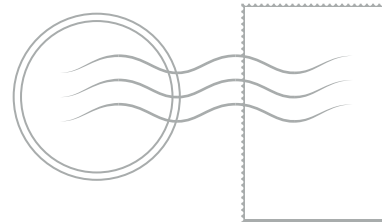


DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | SIFNOS

POSTCARD

Sifnos, Greece



Food is baked into the culture of this tiny island, discovers **Ella Buchan**

Food is everywhere in Sifnos, part of the western Cyclades chain of islands in Greece's South Aegean region. It's in the air, fragranced with wild thyme, sun-baked figs and rich, meaty aromas wafting from tiny tavernas. It's carved into the hilly landscape, tamed by agricultural terraces, and it's on the plates and platters offered pretty much everywhere I visit.

When I arrive at Narlis Farm, close to the island's main town, Apollonia, I'm offered pickled vine leaves, tangy tzatziki, a thick, earthy paste of yellow split peas, and a clay pot of *mastelo* – lamb marinated in red wine and baked overnight.

It's mid-afternoon and I'm here for a cooking class rather than a meal. Yet food is as standard a greeting here as a "hello" or a handshake (though, in fact, you're more likely to be greeted with a hug).

The local crops are mostly dry-farmed, which makes them "extra tasty", George Narlis tells me. He and wife Dina offer traditional meals and culinary lessons in a small, fire-warmed outbuilding. I'm here to make *revithada*, a chickpea stew that takes two days to cook. The pulses, grown a few steps away, are soaked overnight then added to an earthenware pot with olive oil, onions, water and a couple of bay leaves. George uses a wooden stick to push this to the depths of a wood-fired oven, where it will bake until the following lunchtime.

Sifnos is just nine miles long by five miles wide and home to fewer than 3,000 residents. Yet it has long punched above its weight when it comes to food. The first Greek cookbook, *Odigos Mageirikis* ("Cooking Guide"), was authored by Sifnian chef Nikolaos Tselementes in the 1930s. The island hosts a culinary festival in his name each September. Its reputation, along with the intense flavours of its produce, attracts restaurateurs and up-and-coming chefs from Athens and beyond.

There's more food laid out when I return to Narlis Farm on Sunday. Dina serves small, robust cups of coffee with lemon-laced biscotti: something to tide me over until the main event.

George doles out ladlefuls of the *revithada* and adds a squeeze of lemon. It tastes surprisingly complex, with a meaty, smoky aroma and the sticky sweetness of caramelised onions. We mop it up with chunks of bread and sip a shimmering ruby wine (homemade, of course). Sunday lunch will never be the same. **TW**



BOOK IT

Narlis Farm offers cooking classes and traditional meals (sifnos-farm-narlis.com).

Aegean flies to Athens from Heathrow, Manchester and Edinburgh (en.aegeanair.com).

In Athens, clients should head to the Port of Piraeus to catch a ferry with SeaJets (seajets.gr).

Recommend chic Verina Astra, with breezily decorated rooms and sunrise views from the terrace restaurant and infinity pool. Doubles from £115 B&B (verinahotelsifnos.com).

More at discovergreece.com.



TOP: A street in Artemonas village, close to Narlis Farm **ABOVE:** Revithada, chickpea stew

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