

# THE CRETAN INSPIRATION FOR WORLD CLASS CUISINE

BY ELENI VLASTOS-RANNEY

It only takes a moment to spot George Vutetakis at the local farmer's market. He doesn't just look, touch and smell the fresh fruits and vegetables on display. He's the one talking to the vendors and farmers to find out everything he can about the food they're selling.

His mantra has always been "know where your food comes from". Working with the local organic farmers, whom he claims are the real heroes behind every great chef's cuisine, he continues to share his love of food through his website, consultations, and television appearances.

George Vutetakis, celebrated chef, restaurateur, author, and teacher has created amazing food that he's sharing with everyone in his recently released book:

"Vegetarian Traditions – Favorite Recipes from My Years At the Legendary Inn Season Café". Knowing what we are eating, respecting where the food comes from, and incorporating it into our daily routine are three important elements in the book. His education and career has taken him to all corners of the globe. From India to New York to Montreal to Michigan to California (his current home—San Diego), he mastered his craft.

On a recent book tour in Michigan, my sister, Erasmia Novotny, and I had the opportunity to meet George and talk to him about how his Cretan background has influenced his love of

food and how his use of fresh, organic, flavorful, and sustainable vegetables transforms the most basic of ingredients into a feast for the eyes and taste buds. George comments:

"As we say: "everything began in Greece!" which is especially true for me. My Cretan heritage has been the foundation for understanding the beautiful language of food; I learned what good taste was from my yia yia which I translated into delicious vegetarian recipes."

What he learned in his Yiayia's kitchen and from his father's stories, has worked their way into his vegetarian recipes. His culinary creations tell stories, not all that dissimilar to the stories he heard growing up from his father, Spyro.

George began his culinary career as a student in India. He later ran a

restaurant in Manhattan, helped feed Bangladesh refugees, and catered dinners for diplomats in Washington, D.C. Eventually, he settled in metropolitan Detroit, where he was the head chef at Inn Season Café in Royal Oak. Four years later, in 1985, he also became the owner of this award winning restaurant, bringing it to national prominence.

After nearly two decades, Chef George sold his restaurant and began writing and teaching. Over 150 recipes are included in his current book, many of which are accompanied by fascinating stories explaining their genesis. Along with several Greek (and Cretan!) dishes, Chef George shares recipes he created at Inn Season Café that represent the cultures of India, Spain, Persia, and Mexico, and many that are a blend of local and international



ingredients and cooking styles.

He also shares his food knowledge, cooking tips, pod cast demonstrations and delicious vegan recipes on his popular blog: [www.thevegetarianguy.com](http://www.thevegetarianguy.com).

“My dad lived to be Greek and the Greek lived within him. As he was taught by his parents and their Greek-American community, he instilled Greek thought into my brother and me from the very beginning. Important to him beyond the obvious significance of Greek history was the temperament, trials and toils of modern Greeks, our peers across the ocean. My father gave equal time to both his mother’s family

(Stratigakis) and his father’s, Vutetakis. Each had fascinating backgrounds and played significant roles in shaping the political landscape of modern Crete.”

His Pancretan ties can be traced back to his Aunt and Uncle, Harry and Irene Laggeris. They both served on the board of the Knossos Chapter in Canton, Ohio, and were early contributors to the Pancretan Endowment Fund. George has cousins in Detroit that belong to the Cretan Ladies Chapter. His father, Spyros, his grandfather, James, and his uncle, George, were all featured in Pancretan’s Veteran Commemorative Album, published in 2005.

His father’s amazing memories of his experiences during World War II are chronicled in George’s blog.

There’s an old saying: “home is where the heart is”. After reading his book and listening to the stories of his family and his trips to Crete, it’s clear that, no matter where he lives or works, George’s heart is in Crete.

“For me, like my father, I do not see this as work, but as a duty I relish and work that helps people to understand—what it means to be Greek, what it means to have dignity as a human right and the value of living each moment as a gift of God.”

## A recipe, with an excerpt of its "story" from "Vegetarian Traditions":



### Lima Bean and Basil Hummus

It was the summer of 1987 in Plakoures, Crete. With a stroke of good timing fresh green lima beans had been harvested from the sun-drenched, rocky fields just before I arrived. The Plakoures kitchen was a place of sweet voices, laughter and enticing aromas. The food reflected the love this family shared with us. The creamy green flavor of lima and freshly pressed olive oil with a touch of locally harvested sea salt melted in the mouth. The flavors in this dish transport me back to Crete with memories of good company, plentiful sun and sweet Mediterranean air.

Serves 4 to 6

- 2-1/2 cups fresh lima beans, shelled
- 1/2 cup packed fresh basil leaves
- 1/4 teaspoon garlic, minced fine
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
- 1/4 teaspoon sea salt
- 1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

(if fresh lima beans are not available, fava, green peas, or frozen limas can be substituted)

Bring 4-1/2 cups of water to a boil and add lima beans. Simmer until tender (optionally, steam until soft). Drain lima beans and reserve. Place basil, garlic, olive oil, lemon, sea salt and water in a food processor. Blend until smooth, add lima beans and puree. Best to refrigerate 30 minutes before serving allowing flavors to meld. Drizzle with olive oil and serve with bread or crackers. Serve room temperature or cold.

### Read...eat...live!

## A conversation with Chef George Vutetakis

### Where were you born and raised?

I was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. My parents moved the family to Albany, New York when I was three and then to Shaker Heights, Ohio, just outside of Cleveland when I was ten. My father wanted to be near his parents, James and Anthe Vutetakis, who were living in Canton, Ohio since 1924. As a result of this move, I was able to spend more time in my Yia Yia’s kitchen.

A close connection between the family living in the U.S. and the large extended family located in Greece has continued due to the efforts of Yia Yia and subsequently through my father, Spyros Vutetakis. I have visited her ancestral Stratigakis family home of Plakoures (in Akrotiri) and the Vutetakis of Kephala (in Apokorona) many times over the years with Yia Yia, my father and my son Spyros, who has also chosen a vegetarian lifestyle.

Although I haven’t been to Greece recently, I stay in touch with the family there and the spirit and culture influences everything I do. I look forward to taking my wife for her first visit.

## What led you to become a vegetarian?

My commitment to a vegetarian lifestyle started in my teens when I first became interested in Yoga, leading to travels to India where I studied and learned to cook. It is said that ancient Greek culture was much more Eastern than Western, and while in India I discovered many connections between Greek and Indian cooking. Those connections blended with my Cretan passion for life and food became the foundation of my cuisine.

## What is it about Cretan cooking and food that you think differentiates it from other Greek food?

Authentic Cretan cuisine is considered one of the healthiest cuisines in the world. A long-standing tradition of wild foraging of greens and edible plants has remained somewhat intact to this day. At the historic agora in Chania, there are still people who come down from the mountains to sell the gathered harvest.

Another notable aspect of Cretan cuisine is their olive oil. It has a perfect balance of acids and flavor. Crete has the highest per capita consumption of olive oil in the world--35kg per person annually. The diet overall has been found to be a model for longevity. The EPIC cancer study (Seven Countries Study) done over an eighteen-year period from the 1950s to the 1970s found 25% less cancer and heart disease as well as significant reductions of life-shortening chronic diseases in the agricultural population of Crete.

To me, food is much more than ingredients thrown together for nourishment; it is also a language in which many dialects are spoken--a basic form of expression and communication, also at the heart of Cretan culture.

## Is there a history of vegetarianism in Greek culture?

Notable vegetarian traditions have existed in Greek culture since ancient times, such as Pythagoras' teachings and the sacred vegetarian cult of Apollo Genetor on the island on Delos. In the Christian era, lent was 40 days of vegetarian eating every year and numerous recipes were developed over the centuries, becoming mainstays of the diet.

## How do Cretans react to a 'vegetarian' approach to food preparation? (especially at Easter!)

Of course there was frequently the stereotypical response of "what no kreas!?!?" However, once a conversation progressed and we began to discuss the history and virtues of Cretan culture, the initial reaction subsided. The recipe for kaletsounia with sorrel in my book, honors the

Easter tradition of this dish. My relatives were very accommodating and would make special vegetarian dishes for me, especially my Yia Yia. It was never difficult for them because of the many traditional vegetarian recipes to choose from.

One of my favorite recipes in the book is Swiss chard horta. Contrary to the modern name, Swiss chard is indigenous to Italy and Greece. The most common green used for both kaletsounia and horta is "vleeta" (known as lamb's quarters here), as well as mustard, amaranth and purslane. These rediscovered vegetables have become some of the

latest ingredients to be featured on menus of trendy chefs; Dr. Mehmet Oz touts them as "super-foods" on his TV show. It is time for us to reclaim our rightful heritage and to use these healthy greens in our Cretan-American food today.

## How has industrialization affected the Cretan diet?

For centuries, meat was usually consumed for holidays, baptisms and special occasions in Crete. The mainstays of the diet were either plant based or from the sea. With modern practices of factory farming, meat went from a special occasion food to the primary food in a meal, often to the detriment of personal health. This occurred not only in Crete, but also around the world.

As Greek-Americans, a good part of our cultural preservation is through the dishes we prepare and share. Unfortunately, many of the traditional foods we prepare in this country are frequently the fat-laden, special-occasion dishes which used to be consumed infrequently. In addition, the quality and type of ingredients are poor. For instance, it is only recently that good olive oil has been readily available here and dairy products in Crete were almost always from local sheep or goats, not from cows. Over fishing and pollution has even turned the treasured Mediterranean Sea into an unreliable source of healthy food.

## What can we do to embrace this lifestyle?

Focus on the rich heritage of Cretan plant-based cuisine. This is the heart of what I share in my book *Vegetarian Traditions*. The recipes are a sampling of the immense repertoire of dishes served at my former restaurant, Inn Season Cafe in Royal Oak, Michigan. Many of the dishes were the most requested and the recipes were kept secret for three decades. The book has been published in cooperation with the current owners of the restaurant, which is still thriving.

In addition to the book, I have a web site and a blog, [www.thevegetarianguy.com](http://www.thevegetarianguy.com). It features stories, recipes and videos. There is also a free membership in which I periodically share recipes with members.

