

# How to Roast a Lamb

new greek classic cooking



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# Foreword

Barbara Kafka

**I**t is a rare experience to find a brilliant new chef.

Usually, they do not remain a secret. Instead, they become famous.

I had this experience a few years ago when a friend told me that I must try a new restaurant, Kefi. I did, and the friend was correct. Michael Psilakis, whose book you have in front of you, was the chef, and he had all the attributes of a great chef. The acclaim has come along with two more restaurants and the growth of Kefi from a small establishment to a larger one in a new location.

The new restaurants are Anthos and Mia Dona. Go and enjoy.

What are the attributes that make a great chef? First, there is a sound grasp of the many techniques that make a cooked food what it is; but technique is not enough. As with any major creative talent, great intelligence and passion are necessary. Michael has these and a love for his family and for what food means to him and them.

It is creative. Based on the flavors he loves, he constantly creates variations and new dishes. The first recipe section of the book, crammed with delightful salads and vegetable dishes, illustrates the outcome of these talents. Many of these recipes are inspired by his dearly loved father's ardent gardening. These foods are joyous with loving memories.



*Psilakis family, 1979*

## WILD BITTER GREENS, ROASTED PEPPERS, GRILLED ONION, OIL-MARINATED DRIED TOMATO & KEFALOTIRI

HORTA ME PSITA PIPPERIA, KREMIDI STIN SXARA,  
LIASTES TOMATES, KAI KEFALOTIRI

SERVES 4 TO 6 AS A SIDE DISH, OR MORE FAMILY-STYLE,  
AS PART OF A LARGER SPREAD

Very, very simple. This is one of the most versatile salads I make. It goes well with any protein, and it functions like a vegetable and salad all in one. If you are doubling or tripling this dish—or any of my salads—for a large party, serve the dressing on the side, so that if there are any leftovers you can keep the greens fresh and bright. Once a salad is dressed, the vinegar begins to break down the greens and they'll wilt if not used in a very short time. If you know you'll eat all the salad right away, go ahead and toss with the dressing. If you use artisanal-quality oil-marinated roasted red peppers and artichokes from a jar, this recipe takes you almost no time at all and the result will be almost as good as if you made your own from scratch. Just be sure to buy premium European brands, and get the best greens possible. This is a fantastic side salad for grilled *souvlaki*. And by the way, *souvlaki*—shish kebab—doesn't have to be pork or chicken; it can be beef, or lamb, or swordfish, or scallops, or shrimp.

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| 1 small head frisée  | 3 pieces Artichoke Confit (page 267),<br>halved, or 6 halves oil-marinated arti-<br>chokes from a jar, halved again |
| 2 cups baby arugula leaves   | 2 tablespoons small, picked sprigs parsley  |
| 1 recipe Grilled Onions (page 270)   | 2 tablespoons small, picked sprigs dill   |
| 1 large fire-roasted red bell pepper<br>(page 270) home-roasted or store-<br>bought, cut into strips | 6 leaves fresh mint   |
| 6 large sun-dried tomatoes, cut into<br>thick strips   | ½ to ⅔ cup Red Wine–Black Pepper<br>Vinaigrette (page 273)  |
| 4 cloves Garlic Confit (page 264),<br>optional   | 2 ounces <i>kefalotiri</i> cheese, shaved with a<br>vegetable peeler into large shards                              |

Wash the frisée and arugula, spin dry, and wrap in clean towels. Chill.

Just before serving: In a large bowl, combine the grilled onions with all the ingredients, except the vinaigrette and half the *kefalotiri*, and toss gently with clean hands. Drizzle with about ½ cup of the vinaigrette, toss again gently but thoroughly, and taste. Season with salt and pepper, scatter with the remaining cheese, and serve immediately.



## SHAVED FENNEL, CABBAGE, OLIVE, ONION & GRAVIERA SALAD WITH RED WINE–BLACK PEPPER VINAIGRETTE

MARATHO, LACHANO, ELIES, KREMMYDI, KAI GRAVIERA SALATA,  
MAVRO PIPEROKOKKO LADOKSIDO

SERVES 4, OR MORE FAMILY-STYLE, AS PART OF A LARGER SPREAD

I think of this as a sort of Greek coleslaw, only much brighter in flavors and far more exciting.

1 bulb fennel, trimmed	¼ cup small, picked sprigs dill
2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice	8 leaves fresh mint
¼ head savoy cabbage, cored	¼ cup small, picked sprigs parsley
⅔ cup cracked, brined green olives, such as <i>tsakistes</i> , pitted	¼ cup small, picked sprigs thyme
⅔ cup oil-cured Thássos olives, pitted	½ to ⅔ cup Red Wine–Black Pepper Vinaigrette (page 273)
4 ounces <i>graviera</i> cheese, coarsely grated	Sea salt and cracked black pepper

With a mandoline or a very sharp knife, shave the whole bulb of fennel crosswise as thinly as possible (no need to remove the core). Transfer to a large bowl and drizzle with the lemon juice. Shave the cabbage lengthwise, and add. Pull the olives into rough pieces, and add them along with about two thirds of the cheese, dill, mint, parsley, and thyme.

Drizzle with about ½ cup of the vinaigrette and toss aggressively with clean hands until all the ingredients are nicely coated. Season generously with sea salt and pepper, taste, and add a little more vinaigrette if you like (never so much that it pools in the bottom of the bowl). Transfer to a platter and top with the remaining cheese and fresh herbs.

### ACIDITY IN GREEK FOOD

One of the flavors that distinguishes Greek food and makes it bright and fresh is acidity, and often—but not always—it comes from lemon juice. You can serve things that are rich and slightly fatty—like one of the many wonderful confits—but in order to keep everyone’s taste buds alive and interested, you’ve got to cut that fattiness with acidity.



## STEWED ENGLISH PEAS & MUSHROOMS

STIFADO APO ARAKAS KAI MANTTARIA

SERVES 4, OR MORE FAMILY-STYLE, AS PART OF A LARGER SPREAD

To keep the fresh summer peas really green, you need to blanch and shock them in ice water. If you have a pasta strainer insert, it's perfect for the peas because you can get them quickly into the ice water and keep that beautiful bright color and flavor and prevent them from becoming mushy. I prefer a light and fruity olive oil for this dish, rather than the full-bodied Greek olive oil I normally use.

If you make this dish in the winter, you can use it with frozen *petits pois* and even add a little tomato paste and cinnamon—a very different dish but perfect for cool weather.

8 ounces small button mushrooms	10 ounces shelled English peas,
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling	blanched for 1 minute in boiling water, then shocked in an ice water bath, and drained
1 large shallot, chopped	20 leaves fresh mint
8 ounces whole pearl onions, peeled, or thawed frozen pearl onions	¼ cup small, picked sprigs dill
½ cup white wine	2 whole scallions, thinly sliced
2 cups water (1 cup only if using frozen pearl onions)	Kosher salt and cracked black pepper
1 large sprig thyme	Juice of 1 lemon

Rinse the mushrooms in a bowl of cold water, swishing them around. Immediately drain and spread on a towel. (If they're larger than bite-size, halve or quarter them.)

In a braising pan or large, heavy skillet, warm the olive oil. Add and sauté the shallot until just softened, then add the mushrooms and pan-roast until slightly golden, shaking the pan. Add the pearl onions and cook for a minute, then deglaze the pan with the white wine. Add the appropriate amount of water and the thyme, and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat, cover the pan, and simmer gently over low heat until the onions are soft, 15 to 20 minutes (5 to 10 minutes if using frozen pearl onions). Check occasionally and add a little more water if it's all evaporated. Season with kosher salt and pepper.

In a bowl, fold the peas and mushroom-pearl onion mixture together. Add the mint, dill, and scallions, and drizzle liberally with extra-virgin olive oil. Toss, season generously with sea salt and cracked pepper, and squeeze the lemon juice over the top. Toss again.



dinner, family style



## BEEF STEW WITH LEEKS

BODINO STIFADO ME PRASO

SERVES 4 TO 6 FAMILY-STYLE, WITH POTATOES, RICE, OR ORZO

Braises like this are perfect for meat with tough muscle tissue and tendons (which come from the part of the animal that works hard), a great example of poverty cooking. This less expensive cut of meat develops its own natural and luscious sauce as it cooks. You want a little marbling in the meat, because it melts down as you cook and adds a lot of flavor to the sauce. You can use brisket, shanks, shoulder—all fairly tough meats—but save the filet mignon for the grill or a pan. It takes a little time to cook and become tender, but it's a relatively easy setup, and once you get it onto the stove you don't have to worry about it for about an hour. So you can do your laundry, or walk the dog, or make a salad.

A couple of days later, if you have any leftovers, you can shred the meat, then return the meat to the sauce and add your favorite pasta. The resulting dish is a Greek version of beef Stroganoff.

The herbs are very important to the flavor development here, since I'm using water instead of stock, so use fresh herbs if possible.

3 tablespoons blended oil (90 percent canola, 10 percent extra-virgin olive)	½ cup red wine
2 pounds beef stew meat, cut into 1½-inch chunks	2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
Kosher salt and cracked black pepper	3 to 5 cups water
½ large Spanish or sweet onion, finely chopped	1 fresh bay leaf or 2 dried leaves
1 carrot, finely chopped	1 large sprig rosemary
1 stalk celery, finely chopped	1 sprig thyme
1 large leek, cut into thick rounds, washed well in cold water, drained	1 sprig sage
2 tablespoons tomato paste	2 cinnamon sticks
	Extra-virgin olive oil
	Grated orange zest
	1 tablespoon roughly chopped parsley

Place a large, heavy pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat and add the blended oil. Season the beef aggressively with kosher salt and pepper. When the oil is hot, add the beef and sear on all sides, 5 to 6 minutes. Add all the chopped vegetables to the pan with the beef and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the tomato paste and stir for 1 minute. Deglaze the pan with the red wine and red wine vinegar, and let them reduce completely away.

Add 3 cups of the water, 2 teaspoons salt and a generous grinding of pepper, the bay leaves, rosemary, thyme, sage, and cinnamon. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to low and partially cover the pan. Simmer gently for about an hour. Check and, if the mixture is dry, add another cup or two of water. Keep simmering for 15 to 40 minutes more, until the meat is tender and the braising liquid has reduced to a saucy consistency. Remove the bay leaves and cinnamon sticks. Transfer to a platter and drizzle with a little extra-virgin olive oil, and scatter with a little orange zest and the parsley.



*Photos: page 68, Creamed Spinach; page 69, Beef Stew; above, browned beef and aromatics*

## TOMATO & STRING BEAN SALAD

SALATA APO TOMATES KAI AMPELOFASOLIA

SERVES 4, OR MORE AS PART OF A LARGER SPREAD

This is my version of a Greek steak house salad—it's fantastic with a steak or any kind of protein. Add toasted bread and it's a Greek version of the Italian dish panzanella. I recommend going a step further by adding a grilled onion: the char flavor works perfectly with the ripe fruit and vegetables.

¼ pound green beans, ends trimmed	1 teaspoon dry Greek oregano
¼ pound yellow wax beans, ends trimmed	½ small red onion, thinly sliced and separated into rings
⅓ to ½ cup Red Wine and Feta Vinaigrette (page 271)	6 small, picked sprigs parsley, torn
2 tablespoons crumbled feta cheese	6 small, picked sprigs dill, torn
4 vine-ripe tomatoes, preferably heirloom, cut into rough wedges	16 leaves fresh mint, torn
	Kosher salt and coarsely cracked black pepper

Prepare an ice water bath and bring a pot of salted water to a boil. Blanch the beans until tender but still snappy, about 3 minutes, then shock them in the ice water bath and swish around. Drain well and dry on a clean towel.

In a bowl, combine the beans, vinaigrette, feta, tomatoes, oregano, red onion, and torn herbs. Toss well with clean hands. Taste and adjust the seasoning with kosher salt and pepper.

☀ If you wish, add toasted chunks of day-old bread, brushed with extra-virgin olive oil and seasoned with sea salt and pepper.

☀ Or try adding half a grilled Spanish or sweet onion, separated into rings (page 270).



☀ If you have any leftover lamb, you can make a fantastic lamb ragout to toss with the *Hilopites* Pasta from page 76. Pull the meat off the bone and shred, then warm it in a skillet with some of the leftover braising liquid. Reduce the liquid to concentrate the flavors and create a textural sauce to coat the pasta. If you have any Garlic Purée, throw a spoonful into the pan, along with a few tiny picked sprigs of thyme and a pinch of minced rosemary. Cook the *Hilopites* Pasta in the usual way, drain well, and toss with the lamb mixture.

☀ Instead of serving orzo on the side, throw some cooked orzo into the liquid toward the end of the reducing time. The starch from the orzo will thicken the juices.

## SPINACH RICE

### SPANAKORIZO

SERVES 4 TO 6 FAMILY-STYLE AS A SIDE DISH, OR MORE AS PART OF A LARGER SPREAD

My mom made *spanakorizo*, or spinach rice, all the time, always with water. But if you have chicken stock, the flavor will be richer. If you use vegetable stock, you'll still have a vegan dish. This is another example of the type of food we would eat during Lent.

1 cup uncooked long-grain rice, well rinsed	5 cups baby spinach leaves
1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil	Kosher salt and cracked black pepper
2 shallots, finely chopped	1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
6 whole scallions, thickly sliced	3 tablespoons cold, unsalted butter

In a large pot, cook the rice according to the package instructions (or the way you like to cook rice).

While the rice is cooking: in a large skillet, warm the olive oil over medium-high heat. Wilt the shallots and scallions for 2 to 3 minutes without browning. Add the spinach, turning it over with tongs to help it wilt evenly. Stir in 1 tablespoon of kosher salt, a generous grinding of pepper, and the lemon juice.

When the rice is done, add it to the spinach mixture. Stir in the butter, and season with salt and pepper.

☀ *Spanakorizo* is typically a side dish, but you can easily add shrimp, scallops, or mussels to make it into a main course. A scatter of crumbled feta or *manouri* cheese would add another layer of flavor.



There is a single word in Greek, *kefi*, that explains a philosophy of life. *Kefi* is the culmination of a celebration when music, dance, food, liquor, and the company you share intersect. The effect is so ethereal and the feeling so euphoric that you realize this is what life is about. It isn't material possessions—the size of your house or the kind of car you drive—that are important. It's the joy you derive from celebrating life with the people you love.

When I was five years old, my parents sent me to Greek school at our local Greek Orthodox church on Long Island. We learned not only how to read and write Greek, but also about Greek culture and the country our parents had left behind. The religious component of the program wasn't dominant (because the church also had Sunday school, which of course I had to attend) but the culture is tied into the religion and vice versa, so religion was a unifying aspect of all of the other elements of our program.

I found my time at the church for Greek school to be very peaceful. It wasn't because of any deep-seated religious beliefs, but rather because of the friendships that I made there. I found a support system I desperately needed among the other children of Greek immigrants. They understood me in a way that only children growing up in the same cultural bubble could comprehend.

As part of the curriculum, we learned traditional Greek folk dancing. Initially, the forty-five minutes of dance instruction every Saturday was relatively casual. Mrs. Benes was a good recreational folk dancer, but she was not a professional. It was when Mrs. Sopasis, a retired professional dancer, came to Greek school to teach us that I really became interested in Greek, especially Cretan, dancing.

As Mrs. Sopasis and her daughter, Debbie (later my dance partner), whipped us

