

[The dining room at Molyvos]

# dining on the city's best mediterranean cuisine

The Mediterranean Sea provides a culinary bounty for the nations that surround it – Greece, Lebanon, Israel, the north coast of Africa, and the southern shores of France and Italy. In this sun-drenched part of the world, hills are filled with olives and wild herbs, sheep and goats provide meat and cheese and, of course, there are all the fish in the sea. The Mediterranean diet has long been espoused as the healthiest in the world, but it is also one of the tastiest. Here we explore eight New York City restaurants offering the best in Mediterranean cuisine.

By Marian Betancourt

## Begin with Artisanal Cheese

### Molyvos

While Greek yogurt has become the most consumed yogurt in the world, less is known about Greece's rich variety of cheeses, other than feta. Try an artisanal Greek cheese plate at **Molyvos**, a fine dining establishment near Carnegie Hall for 17 years. Graviera Kritis from Crete is a semi-hard sheep's milk cheese, a bit crumbly and nutty served with some Cretan honeycomb. Kasseri from Livadia is a medium-hard, pale yellow sheep and goat cheese accompanied by sour-cherries preserves. Collaborating Chef Diane Kochilas, host of Greece's most popular cooking show, *Ti Tha Fame Simera Mama?*

(What Are We Going to Eat Today Mom?), together with Executive Chef Carlos Carreto, has revamped the **Molyvos** menu with some new dishes.

For example, Kochilas created Octopus Stifado Ravioli when she welcomed unexpected company at home and "all I had in the fridge was an octopus." Inspired by a classic dish called Octopus with Short Pasta, the fish is braised in a sauce of tomato, grape molasses, red wine, whole slow-cooked cippolini onions, and warm spices before being surrounded by the ravioli dough. Diane's Longevity Wild Greens Pie is a new

dish inspired by Ikaria, known to Greeks as the Longevity Island. Seasonal greens such as chard or spinach are combined with a mix of fresh herbs and fennel, leeks, onions, scallions, some grated butternut squash, then wrapped in phyllo and brushed with olive oil. It is served as a mezze or small plate, but works as a side dish, too.

At **Molyvos**, there are daily selections such as Lavraki, a lean and tender fish from Greece that may be charcoal-grilled with lemon and olive oil, served with greens like chard. This fish is also delicious pan-seared with wild mushrooms, grilled red onions, and a baby green salad with kalamata vinaigrette. A terrific salad of Baby Beets with yogurt cheese, micro greens, is dressed with extra virgin olive oil. The Stuffed Cabbage is always

a crowd pleaser, a delicious blend of ground lamb, beef, and pork, with Arborio rice, wrapped in cabbage leaves and served with spiced yogurt sauce and sprinkled with paprika.



[ At Molyvos, Executive Chef Carlos Carreto and Collaborating Chef Diane Kochilas ]



[ Diane's Longevity Wild Greens Pie ]



[ Baby Beets with Yogurt Cheese ]

## Small Plates with Big Flavor



[The dining room at **lilli**; manouche, a pizza-like dish with lamb and sesame seeds]



### **lilli**

Cheese is only one of the mezedes or small plates so popular in Mediterranean restaurants. Phillipe Massoud, Chef/Owner of the

elegant **lilli** downtown, which features Lebanese cuisine, believes in sharing many dishes at the table. If dining with family and friends, try the Mezze Royale, a very large assortment meant for sharing with treats like Mouhamara, a dip made with walnuts, sun-dried peppers, and pomegranate molasses; Kibbeh Nayeh Beirutieh, steak tartar with onion and mint, and Manouche, similar to pizza but made with lamb and sesame seeds. Fresh-baked pita and dipping sauces such as a tangy mix of sumac, yogurt, and pomegranate, complete the table.

Try the Kafta. The traditional dish of spiced ground beef and lamb, served with ratatouille, sumac garlic whip, and sumac onions, is quite wonderful. Warm Eggplant is a side dish so good you will want seconds. Light, crisp pieces of fried eggplant are combined with tomato, scallions, and tamarind molasses. Another side in great demand is Brussels Sprouts prepared with grapes, fig jam, walnuts, mint and yogurt.

### **Barbounia**

On the small plate menu at **Barbounia** on Park Avenue South, is the hummus, tasted



[Barbounia's Chopped Salad]

first thing each day by Chef Amitzur Mor to be sure the chickpeas are properly soaked and correct amounts of salt, olive oil, lemon juice, a bit of garlic and tahini, a sesame paste that he gets from the West Bank, are just right. They serve 40 pounds a day of this Middle Eastern delicacy that has become an international favorite. Hummus and other dips such as tzatziki, made of cucumber and yogurt are served with flat bread. The falafel, crisp deep-fried little balls of ground chickpeas, parsley, garlic and tahini have a refreshing green flavor.

**Barbounia**, which means red mullet in Greek, offers a cross section of Middle Eastern fare. One seafood treasure is the Grilled Octopus Appetizer dressed with Moroccan olives, red onion, oregano, sherry vinegar and labneh. Beets are roasted in the taboon, a traditional Middle Eastern oven and the salad is served with orange slices and a scoop of yogurt cheese. Middle Eastern Okra Stew is one of Chef Mor's favorite things to eat and he keeps it on the menu as an accompaniment for striped bass. He dries fresh okra in the fridge or the sun, then sears it in hot oil before braising slowly in fresh tomato sauce. Another favorite is Lamb Kebab Terracotta, roasted tomatoes, grilled onions, tahini and pine nuts covered with flat bread, baked in the brick oven.

### **Periyali**

At **Periyali** in the Flatiron district, Chef Charles Bowman presides in the kitchen. This charming, medium sized Greek restaurant is divided into several rooms, creating an intimate, yet open atmosphere. Mezze here includes crisp and tangy toasts with feta, olive and tomato, zucchini fritters, and *spanakopita*, little spinach pies. And the chef adds a secret ingredient to his hummus—a touch of red wine vinegar to kick it up a notch.

**Periyali**'s octopus appetizer is marinated



[Periyali's garden room]

in red wine and charcoal-grilled to become tender, sweet yet sharp, comfort food. And on the fish menu, Grilled Sea Bass is served with rice or orzo. Try the Charcoal Grilled Lamb Chops with roasted potatoes and fresh rosemary—the heady rosemary aroma alone will keep you satisfied for some time before you dig into the tender and juicy meat.



[The Octopus Appetizer at Periyali]

### **Da Marcella**

Guests come to **Da Marcella**, a Mediterranean Taverna below street level and just across from Radio City Music Hall, for tapas such as Classic Bruschetta with San Marzano tomatoes and Croquettes de Jamon, tasty little ovals of potato and ham.



[Da Marcella's dining room]

For a main dish, Chef Francisco Mueses adds a mysterious bit of heat to **Da Marcella**'s Linguine alle Vongole with baby clams, which makes the flavors of the pasta and clams more intense. And for traditional grilled fish, Branzino Intero al Forno, is an oven-roasted

[Red and Golden Beets "Carpaccio"]



Mediterranean sea bass with garlic and rosemary, presented to the table whole and then filleted. Beets, both red and gold, are chef favorites. The Carpaccio di Rape con Feta Greca salad is a menu staple. Red and golden beets "carpaccio," sliced paper thin, are dressed with feta cheese, endive, and arugula.

# Olive Oil Tastings



[ Il Buco's dining room ]

## Il Buco

The Mediterranean is rich in olives and olive oil, and at **Il Buco**, a small country-style restaurant downtown with copper pots hanging from overhead pipes, and wood farm tables and benches, try a tasting of three imported olive oils with a basket of freshly-baked breads.

For example, Il Buco's "Viridens" 2011 Harvest, is a deep emerald, full bodied, spicy and nutty oil. The Sicilian "Biancolilla," a light elegant oil, is floral and fragrant. (You can also buy these oils at the restaurant's new branch **Il Buco Alimentari Salumi** on the next block.)

Keeping the olive theme going is a popular appetizer of a plate of olives, marinated in fennel pollen with rosemary and lemon zest. To change things up, the house-made Egg Pasta Ribbons are served with chanterelles. There is always a crudo on the menu, such as Tuna Crudo with citrus or avocado, and Salmon Crudo with horseradish and haricot vert. Chef Joel Hough particularly loves preparing fish and



[ Hand-rolled Pasta Ribbons ]

## Tavola

Oil from Sicilian Castelvetro olive stars at the new **Tavola** in Hell's Kitchen, in what used to be the famous Italian grocery, Manganaro. Shelves still line the walls but are now stocked with Chef/Owner Nicola Accardi's olive oils and other imports from Sicily, where he grew up. The oil is served with fresh baked bread and do try a plate of the olives, too.

Rice Balls at **Tavola** are a culinary treasure. Risotto prepared with saffron is formed around a small bit of shrimp or veal, wrapped in cheese. Coated in Panko bread crumbs and deep fried, they are tender, crisp and light, served with a simple marinara dipping sauce with some added cream. Try the hand-rolled Pappardella with Sicilian Pesto, made with Sicilian anchovies, roasted almonds, and wild fennel topped with shavings of pecorino. **Tavola's** twin wood ovens are the largest in the city, made with stone from Mount Vesuvius. In fact they are named Vesuvius and Etna, the latter being for fish cooked simply with herbs and olive oil. (Vesuvius is the hotter



[ The shelves are stacked with olive oils in Tavola's dining room ]



[ The dining room at Marseille ]

Gambas, a dish of pan-fried prawns in Trapanese (Sicilian) coarse sea salt, is a signature, as is the Seppioline, cast-iron seared baby cuttlefish with English peas, saffron, and squid ink. Try the lovely and light Fava Bean Salad with mint, olive oil, pea shoots, and curls of pecorino cheese. The beans are delicate and tender.

oven, where a pizza takes only 90 seconds to bake, so the chefs don't blink.) Sicilian eggplant, which is rounder and lighter in color than others, is a main ingredient in Caponata along with celery, peppers, Castelvetro olives and ricotta salata.

## A little Bouillabaisse

### Marseille

If you cannot get to Marseille, where bouillabaisse, a Mediterranean fish soup was created, the next best

thing is the restaurant **Marseille**, in the theatre district. With red lampshades on the bar, framed photos of Marseille on the walls, polished tables, and a center mirrored carousel, you'll be transported to that Mediterranean city. Bouillabaisse, a melting pot of fish and shellfish in a rich tomato-saffron broth with potatoes, leeks, garlic, and *rouille*, is a complicated dish. First you enjoy the rich broth of saffron and other spices with some toasts you coat with *rouille* and dunk into the broth. After that, the fish and potatoes arrive, so this is a full meal you need time to savor. For fast-paced New Yorkers, especially those heading to the theatre, Executive Chef Andy D'Amico has created Petite Soupe de Bouillabaisse, with monkfish, shrimp and mussels, leeks, potatoes, tomatoes, and a *crouton rouille*. This junior version has the same rich stock, but arrives in a smaller bowl and eliminates the second step, while bringing you the essence of this classic dish. Another favorite here is the Seafood Burger of salmon, shrimp and scallops with Moroccan spices roasted peppers and *rouille*. If you are in the mood for meat, the Lamb Couscous is something to try, with sweet and spicy onion sauce, merguez sausage, golden raisins and pine nuts.



[ The two-step Bouillabaisse ]



[ Fresh Buratta ]