INTRODUCTION

Greek Revival architecture, which became popular in the United States at the beginning of the nineteenth century, remains a majestic and timeless classical building style. Large fluted columns, scrolling capitals, colonnades, porticos, and friezes characterize this architecture. As American architect Asher Benjamin wrote in 1830, “The three essential and distinct qualities in [Greek] architecture are **strength, grace and richness**” (Benjamin, *The Practical House Carpenter*, 111). Such architectural qualities were employed in the design of our federal and state buildings, including the Capitol, the White House, and many state capitols. Reminiscent of the ancient temples of Greece, this architectural style is both visually magnificent and evocative of democracy. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Henry Latrobe, and James Hoban all contributed to the Greek Revival movement in the United States. Learning from them, architects such as Robert Mills followed. In addition to the Washington Monument, he designed sixteen neoclassical county courthouses across the state of South Carolina as well as other state and federal buildings. As Mills intended, these imposing and serious stately structures inspire national pride (Edgar, ed., *The South Carolina Encyclopedia*, 637–38). They channel the spirit of democracy itself. “People rule” in a demokratia, a system of government where every voice is heard.

Just as the presence of Greek Revival architecture has the power to evoke the very seed of our political ideology, *Greek Revival: Cooking for Life* can empower our long and healthy lives by reviving ancient food traditions. These traditions include cooking and eating from the bounty of nature while taking the time to truly enjoy what matters.

In *Greek Revival: Cooking for Life*, we look back and embrace the so-called peasant diet, which was in fact opulent—resplendent with colorful seasonal vegetables and fruits; seafood; whole grains, nuts, and seeds made into dense breads and cakes; meat only on holy days; and legumes to provide protein during most other times.
Central to it all was—and still is—olive oil. The source of rich, satisfying flavor and the gift of Athena to the world, olive oil was thought to hold life-giving properties. It was used heavily for cooking, medicinal purposes, and religious celebrations, and it was the prize for victors at the Olympic games (Knickerbocker, *Olive Oil*, 6). Today its life-giving quality is well accepted, and we view it as nature’s gold.

With *Greek Revival: Cooking for Life*, we have a new Greek Revival that holds the power to overcome the health challenges we face today. Here you will find simple, luscious, colorful, and healthful recipes but not a diet regime. You will read stories of life in Greece and Cyprus demonstrating a lifestyle that is both simple and sumptuous. You will read about the health benefits of foods, but you won’t count calories or grams of fat. You will eat the bread! At the end of a meal, you may just find yourself peeling oranges and passing the sweetest, most succulent slices to your guests.

*Greek Revival: Cooking for Life* is a recipe for reinvigorating our bodies and reviving our spirits. Through it we embrace the opportunity to be healthy because it’s so sensually satisfying to do so. The food is delicious, and the time is ours to own.

**STUDYING THE TRADITIONAL MEDITERRANEAN DIET**

We are fortunate today to have results from a half century of research into the Greek diet and lifestyle. This research has identified multiple health benefits...
associated with this way of life. Longevity and reduced risk of heart disease, stroke, cancers, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease, age-related blindness, arthritis, birth defects, and even asthma and allergies have been attributed to the traditional Greek diet and lifestyle.

As early as 1958, Ancel Keys, an American physiologist, recognized that the men of the island of Crete lived long, full, active lives. Keys was the first to document the diet and lifestyle and to coin the term “Mediterranean diet.” His central findings were that the men of Crete lived longer because of their simple diet, which consisted of olive oil, grains (mostly breads), beans, vegetables, and fruit with smaller quantities of animal products.

Keys’s “Seven Countries Health Study” compared the men of Crete with those from six other countries and followed them over many years. Compared to Americans, the men of Crete had half the cancer death rate and one twentieth the coronary artery disease of American men (Simopoulos and Robinson, *The Omega Diet*).

Years of nutrition research at Harvard University were summarized in Dr. Walter Willett’s book *Eat, Drink, and Be Healthy*, in which he designed the Healthy Eating Pyramid to encorporate the recommendations of current nutritional research. As in the traditional Greek diet, his book heartily recommended whole grains, olive oil, vegetables and fruits, nuts, and beans. Two novel additions to his Healthy Eating Pyramid are alcohol in moderation (if appropriate)—depicted by a glass of red wine, daily exercise, and weight control.

Dr. Willett cited the low rates of heart disease and cancer among people eating a Mediterranean diet as solid proof of its safety. He also estimated that heart-disease rates in the United States could be reduced by at least 80 percent with moderate diet and lifestyle changes.

A study conducted by a group of researchers from the University of Barcelona set out to assess the effects of dietary changes on patients who were at high risk for heart disease. The participants in the study were between fifty-five and eighty years of age and had either type 2 diabetes or three or more risk factors for heart disease—such as smoking, hypertension, high cholesterol, and being overweight. After only three months on a Mediterranean diet, subjects experienced decreased blood pressure, improved lipid profiles, decreased insulin resistance, and reduced concentrations of inflammatory markers in their blood samples. This is impressive since three months is a relatively short period of time. And it encourages those of us with known risk factors who may be starting our quest for better health. Studies such as this have contributed to my belief that lifestyle changes not only keep us

Positive health requires a knowledge of man’s primary constitution and of the powers of various foods. . . . But eating alone is not enough for health. There must also be exercise, of which the efforts must likewise be known. . . . If there is any deficiency in food or exercise, the body will fall sick. (Hippocrates, c. 460–377 B.C.E.)
healthy but can change the course of disease (Estruch and others, “Effects of a Mediterranean-Style Diet,” 1–11). A further assessment of the effects of the Mediterranean diet on Americans, through the National Institutes of Health–AARP Diet and Health Study, indicates that higher conformity with the Mediterranean diet is associated with lower death rates from all causes, including cancer and cardiovascular disease (Mitrou and others, “Mediterranean Diet Pattern”).

Other studies have confirmed that closer adherence to the Mediterranean diet yields more extensive health benefits. As part of the European Prospective Investigation into Cancer, Dr. Dimitrios Trichopoulous of Harvard University studied twenty-six thousand Greek men and women and determined that those who most closely followed a Mediterranean diet were overall less likely to develop cancer (Benetou and others, “Conformity to Traditional Mediterranean Diet”).

Dementia and Alzheimer’s disease have us all concerned as we begin to worry about our memories. Columbia University researchers recently discovered that people who followed a Mediterranean diet had a lower risk for developing mild cognitive impairment. Close adherence to the Mediterranean diet was associated with a 28 percent lower risk. In addition, among
those who already had mild cognitive impairment, the group that most closely followed the Mediterranean diet, was 48 percent less likely to develop Alzheimer’s disease. Though more research is necessary to confirm the role diet plays in reducing the risk of dementia, this would certainly be a wonderful benefit of eating foods we enjoy anyway (Scarmeas and others, “Mediterranean Diet”).

The reduction of neural-tube birth defects such as spina bifida has been associated with a high consumption of folates before and during pregnancy. Folates are found in green leafy vegetables, fruits, beans, and peas, all of which are widely consumed in the traditional Greek diet. The lower rates of neural-tube defects in some Mediterranean countries suggest that the diet is beneficial for prevention (Christianson and others, *March of Dimes Global Report*).

Another prenatal benefit of the Mediterranean diet appears in a study by Greek researchers who compared pregnant women who adhered closely to a traditional Mediterranean diet with those who did not. The former group gave birth to children who by the age of six years, had developed asthma and allergies at much lower rates than the children born to the women who had not eaten the traditional diet (Chatzi and others, “Mediterranean Diet”).

Yet another study followed schoolchildren on Crete over time and found that the children who consumed the traditional Greek diet had fewer allergy symptoms (rhinitis, dry cough, and wheezing). Eating grapes, apples, oranges, fresh tomatoes, and nuts was identified as protective against such symptoms (Chatzi and others, “Protective Effects”).

With all the positive research findings pointing to the myriad health benefits of a traditional Greek diet, of late we hear alarming reports concerning nutrition in Greece. Fewer Mediterranean people are consuming the Mediterranean diet. In July 2008 ABC News was among the first to report that the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization’s senior economist had stated that Mediterranean people are currently consuming a diet that is “too fat, too salty, and too sweet.”

It seems that, just as in the United States, more Mediterraneans are consuming more calories, expending fewer calories, and eating more meats, animal products, and sugar than their ancestors. Unfortunately the results are readily evident. More Mediterranean people are overweight and obese—with all the related health problems.

Even Greek children are getting fatter and experiencing high blood pressure, high cholesterol, and diabetes related to an increased consumption of convenience and fast foods. In a place where people were once fit and trim,
living to one hundred, the children are now experiencing such health problems that their life expectancy will be shorter than their parents’ (Angelopoulos and others, “Relations between Obesity and Hypertension”; Rosenthal, “Fast Food Hits the Mediterranean”). Fifty years of research support the idea that the traditional Greek diet is an important tool for health. And we now have evidence of the hazards associated with the abandonment of the traditional Mediterranean diet for the lure fast food. One Greek gentleman interviewed for the New York Times was so upset about the changing eating habits of his family that he decided to buy a farm and grow his own traditional crops. Even today’s Greeks need a Greek Revival!

THE TRADITIONAL GREEK DIET

So how do we define the “traditional Greek diet” or the “Mediterranean diet”? The following is a list of its basic elements developed by Antonia Trichopoulou of the University of Athens Medical School:

The Basic Characteristics of the Traditional Greek Diet

1. High consumption of olive oil
2. High consumption of legumes
3. High consumption of unrefined cereals (grains)
4. High consumption of fruits
5. High consumption of vegetables
6. Moderate consumption of dairy products, mostly as cheese and yogurt
7. Moderate to high consumption of fish
8. Low consumption of meat and meat products
9. Moderate consumption of wine

Dr. Trichopoulou’s research stresses the patterns of eating these foods and closely adhering to the basic characteristics of the diet as being significant to the findings of positive health outcomes. Her studies also indicate that rather than single foods or nutrients, the synergy of the foods in combination may be significant to achieving the many benefits of the traditional Greek diet (Trichopoulou, “Traditional Foods”).

THE SOURCE OF FLAVOR AND HEALTH: OLIVE OIL, NATURE’S GOLD

As the main source of fat in the Greek diet, olive oil has been recognized by various researchers as a contributing factor in the diet’s protection against
heart disease, atherosclerosis, diabetes, colon cancer, asthma, breast cancer, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, rheumatoid arthritis, dementia, and age-related blindness. Olive oil is a “good oil,” arguably the best. It is a monounsaturated fat, which contains strong antioxidants and lowers cholesterol (Simopoulos and Robinson, *The Omega Diet*). Extra-virgin, cold-pressed olive oil has the highest content of nutrients because heat is not required for the extraction process. To keep olive oil at its peak nutritional quality there are a few things that are good to know.

Store the oil in a cool, dark place, not in sunlight. Olive oil is light sensitive, and there’s some evidence that it loses nutritional value if it is exposed to light or is kept too long. Since I use a lot of olive oil, I buy it in large cans and decant it into a dark green glass bottle with a cork. I store it in a kitchen cabinet, out of direct sunlight.

Don’t store olive oil in the refrigerator, as it will become solid. As it warms to room temperature it will liquefy, which may cause condensation to form inside the container. Any resulting drips of water could change the flavor of the oil or promote spoiling (Knickerbocker, *Olive Oil*, 29).

Olive oil adds a rich flavor to all foods, especially vegetables, salads, grain dishes, fish, and even meats. I think one of the reasons why Americans love Greek food is because the flavors of nearly all foods are enhanced by olive oil. Olive oil flows freely in Greek cuisine and so do the associated health benefits. While we don’t want to overeat or consume more calories than we burn, we do need to be aware that a diet rich in olive oil and low in saturated fats has been shown to be healthier than a low-fat diet in many ways.
including for weight loss and diabetes control (Guttersen, “Weighing in on Obesity”).

THE GREEK LIFESTYLE

There are two freeing and wonderful aspects of following a traditional Greek diet and lifestyle. The first is that the foods are fresh and delicious. The second is that the Greek lifestyle is not one of deprivation. Greeks do not traditionally eliminate foods from their diet. Because of the emphasis on plant-based foods, food is not weighed or measured. Because of the variety, foods are not eliminated or sworn off. Because mainly healthful fats are eaten, grams of fat are not calculated. Because whole grains are consumed, carbohydrates are not shunned. How freeing it is that, by following traditional food choices and patterns, eating does not have to be analyzed but can simply be enjoyed. This promotes a happy relationship with food where meals are anticipated with joy, not anxiety, and they’re eaten with gusto. One can feel sated and virtuous eating roasted vegetables with olive oil and crusty whole-grain bread. Choosing flavorful, healthful food can engender a healthier attitude toward eating. Then there’s the “not so secret” ingredient to the health benefits of the Greek lifestyle: time.

If you’ve had the pleasure of a Mediterranean vacation, the highlights of your memories no doubt are the wonderful meals, the sun, the slower pace of life, the music, the beaches, and the clear waters of a calm sea. If you enjoyed a Greek island, you most likely saw old men in the kafeneon sipping coffee, working worry beads through their rough knobby fingers, and talking nonstop. I’m quite sure you also witnessed the great-grandmothers, yia-yias, dressed all in black, often with crosses around their necks and scarves covering their heads. These pillars of traditional Greek families still shop, cook, clean house, and sweep—and whitewash the sidewalks. Surprisingly they are often well into their nineties.

Life is long for the followers of the traditional Greek peasant diet; meat is reserved for a special occasion; fish is common; and vegetables from the garden are overflowing. The noon meal is the big one, and its plates and bowls and platters hold stewed, braised, caramelized, long-cooked vegetables and beans swimming in olive oil. There is always a sip of wine in a small juice glass, and fresh fruit follows every meal. Kilos of fruit are brought to the table. Whether it’s watermelon, figs, or oranges, fruit is cut open and consumed only if judged perfect by the host.

After lunch is a quiet time. Blinds are closed to shutter homes from the high sun. Ceiling fans turn. Lights are dimmed, and families rest. Even those
working outside the home return home for lunch and rest. Late afternoon is wake-up time, the second morning of the day. Refreshed, unstressed, workers set back to work; students return to school; and stores reopen for late afternoon and evening shoppers.

A NEW GREEK REVIVAL?

Can we have a Greek Revival in the United States today? I think we can and we must. To join this revival, know the basic principles of the traditional Greek diet and let those principles guide your food choices. Trust the research. The news just keeps getting better. Cook. Employ the cooking methods described in this book. Remember that extra-virgin olive oil equals flavor. Adjust your food choices to maximize variety: grow your own vegetables or buy locally grown from small farms; seek out animal products from farms where the animals graze and are not subject to antibiotics or growth hormones. As for lifestyle, if our intention is to pattern our lives after the healthiest Greeks, we would exercise daily—get out and walk and take in some sunshine. We would take time for the people important to us. Talk with family and friends, share, discuss, challenge, and support each other. And rest, even during the most hectic of days. Most of us can’t go home and nap, but we can close the door; close the world out for fifteen minutes. Take a few deep breaths . . . a hypnogogic nap. Or take a short walk, a physical break, in the afternoon. It is possible to be refreshed and renewed during busy days, if we choose the right tools.
The Church of 100 Bells with oranges in Paros. Photograph by Harris Pastides