

Chef cooks up red eggs, lamb for Greek Easter

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Mediterranean cooking isn't just Italian, says George Kyrtatas, chef and restaurateur.

"I'm a Mediterranean chef. That's my specialty. That's foods from Spain, Italy, Greece, Turkey, North Africa," Kyrtatas said. "Similar processes, similar cuisines. All healthy, all flavorful."

Kyrtatas' first cookbook, "My Big Fat Greek Feast," shares his passion for Mediterranean recipes. In a phone interview from his New Jersey restau-



KYRTATAS

rant, Hathaways, Kyrtatas was refreshingly frank about a second reason for penning the book. "My ultimate goal is to have my own cooking show someday, but I've found out it's not what you know, it's who you know," he said. "The reason I wrote the cookbook is to get my name out there, let people see

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Dishes that take 30 minutes

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who I am, what I'm capable of. It's opened up a lot of doors."

Indeed. Since the book's release, the 27-year-old has been featured in magazines and on television shows.

We asked Kyrtatas about traditions associated with the Greek Easter, which is Sunday.

Q. What will we see on your Easter table?

Kyrtatas: "Red eggs. With Americans, it's multicolored eggs. With the Greeks, it's red-dyed eggs. The red is symbolic of the blood of God."

Is there a typical Greek dish for Easter, or does it vary by region?

"Some kind of lamb, whether roasted in the oven, or the entire lamb on the spit."

What dish is served only at Easter?

"Tsoureki, a traditional Easter bread. It's flavored with a spice called mahleb (ground black-cherry pits). It has a distinct flavor, hard to compare to anything else — gives it a nutty flavor."

What traditions surround the holiday?

"For 47 days before Easter, there's a period of fasting. No meat, then proceed to no meat and no dairy. During Holy Week, no meat, no dairy, no oil."

"On the Saturday before Easter we go to a midnight service, a candlelight service, very beautiful. When we go home at 1 in the morning, we break the fast by eating a traditional soup. It's avgolemono, with carrots, potatoes and celery and bits of lamb."

What spice is indispensable for Greek cooking?

"Definitely dill. Oregano and rosemary. You also see a lot of thyme. You'll notice the oregano, rosemary and thyme are indigenous to areas without a lot of water."

the spleen, the brain, the stuff nobody eats anymore. I wanted to write a cookbook that wouldn't scare people away."

Kyrtatas said his recipes are simple and easy, and nearly all can be completed in 30 minutes. Put him to the test. Try one of his appetizer recipes and time yourself.

His baguettes topped with a "sweet kiss" combine sweet, hot and pungent flavors. Slices of baguette bread are spread with honey and brown sugar, sprinkled with cayenne and paprika, then topped with chopped figs and crumbled Gorgonzola. The slices are placed under a broiler until the cheese melts.

Or try his favorite party dip, a fondue made with feta, Parmesan and Asiago cheeses, with chopped kalamata olives. For drama, Kyrtatas pours brandy on top and sets it on fire. Serve with pita chips.

To read more about Kyrtatas, visit www.littlegreekchef.com

ASIAGO CHEESE AND KALAMATA DIP

1/3 cup feta cheese, crumbled
1/4 cup parsley, chopped fine
1/4 cup kalamata olive, pitted and chopped
1/4 cup pimientos, chopped fine
14 ounces sour cream
6 ounces Asiago cheese, grated
1 teaspoon granulated garlic
1/4 cup Parmesan cheese
1/2 cup bread crumbs

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Mix first 7 ingredients in a bowl. Transfer to a bowl or casserole that can go in the oven.

Sprinkle with bread crumbs and Parmesan cheese. Bake until golden brown on top and mixture starts to bubble. Makes 4 cups.

Variation: Put dip into fondue pot, top with the Parmesan and bread crumbs, cook the top a little with cooking torch. Then pour 1/2 shot of brandy on top and set it on fire.

FROM "MY BIG FAT GREEK FEAST"