

2nd Gymnasium of Heraklion

Traditional Cretan Christmas food



In Greece we love and cherish **Christmas** and nearly every sub-region of Greece has its traditional food favorites. Crete, of course, has its own culinary traditions. For the visitors of Crete, the exploration of the island's local cuisine during Christmas holiday is an additional journey of discovery and a significant culinary experience.

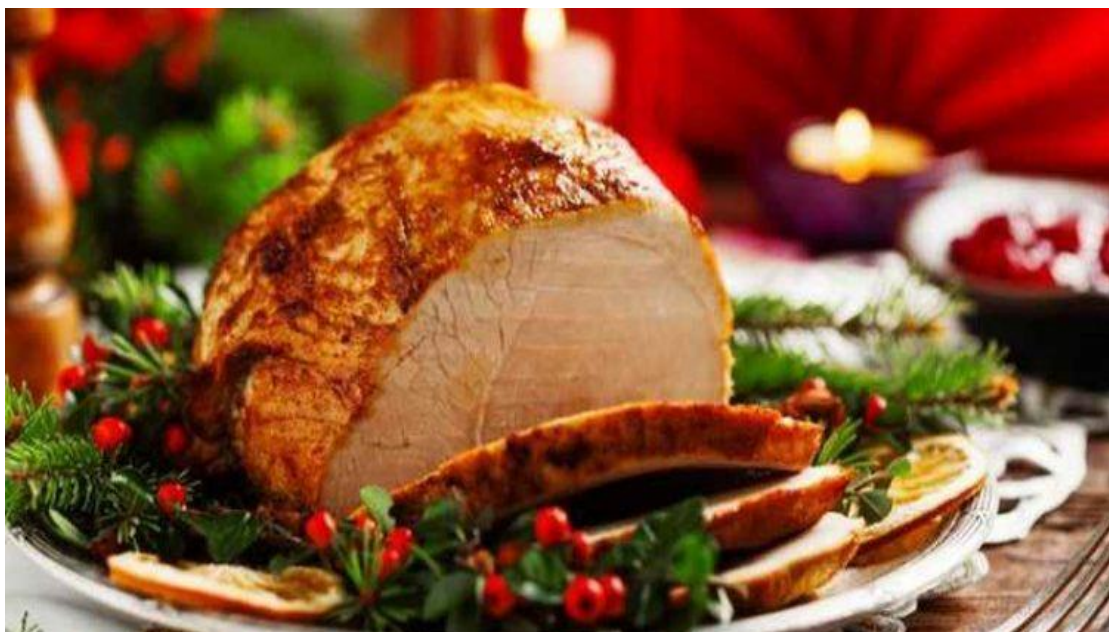
The **Christmas** season, known as **Dodekaimero** (twelve days), is in full swing by December 24 and will last until January 6th, the Feast of Epiphany. No dining table would be complete without a platter of **kourambiethes**, **melomakarona** and **Xerotigana**, the traditional Christmas treats to tempt guests throughout the holiday. **Melomakarona** are oil-based cookies dipped in a syrup of cinnamon and honey, and then sprinkled with crumbled nuts. **Kourabiethes** are short-bread almond cookies rolled generously in confectioner's sugar. The basic ingredients for **Xerotigana** are honey, cinnamon, flower and nuts.



Christmas is a special holiday in Greece that is dedicated to family and good friends. Unlike the rest of the western World, traditionally Greeks do not celebrate Christmas on Christmas Eve, but rather celebrate it on **Christmas day, by having an extravagant lunch**. Depending on where you are in the country you will get to taste and enjoy different dishes. **Pork** though –however it may be cooked- plays a major role almost all over the country.



Christmas Lunch starts early and it can last for much longer than expected, if the mood is right, which it usually is. As per tradition, everyone gathers at the house of the grandparents or of the elder members of the family. At this gathering, the extended family is present along with close friends.



In Crete specifically, the festivities begin when the Christmas **hog** is served: an oven-baked **pork** prepared with lemon leaves, which give the dish a special fragrance. Traditional **sausages**, **apaki** (cured pork), **Brawn** or “**Tsiladia**”, **tsigarides** (crispy suet) and other pork-based Cretan delicacies are also prepared from the meat of the pig.



In addition, **Christopsomo, the Christmas bread**, is served, which is a special festive semi-sweet, light, buttery bread, infused with cinnamon, orange and cloves, and is perhaps the most important Cretan food tradition and considered as blessed bread. This used to be the main feature of Christmas meal, in the countryside of Crete. Beautifully decorated and golden, it occupied the centre of the table. Its preparation was -and still is- something of a ritual: first the leaven, then the lighting of the fire, the kneading, the shaping... especially the shaping! In most parts of the island, it had a large cross in its centre, which, if looked at side-ways, shows the letter X, the first letter of the Greek word for Christ. In other regions, the cross stood above the branches of a tree, also made of dough, on top of the Christmas bread. In different parts of the island, it was more or less decorated with partridges, flowers and so on. Only the head of the family was allowed to cut this bread: holding the knife like a priest of ancient times, he made the sign of the cross, wished all those present (everyone was standing) a Happy Christmas and then cut the bread.



The Greek table for the **New Year** celebrations is made of dishes shaped by regional traditions and customs coming from all over Greece as well. In fact, there's no other celebration in the Greek calendar carrying such a deep symbolism, since it's associated with luck, prosperity, welfare, and happiness, as it is the first day of the year.



Blessed with many fine culinary delights and traditions, the **New Year's Eve** festive table is adorned with **vassilopita** with which Greeks traditionally welcome the New Year. Cutting the traditional sweet cake, which contains a hidden coin, is one of the traditions locals follow with devotion, hoping to find the coin that is said to bring them blessings throughout the whole year.

Vassilopita is named after Saint Basil whose memory is celebrated on 1st January. It is the main custom in Greece for New year. It's one which we encounter throughout Greece, though naturally with local variations having to do with the ingredients of the cake. In some places it's a cake, though there are also parts where it's a savory or sweet pie. There are even places where it's a bread. In all cases, the cake or pie is round and has a coin hidden inside it.



Most Greeks cut the **Vassilopita** immediately after the turn of the year. In some areas, however, the pie or cake is cut at the lunch table on Saint Basil's Day (1st January). But whenever the pie's cut, the same procedure is followed. The father of the family rotates the pie three times in the name of Trinity. Afterwards he makes the sign of the Cross three times over it with a knife and then starts cutting the pieces. The first is for Christ, the second for His Mother, the third for Saint Basil, the fourth for the house, the fifth for the poor and stranger and the rest for the members of the family in order of age from eldest to youngest.

Recipes

Grilled Pork



Ingredients

1 suckling pig

3-4 lemons cut into slices

½ cup olive oil

Salt, pepper

Oregano, rosemary

Wash the piglet, cut it with a sharp knife but not entirely, put salt and lemon slices in the slits and let it stand for a few hours.

Baste the pig with the oil mixed with pepper and oregano and place it upside down in a large baking tin, upon wine or thyme twigs.

Roast at low temperature for as long as it takes to get colour and become tender. Half way through, turn it over.

Pork with potatoes



Ingredients

1.5 kg pork leg

1.2 kg/ 8 medium potatoes, cut into wedges

juice of 3 oranges

juice of 2 lemons

2 tbsps mustard

1 tbsp honey

2 tbsps olive oil

1 clove of garlic

some fresh rosemary

some fresh thyme

salt and freshly ground pepper

Rub the pork well with salt and place on large baking. Peel and cut the potatoes into wedges and place in the pan.

Into a large bowl, add the orange juice, the lemon juice, the mustard, honey and olive oil and blend with a wooden spoon, until the ingredients are combined. Pour the mixture over the pork and the potatoes. Add one whole clove of garlic and sprinkle the pork with some fresh rosemary. Season the potatoes and sprinkle with fresh thyme.

Preheat the oven at 200 C and roast for approximately 1 hour and a half. It should be in the oven as many hours as the kilos of the pork.

Brawn or “Tsiladia”



“Tsiladia” or brawn, was prepared using the head and the feet of the pig on the day after Christmas. Left to set in an earthenware pot (the cold weather of the season helped), it was served on New Year’s Day. It was an indispensable addition to the New Year’s feast. Today, this delicacy is prepared all the year round.

Ingredients

pig’s head

or 2 kilos of pork meat (boneless)

pig’s trotters

the peel of an orange

1 cup orange or bitter orange juice

1 cup lemon juice

½ cup vinegar

salt, cumin, pepper

a little nutmeg

After cleaning the head and the trotters thoroughly, boil them in salted water until properly cooked, at least two hours and a half. Remove the pot from the heat and when the meat is cold enough, remove the bones. (The ears remain as such; they are one of the best parts of “tsiladia”).

Strain the broth and add some water to have about 7 cups of liquid in all. Add the boneless meat chopped up and the juices (orange or bitter orange and lemon), the vinegar, the orange peel and the spices. Bring the mixture to the boil, remove from the fire and let it cool.

Divide the brawn into several earthenware bowls (according to the quantity prepared), taking care that the liquid covers all the pieces.

Put the brawn in the refrigerator to set and keep it there. With a spoon, remove the fat from the surface, before serving.

“Apaki”



“Apaki” is a smoked meat, known since Byzantine times and very common on Crete. It was made with the tender meat around the kidneys. A delicacy in Venetian times, it was to be found in most Cretan households.

The meat used for “apaki” is cut in strips and left in a bowl with vinegar for 3-4 days. Then it is salted, peppered and hung over the fire-place. Several, freshly gathered Cretan aromatic herbs (oregano, sage, bay leaves and others) are then burnt and the fire is covered with the ashes so as to make it smoke profusely. The meat is cooked in this fashion with the smoke and can be kept for many weeks.

Christopsomo, the Christmas bread



Ingredients

2 kilos of flour

1 piece yeast

1 1/2 cup of olive oil

3 cups of tea sugar

1 teaspoon cinnamon

1 1/2 teaspoon cloves crushed

1 teaspoon crushed mahlepi *

1 teaspoon anise

1 teaspoon coriander

2 vanillas

2 pieces of mastic (crushed with a little sugar)

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 cup of orange juice

1/2 teaspoon salt

4 nuts

1 cup of sesame

In a bowl, dissolve the yeast with two tea cups of lukewarm water, add half the flour and a little oil. Work the mixture to absorb the liquid and become a little thin dough. Cover with warm cotton towel and leave in a warm place. Boil half a cup of water with coriander and anise, strain and let cool down. When the dough has doubled in volume add the sugar, salt, spices, the remaining olive oil, the juice from the cooked coriander and anise, orange juice and finally the remaining flour, which you mix with the baking powder. Knead the mixture with quick and powerful movements (if you put it in the mixer, set it to work on medium speed). If the dough is too thin, add a little flour on top. To work easier, dip your hands every so often in warm water. When you obtain a smooth and homogeneous dough, cover with two cotton towels and leave in a warm place until it doubles in volume. Divide the dough into quarters for 4 pieces of round Christopsomo, saving a little dough for the decorative crosses. Shape each one into a round loaf. With the dough you saved roll out a thin rope and put it on the Christopsomo in the shape of the cross. Place in the center on top a nut and sprinkle with plenty of sesame. Bake the loaves onto two oiled sheets for 45 to 55 minutes at 180° C, until golden brown.



Vassilopita, the New Year's cake



Ingredients

3 1/2 cups (525 grams) sifted all-purpose flour

2 teaspoons baking powder

pinch of salt

1 cup (225 grams) unsalted butter, softened

2 cups (400 grams) white granulated sugar

6 large eggs

1 tablespoon orange rind, tightly packed

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2 tablespoons (30 ml) cognac or brandy

1 cup (250 ml) milk

Approximately 1/3 cup (45 grams) icing sugar, for dusting on top of the vasilopita

Preheat oven to 350 degrees Fahrenheit (180* C)

In a large bowl, combine the sifted flour, baking powder and salt. Mix together with a whisk or a fork. Set aside.

In the bowl of an electric mixer, at medium speed, cream together the butter and sugar. Beat until well combined and smooth, approximately 3 – 4 minutes.

To the sugar and butter add the eggs, one at a time. Beat well after each egg is added. Then, add the orange rind, vanilla extract and cognac. Mix well.

Slowly add one cup of the flour to the bowl of the electric mixer. Mix well. Then, add the milk and the remaining flour. Mix well, over low speed to prevent too much splattering. When the ingredients have been combined, turn the speed to medium and continue beating for another minute or two. Your batter should be smooth and without any lumps.

Take a 10 inch round baking pan and grease the bottom and sides with a thin layer of vegetable oil. Line the bottom of the pan with parchment paper.

Take a silver coin and wash it well. Dry the coin and then wrap it in securely in food grade plastic wrap or aluminum foil. Set aside.

Pour the batter into the prepared cake pan. Smooth out the batter so it is spread evenly in the pan. Using a knife, make an indentation in the batter in order to make it easy for you to slip the coin in. Be sure that the coin does not poke out the top of the vasilopita batter. Smooth the top once again.

Bake your vasilopita in the middle rack of your oven for approximately 60-70 minutes. You can check that it is done by inserting a clean toothpick into the center of the cake. If it comes out clean, with only crumbs attached to it (no wet batter), then your vasilopita is ready. Remember each oven is different, therefore, start checking your cake after 55 minutes.

Allow to cool in the cake pan for about 5 minutes and then remove it from the pan and allow it to cool fully on a cake rack. Once it is fully cooled, sprinkle the top with some icing sugar, and serve.



Kourabiethes



Ingredients

700 grams butter

300 grams olive-oil

½ cup caster sugar

3 yolks and 1 egg white

1 teaspoon baking soda

3 tbsps cognac

1 tbsp cinnamon powder

700 grams blanched and roughly ground almonds in their skins

About 1200 grams flour

½ kilo caster sugar

In a large bowl beat the butter and the oil with the sugar until fluffy. Stir in the beaten eggs, the soda diluted in the cognac, the cinnamon and the almonds. Gradually combine the flour with the mixture and knead thoroughly until the dough is malleable. Take pieces of dough the size of a walnut and give them either a round or an oblong shape. Bake the kourabiethes for 15-20 minutes. When they are slightly cold, shift caster sugar over the until they are completely dusted.

Melomakarona



Ingredients

1,5 cups olive oil

½ cup caster sugar

½ cup orange and lemon juice

1 teaspoon grated orange rind

1 teaspoon clove and cinnamon powder

2 teaspoons baking soda

½ cup raki or cognac

1 teaspoon baking powder

1 kilo flour (more or less)

The syrup: 1 cup honey

1 cup sugar

1 cup water

1 stick of cinnamon

Ground walnuts and cinnamon powder

Beat the oil and the sugar together and then add the cinnamon and the clove, the orange rind, the soda diluted in the fruit juice, the baking powder diluted in the raki and finally the flour, little by little until you have soft dough that doesn't stick to the hands. Knead thoroughly and then take pieces of dough the size of a small egg and make them oblong. Place on baking sheet or in oiled baking pan, far apart, and bake in a moderate oven for about 20 minutes, until golden brown.

While they are cooling prepare the syrup. While the syrup is boiling over low heat, dip the melomakarona in for 1 minute to absorb syrup and to moisten. Take them out with a slotted spoon, put on to a plate and sprinkle with the mixture of walnuts and cinnamon.

Xerotigana



Ingredients

1 kilo flour

½ cup raki or lemon juice

1 tbsp olive oil

1 tbsp salt

As much water as needed (about 2 cups)

For the syrup:

2 cups sugar

2 cups water

1 cinnamon stick

1 cup honey

3 tbsps lemon juice

cinnamon powder and ground nuts for the sprinkling

Knead rather smooth and elastic dough with the above ingredients. Roll out the dough to long, almost paper-thin strips, 3 cm wide and 25 cm long. Heat the oil in a pan. Wrap one strip at a time around your fingers, first using two fingers, then three and then four; stick the edge and deep fry. With the help of two forks, turn these rings upside down, taking care not to spoil the shape. When each fritter is nice and brown, take it out of the pan and place it on a kitchen roll.

Prepare the syrup when all the fritters are ready. Boil the sugar in water, with the cinnamon, for 5 minutes and then add the honey and the lemon. Dip each fritter in the very hot syrup and when you take it out, place it on a dish and sprinkle with nuts (or sesame seeds) and the cinnamon.



Food is a great vehicle for sharing culture with people from different countries or backgrounds. The ingredients, methods of preparation and types of food eaten at different meals vary among cultures. The particular tasty influences of a country or its unique cuisine may reflect its history, the lifestyle, the values and the beliefs of the people living there. “To break bread together,” a phrase as old as the Bible, captures the power of a meal to forge relationships, bury anger, provoke laughter. Coming together and sharing a meal is the most communal and binding thing in almost every place in the world.

Food Unites the World!