



## cooking the books

Susan Parsons

*My Greek Family Table*, by Maria Benardis. (Penguin, October 2009 \$59.95)



To recapture old Athens, I go to the Kafeneio upstairs at the Hellenic Club in Woden. The men play cards, the coffee is made in a tiny, long-handled copper pan and biscuits are homemade kourambiethes or koulourakia.

Maria Benardis spent her early childhood on the island of Psara, and has worked for Neil Perry in Sydney where she now runs a cooking school, Greekalicious. Her reminiscences and recipes capture the essence of Greece with traditional ingredients including feta, pomegranate seeds, yoghurt, kalamata olives, wild oregano and vine leaves. Their taste is palpable through her words and photography by former Canberran Alan Benson.

Mastic gum is her secret, infused with olive oil and added to prawns, mayonnaise or in liqueur with ricotta cakes. Filo is baked in leek triangles, Hellenic meat pies (kreatopita), lamb or tomato or caramelised onion parcels. I baked asparagus, the spear of love to ancient Greeks, with oregano, crumbled feta and lemon zest and with the bay tree waving out the window, plan to make Santorini caper and tomato sauce to serve on sardines. Every dish is worth placing on your table.



*Where the Heart Is*, by Karen Martini. (Penguin, October 2009 (hardback 2006), \$39.95)

Karen Martini is the downunder version of the Nigella Lawson – both brunettes, both well-built, intuitive cooks. This book was first published in 2006 but Martini's dimples continue to brighten our living rooms each week on *Better Homes and Gardens*.

With a name like Martini, it's no surprise that the start of a meal most excites her.

The hungry reader will revel in the extensive choices in a section she calls "Beginnings".

Take her obsession with certain ingredients – artichokes, try them braised with almonds, with fusilli or in a salad. Next is fennel baked with parmesan, served with black mussels and linguine, or pork chops and orange, or pan-fried snapper.

Finally peas, with braised cannelloni beans, chow-mein beef, crumbed zucchini flowers or escalopes of ocean trout.

Lemon juice, chilli, garlic and fresh herbs feature heavily in "middles", including lots of free-range chicken recipes.

Blossoms cover my cherry tree and the bottle of rosewater I purchased at Herbie's Spices earlier this year will be used in cherry and watermelon salad with rosewater and yoghurt semifreddo, though you might prefer rosewater in a syrup poured over honey dumpling doughnuts.