

Excavating the ‘Hidden History’ of Ancient Greek Vegetarian Cuisine on Santorini

Ancient Greek philosophers from Pythagoras to Zeno encouraged vegetarian diets. Now a historian and a chef have teamed up to recreate Classical plant-based dishes for modern diners.

OCTOBER 4, 2021

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Santorini – of the sea-drowned caldera, sun-bleached, blue-shuttered houses, and crimson sunsets – may be one of the most Instagrammed places in the world, but its strengths go beyond the archetypal Greek island fantasy allure. Between 2600 and 1100 BC, the Cycladic island (then called Strongyle) served as one of the most important outposts for the Minoans, believed by many scholars to be Europe’s first literate and advanced civilization. That illustrious past is reflected in the palaces, three-story houses, paved roads, spectacular sewage systems, and written works (among the continent’s first writing systems), which have been excavated in Akrotiri, a village in Santorini’s southwest. Those excavations have also provided a glimpse at what the ancients ate – and, historians have concluded, it was largely plant-based.



(Photo: Courtesy Opson Restaurant)

To revive Santorini's centuries-old vegetarian gastronomic tradition, Morrison teamed with Chef Stefanos Kollimadis to create a vegetarian Greek cuisine tasting menu based on the dishes enjoyed by philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and Omiros for [Opson Restaurant at Andronis Arcadia](#), a hotel in picturesque Oia. Some of the dishes and delicacies included in the menu are a close approximation to what these ancient philosophers would have been eating, based on Morrison's thorough research.

The historical record makes clear that Ancient Greeks ate three times a day – breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They would begin their day with akratisma, bites of handcrafted bread baked from ancient grains flavored with aromatic spices and dipped into wine. Their lunch and dinner could be a wide assortment of dishes – some meat and fish included for the elites, but vegetarian dishes were very common, particularly for the less-privileged. One popular dish would be a preparation of brown lentils with coriander, oxymelo (honey and vinegar mixed together), olive oil, and sea salt. Another would be marinated egg yolk, resting in the middle of sweet peas, surrounded by a light sauce with morel mushrooms. Local melon and microgreens were relished in a velvety soup. Green pea sprouts with asparagus and grains appeared consistently on the table.

One of the vegetarian Greek dishes developed for Opson is dubbed “beetroot bouquet.” It contains rolled beets with flowers, walnut praline, and wild garlic aioli. The ancients were inventive enough to even have conceived of a pomegranate sorbet to cleanse their palate after dinner.