



New Year food special: from learning the secrets of perfect tzatziki to indulging in the ultimate gourmet destination

Making my own big fat Greek feast

By **Sally Hamilton**

I'VE always wanted to know how to make tzatziki,' says Jane, a fellow guest at Costa Navarino, a five-star resort tucked back from the glorious west coast of the Peloponnese peninsula of mainland Greece.

We've both taken an afternoon off from sunbathing, swimming and relaxing to join others who want to learn to cook – traditional Greek style.

We have gathered in a kitchen at a nearby stone-built home in the hills overlooking the historic Bay of Navarino. Holding court are the delightful Anna and Loula, who begin by teaching us how to make the refreshing yogurt and cucumber dip tzatziki, an essential accompaniment for any Greek meal.

Their day job is to cater for many a Big Fat Greek wedding but they also enjoy sharing their knowledge and love of local delicacies with visitors to Messinia, one of the least tourist-trodden regions of Greece.

Since we don't speak Greek and the hosts have only a smattering of English, there is a good deal of gesticulating, demonstrating and pointing.

I'm later charged with grating three courgettes to mix with olive oil, eggs, chopped onion, mint, flour and salty feta before it is scooped into a

dish and baked for 40 minutes.

Next is the preparation of hilopites, traditional Greek noodles. Flour, eggs, milk and salt are the only ingredients – along with a dollop of elbow grease to knead the doughy mixture into the right consistency.

Then the fun part starts – rolling out the dough with a long wooden pin thinner than a broomstick. Once I have made a circle the size of a giant pizza, I roll it up around the pin. I then take a knife and split it open lengthwise against the pin. This

creates a layering effect of the flattened dough. I slice it – with direction from our hosts – into short, broad noodles which are then tossed in flour ready for cooking later.

While we are at work, we nibble on lalaggides – Greek pancakes – served with delicious golden honey.

A simple Greek salad and chicken in tomato sauce are also prepared, and in no time we are sitting down to savour the feast we have created.

Over a late lunch, there is plenty of chat about other favourite Greek specialities, including kleftiko – lamb slow-cooked in spices.

The rough translation is 'thieves' dinner' – so named because several hundred years ago, fugitives escaping despotic rule in Greece were forced to steal their rulers' animals and then cook the meat in covered



fire pits to avoid detection.

For those who prefer a less hands-on culinary adventure, they will find foodie heaven back at Costa Navarino's Westin Resort. Award-winning chefs prepare exquisite menus with local ingredients in 13 restaurants. We sampled Armyra (Greek), Da Luigi (a buzzy Italian) and Flame, serving mouthwatering steaks.

But my favourite was the fish restaurant Barbouni. I selected my own sea bass from the display before having it freshly grilled. You can dine there only at lunchtime to protect nesting turtles from artificial light on their path to the sea at night.

Olive oil is practically compulsory with most meals at Costa Navarino and across Messinia. The region produces its fair share of the glorious 'liquid gold' from vast plantations of ancient groves.

During our stay, we attend an olive oil tasting session at the resort, given by 'sommelier' Kristina Stribakou. She tells us that when tasting, you need to suck air through your teeth to experience the full flavour. It's a noisy business.

Kristina explains how the most sought-after olive oil is extra virgin. And to get the best results for her own oil that she produces nearby, the juice from the olives must be squeezed out just as the fruit turns from green to purple. The process needs to be carried out at a temperature no higher than 14C – cold-pressed, in the jargon.

Her oil uses the native Koroneiki olive, which is unsuitable for eating but perfect for oil-making.

I couldn't agree more.

● *Sally Hamilton was a guest of Costa Navarino (costanavarino.com). Seven nights' B&B costs from £1,750pp. Return flights with Aegean (en.aegeanair.com) from Heathrow or Gatwick to Athens start from £80.*



KEEPING COOL: The vaulted ceiling in the lobby of the Westin Resort

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WHAT'S COOKING? Class leaders Anna and Loula