: Live today; forget the past.