

Cruising

How to roll a vine leaf at sea

Sailing – and eating – his way round the Greek islands in the company of a top chef, **Terry Ramsey** enjoys the ultimate boutique foodie cruise

Here's a recipe for possibly the most delicious lamb I have ever eaten: take a large leg of lamb and put it on a boat; sail out into the Aegean Sea; prepare the meat on deck, under blue skies, with a bottle of wine to hand; put the lamb in an oven for several hours; serve on a secluded beach as the sun goes down. Easy really, isn't it?

Of course, this is not a dish for every day of the week. Or even every week. And my advice is, if you're going to take the wine seriously, get someone else to sail the boat.

But what I like best about this recipe is that it's a traditional recipe, taught to me by a top Greek chef as we sail the Dodecanese islands. It's not from a TV programme, it's not from a magazine, it's the genuine thing.

And while I would like to embellish the story by saying that I tracked down the chef to a remote taverna, known only to local goat-herders and intrepid foodies, that would be stretching the truth a little. Actually, he came by plane from Heathrow and was staying in a cabin only a few doors away.

We were both here for the annual Greek culinary cruise run by the sailing cruise company, SCIC, aboard a traditional, beautifully polished, wooden boat.

The idea is simple: a group of people sail round the Greek islands, sampling food and learning how to make local dishes during onboard cookery workshops. None of us know each other, but that adds to the adventure.

Our chef is Theodore Kyriakou, whose London restaurant credits include Livebait and The Real Greek, and whose championing of Greek food over the years should make him a hero in his homeland. His job is to teach us how to tell our Manouri from our moussaka, but it soon becomes clear that he is not simply a "celebrity chef" who has turned up to hand down pearls of wisdom. He is also leading the trip and joins in with everything, from morning swims to nights out. And, of course, he is our expert on all things Greek, from food to language, and from restaurants to the euro crisis.

The cruise promises a very individual experience — there are only 11 of us on board, plus the crew. SCIC (which stands for Sailing Cruises in Comfort) is based in Turkey but is Dutch-run and has

customers from all over Europe. We sail out of Turkey, into Greek waters and to a different island each day. All the sailing is done by the crew (they weren't going to let us take charge of such a beautiful boat), which means that we can get on with the important business of eating, drinking, relaxing and learning to cook.

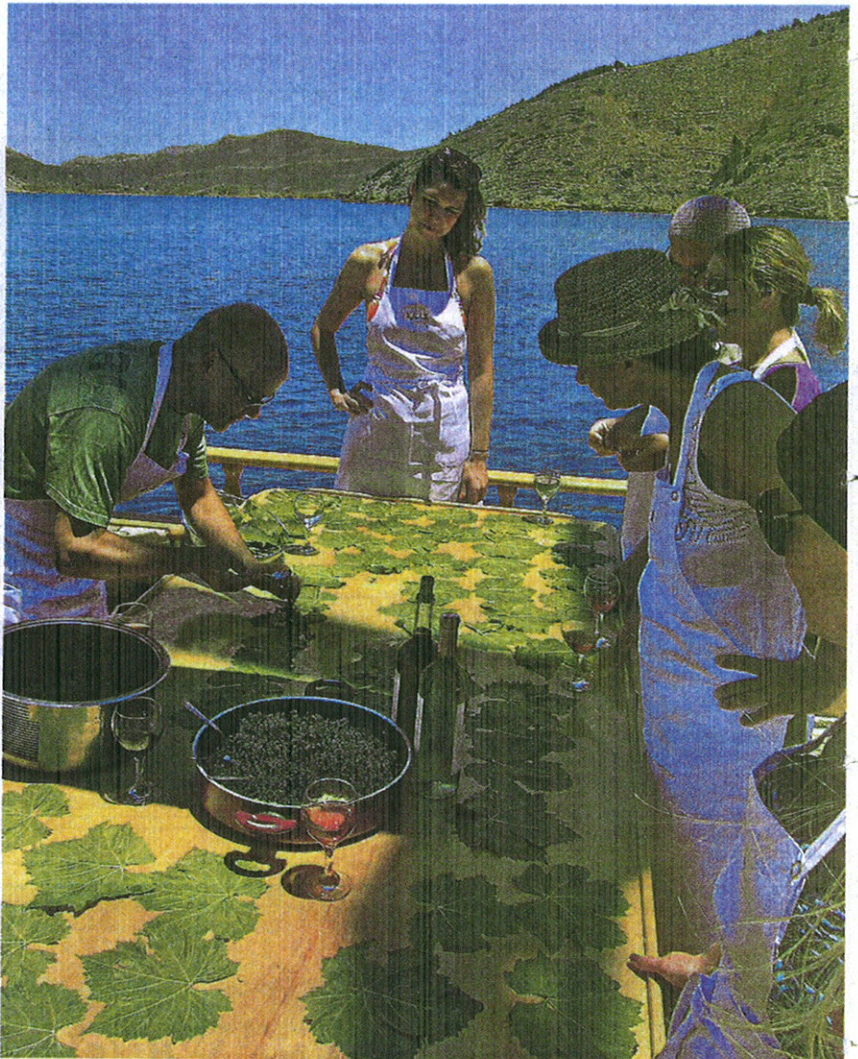
Each day starts with a breakfast (yoghurt, fresh fruit, fresh bread, cheeses and a hot dish) that proves a revelation. Not only the idea of a healthy breakfast every day, or the discovery that there is an 8.30am while on holiday. No, it's the fact that breakfasting at a table with nine people you barely know really can be fun. There is chat about the previous night's fun and games, discussing who were the last ones drinking on deck (yes, guilty), before the captain rolls out a map and we plan our route for the day.

Well, actually, the captain has a pretty good idea where to go, but we make requests and suggestions. After breakfast, everyone does their own thing — which usually involves lying in the sun, reading and sleeping. At midday, Theodore swings into action with his culinary workshop, sometimes on deck, sometimes in the indoor dining area. It lasts for about an hour each day and, while there's no obligation to attend, each one is so entertaining (not to mention, delicious) that everyone is champing at the bit.

The workshops are very informal — not a chef's hat to be seen — and everyone gets as involved as much, or as little, as they like: chopping, mixing, puréeing or simply tasting.

On day one, we start with some simple dishes: a creamy, smoky, chargrilled aubergine salad and a zingy smoked pepper and feta purée. The next day we're on to chicken kirkasiano, an Eastern-flavoured dish made with walnuts, garlic and cumin. And then it's the challenge of dolmades — stuffed vine leaves. They may look simple, but there's a real art to rolling those little cigar-like packages of rice flavoured with onion and pine nuts — an art that becomes much more tricky when you're rocking on the deck of a sailboat.

Nevertheless, if you are looking for Greek foodie heaven, it has to be on the deck of a sailboat, slicing through the sun-dappled Aegean, with a glass of wine in your hand, rolling your own dolmades — even if the finished products look like they



Chef Theodore Kyriakou, left, runs a different workshop every day, from moussaka to dolmades (stuffed vine leaves)

were made by someone wearing boxing gloves. I have to confess that I have always thought there is only one way to serve beetroot — and that is to someone else. But Theodore's slow-roasted beetroot with cheese and yoghurt dressing is a revelation: the earthy and tangy flavours come together in perfect balance to show that I have been wrong about beetroot for all those years.

Another day, as we head for Tilos, he shows us how to prepare that delicious Greek lamb. It cooks all afternoon, and in the evening the crew take the food and tables by launch to the beach and, with the waves lapping on the pebbles, we have a memorable meal of meltingly soft lamb flavoured with oregano, mint and garlic.

Theodore isn't the only chef on board. There is also the ship's chef, Mehmet, who prepares most of our food. Breakfast and lunch are included every day, with dinner on five nights (the other two nights are left free for sampling local restaurants), and the dishes — from salads to roasted fish — are always fresh and swim shorts-bustingly plentiful. And, miraculously, they are all cooked in a below-deck kitchen only slightly bigger than a cupboard.

Greek island life appears as ageless and as charming as ever. We moor at coves with views of distant white churches, we swim off the boat in deep blue sea and up to remote beaches (on one occasion, to the surprise of a pair of slumbering nudists). On Nisyros we take a tour of the smouldering, sulphurous crater of the island volcano. On Tilos we wander down a country lane to buy ice creams in the local village.

Boutique cruises

Namibia-Botswana

Cruise along the Chobe River, stopping for game drives and canoe safaris. A three-night cruise with activities costs from £1,645pp, including flights, meals and non-alcoholic drinks, with Sally and Alice Travel Co (sallyandalice.com).

Saigon to Angkor

Travel on a 20th-century French Colonial vessel through the Mekong Delta and across Cambodia. A seven-night cruise, plus five nights in a hotel, costs from £2,995pp including flights, with Bamboo Travel (bambootravel.co.uk).

Hebridean Princess

This 50-passenger ship sails around the West Coast of Scotland, from March to November. Prices, including alcohol and activities, start at £1,700pp for seven nights. Pride of Britain (www.prideofbritainhotels.com). **Harriet Addison**

In Symi, we stroll around the beautiful Venetian harbour, taking in the handsome architecture, as well as some ice-cold beers as we sit overlooking the waterside.

Symi, incidentally, is on day three of the trip and is a night in harbour when everyone can do their own thing. At the start of the cruise — before we had met any of our fellow passengers and were fearful that we might get stuck on a boat with people we couldn't stand — my wife and I had it marked down as a night to escape, the chance to get away and have some time to ourselves. Others probably thought the same thing. But, you know what? We are all getting on so well that everyone wants to eat together.

For the seven days we sail the Greek seas, these nine strangers become our best — and, admittedly, only — friends. Of course, it's only a holiday friendship. Most of us will never see each other again. But we will always have Tilos — and that marvellous slow-cooked lamb.

Need to know

Terry Ramsey was a guest of SCIC Sailing (scicsailing.eu), which runs a variety of themed and non-themed sailing cruises in the Mediterranean, starting from £790pp per week, including food and drink. This summer's Greek Culinary Cruise, with Theodore Kyriakou, starts on June 23.