



OLIVES FOR THE AGES

Organic Kalamata Crops Thrive
In Kefalas Village

BY LINDA BROCKMAN

AFTER A FIRE RAVAGED THE TINY GREEK VILLAGE OF KEFALAS in 1997—endangering the olive trees that have stood for more than 150 years and the livelihood of its 21 farms that produce a variety of olives making up the local co-op, the word ‘cooperative’ took on a truer meaning. The frightening experience inspired villagers to work together to ensure the town would not face this kind of peril again. They converted their vehicles into hybrid fire trucks—with pumps that could be fitted with water hoses—just in case a similar blaze threatened the groves of Kefalas again.

And in 2007, one did. This time, the members of the Kefalas cooperative

ALL PHOTOS COURTESY OF FOODMATCH

were prepared, and its members were not only able to safeguard their loved ones and homes from the fire, but also preserve the trees and crops that define their livelihood and lifestyle.

“Today, the sweeping views of thousands of olive trees is more breathtaking than ever, perhaps because we know how close all of it was to being taken away,” says Fanis Vlacholias, general manager of Kefalas Village Coop.

In 1995, the Kefalas farmers formed a cooperative to better define product specifications and consolidate production efforts. Most of the 320 inhabitants of Kefalas are involved in the annual production of 500 tons of organic Kalamata olives—the largest consolidation and quantity of consolidated organic Kalamata olives in all of the Peloponnese peninsula, Vlacholias says through a translator.

From a young age, Vlacholias knew that this land held a lot of family tradition passed down from his grandfather and great-grandfather. “That tradition goes back many, many years,” he says. “I have always felt a responsibility to keep it, nourish it and carry it to the next generation.”

Being so close to nature offers a simpler life and lifestyle cherished by Vlacholias and his family, especially at the start of the day. “The colors in the sky, the smell of the earth and the plants, and the sounds of nature are simply magical,” he says.

Vlacholias’ teen daughter, who has a strong sense of family and tradition, is interested in continuing the family farm, he says. “We love our lifestyle and our children love our lifestyle, and we want them to carry it on and follow the family tradition.”

Kefalas is located in the Lakonia region of southwest Greece’s Peloponnese peninsula. Here, the olive trees thrive due to the mild Mediterranean climate. Groves are spread on low-altitude rolling hills and the incline acts as a natural drainage system for the rainwater. “This, together with the red clay soil in the region, gives the olive fruits a denser texture and a more intense flavor,” says Vlacholias.

Olive you...

In Greece, the beloved Kalamata goes by its varietal name, Kalamon (the Greek word for olive is elia), says Vlacholias. It has traded for many years as Kalamata and took the name from

*The groves and product
of Kefalas Village*



the city of Kalamata in Lakonia's neighboring province, Messenia, which is also on Peloponnese.

Kalamatas are black olives, but not all black olives are Kalamata. The distinctive fruit—yes, an olive is a fruit—has an elongated shape with a pointed end, and supple skin with firm, meaty flesh (and an 8:1 flesh-to-pit ratio). Its color is brown to deep eggplant or black, and its flavor is smoky and fruity, with a round, complex flavor and a savory finish.

"Kalamatas are the Parmigiano Reggiano of Greece," says Brett Greenberg, corporate chef for FOODmatch, the exclusive New



Kalamatas fresh picked.

RECIPE

MEDITERRANEAN STUFFED PEPPERS



- 1 cup Kalamata olives, halved
- 6 oz goat cheese, crumbles
- ¼ cup basil, chopped
- 2 Tbsp roasted garlic cloves, chopped
- 1 lb mini sweet peppers, halved, seeded

- Preheat broiler.
- In a bowl, combine olives, goat cheese, basil and garlic.
- Season mixture with salt and pepper and stuff inside peppers.
- Arrange on baking sheet and broil for a few minutes until cheese is hot and bubbly.

York City importer of Kalamata olives from Kefalas Village and a producer of Mediterranean specialty ingredients. "It is certainly the most well-known olive and one of the more complex-tasting cultivars balancing all five tastes—salty, sweet, bitter, sour and umami. There is also a subtle smokiness to them that I really enjoy."

Greenberg, who is a certified olive oil sommelier, notes that as a cornerstone of the celebrated Mediterranean diet, Kalamata olives are rich in healthy mono-unsaturated fat, vitamins and minerals, "most notably vitamin E, and a variety of antioxidants and anti-inflammatory phytonutrients."

...As Long As Olive

At 88, olive grower Panagiotis Alexis is a living testament to the health benefits of this diet. He is not alone. Most of the older residents of Kefalas remain active on the family farms.

Alexis' motto is "If you give the fruit love, the fruit will give the love back to you." He still goes to the groves daily, working alongside his 55-year-old son Giorgos, who owns the largest number of trees in the village. The elder Alexis and his contemporaries are revered for their knowledge and experience, even if they don't have the physical strength to work in the fields. Vlacholias believes a good number are reluctant to retire because many of them planted the groves themselves. "So they consider them like their children," says Vlacholias.

Being between the generations, Vlacholias knew that the conventional farm he inherited needed to improve in order to inspire the younger generation to stay in the country.

In 1995, Vlacholias decided to trans-



form the family property into an organic farm to maintain a cleaner environment for village inhabitants, while offering a healthy and better-tasting product to consumers.

The Kefalas Kalamata olives are certified organic and use only organic fertilizers and traditional methods to keep parasites and insects away.

For example, says Vlacholias, to keep away olive flies, farmers use traps that first attract the insects and then detain them in closed containers and away from the fruits.

Other organic farms are often surrounded by non-organic farms that treat crops with fertilizers, risking cross-contamination. Today, Kefalas is an "organic pocket" existing away from any conventional farms. "This ensures and guarantees the purity and cleanliness of the product," says Vlacholias.

To PDO or Not to PDO

Kalamata olives grow in several regions within Greece and not just on the Pelopon-

nese, says Vlacholias. The largest region to produce Kalamata olives is the entire western coast of Central Greece. Kefalas is located in Lakonia, the second largest province to produce kalamatas. However, the Messenia region holds the exclusive PDO status for Kalamata olives.

There was a debate about this for many years, because Messenia produces a very small percentage of the total Kalamata olive production, not allowing the other regions to call their olives "Kalamata."

While Kalamata growers in Messenia are protected by PDO status, now Kalamata growers outside of Messenia—such as those in the Lakonia region—can also legally call their product Kalamata, allowing the co-existence of two distinct products, says Vlacholias. Therefore, olives from Kefalas are now legally called and traded as organic Kalamata olives, says Vlacholias.

Harvest time is from the end of October to the end of December, depending on the weather conditions. Olive trees are usually kept at about 9 feet tall so they are easier to harvest, says Vlacholias, who owns about 2,000 trees. Unpruned, trees can grow up to 30 feet. Those planted by Fanis' great grandfather are still in the property at about 170 years old, but not every tree is old. Every generation through the years plants

RECIPE

GOAT CHEESE KALAMATA DIP

- ½ cup pitted Kalamata olives, drained, chopped
- 10 oz soft goat cheese, room temperature
- 2-3 Tbsp milk
- ½ cup pecans
- 1 tsp fresh thyme, finely chopped
- ¼ cup honey



- Mix goat cheese until softened and spreadable, adding 1 Tbsp. of milk at a time as needed.
- Mix olives, nuts, herbs and honey in a bowl.
- Spray small bowl with cooking spray or line with plastic wrap.
- Add 1/3 of olive mixture, or enough to cover bottom of bowl, followed by 1/3 of cheese mixture, or

- enough to completely cover olives.
- Repeat with remaining olive mixture and finish with remaining cheese.
- Chill until firm, at least one hour.
- Invert onto serving dish, remove bowl.

new trees.

Aside from organic Kalamatas, the Kefalas cooperative produces organic, extra virgin olive oil, mainly from crushed Koroneiki and Athinolia olives, he says. It

takes 5 kilos of olives—that's 1,500 olive fruits—to make 1 kilo of olive oil.

Kalamata table olives are collected in tractors, sorted (to remove olives with defects or irregularities) and calibrated,



ORGANIC KALAMATA

THE ICONIC GREEK OLIVE – HAND-HARVESTED & TRADITIONALLY CURED



©2019 FOODMATCH, INC.

CHEESE CONNOISSEUR 2019

then washed and put into fermentation tank where they are cured with water and sea salt. The olives are then transferred to a packing plant in central Greece for final packaging as table olives or chopped to be used in a tapenade, says Vlacholias.

Olive Simple

A Greek salad is a classic stage to showcase the natural harmony between Feta cheese and Kalamata olives. "I like to keep it simple," says restaurateur George Pappas, who owns Ethos Greek tavernas in South Florida. "There's nothing like a Greek salad with Kalamata olives. I can eat it every day. The olive's acidity balances the buttery Feta and complements the cucumbers."

A self-proclaimed "Feta fanatic," Janet Fletcher, publisher of the Planet Cheese blog, calls Kalamata olives and Feta a natural pairing "since both are briny and salty and get your appetite going. Sometimes I drizzle a little extra virgin olive oil on the Feta and sprinkle some crumbled Greek oregano on top." Fletcher, the author of *Cheese & Wine*, recommends serving Kalamatas with a crisp, white Assyrtiko (Greek), Albariño (Spanish) or a dry California Rosé.

In Kefalas, a traditional midday snack

RECIPE

CLASSIC GREEK SALAD

- 1 cup pitted Kalamata olives, rinsed, halved
- 1 3/4 lb fresh tomatoes, cut into wedges
- 1 English cucumber, peeled, chopped
- 1 large green bell pepper, cored, seeded, chopped
- 2-3 scallions, minced
- 4 oz Feta cheese, sliced or crumbled
- 3/4 tsp dried oregano
- Red wine vinegar
- Extra virgin olive oil
- Salt & freshly ground pepper



- Layer tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers in a large bowl and season each layer with salt and pepper.
- Sprinkle the scallions and olives on top followed by the cheese.
- Sprinkle the oregano, splash a little vinegar and drizzle olive oil over the cheese and the salad.

(meze in Greek) consists of olives with a hard or semi-hard cheese, such as Parmesan, Kasseri or Graviera—Greek cheeses made from goat and sheep milk, served with an aperitif like Tsipouro, a Greek pomace brandy, "when we are not working, of course," jokes Vlacholias.

An unexpected pairing, says Chef Green-

berg, is Kalamata olives with chocolate. He even suggests adding chopped olives to chocolate chip cookies.

"The saltiness acts to balance the sweetness, while both share in bitterness. Another great way to use olives is to dehydrate them in a low oven until dry and crumbly," he says. CC

TOMALES BAY FOODS

Nation-wide distributor for Cowgirl Creamery!

Purveyors of the finest artisan and farmstead cheese, charcuterie and provisions.

wholesale@tomalesbayfoods.com | 707.789.9433

NEW Dessert CHEESE BOARD

SIMPLE. SOPHISTICATED. SENSATIONAL.

Our farmstead cheeses are crafted with farm fresh milk. Perfect for sweet and savory culinary applications.

Visit cravecheese.com

© 2019 Crave Brothers Farmstead Cheese LLC

ORIGINAL BLUE • BAY BLUE • TOMA • GOUDA • ORIGINAL BLUE • BAY BLUE • TOMA • GOUDA • ORIGINAL BLUE • BAY BLUE • TOMA • GOUDA • ORIGINAL BLUE

Original BLUE

BAY BLUE

Toma

Gouda

POINT REYES FARMSTEAD CHEESE CO

www.pointreyescheese.com 800.591.6878 #saypointreyescheese

ORIGINAL BLUE • BAY BLUE • TOMA • GOUDA • ORIGINAL BLUE • BAY BLUE • TOMA • GOUDA • ORIGINAL BLUE • BAY BLUE • TOMA • GOUDA • ORIGINAL BLUE

MIDWEST MADE CAVE AGED

222 3rd Street NE Faribault, MN 55021 cavesoffaribault.com

Proud sponsor of the American Cheese Society 36th Annual Conference

CAVES OF FARIBAULT A division of Prairie Farms Dairy, Inc.

ROGERS COLLECTION

Moncedillo Spanish Raw Milk Cheeses

One breed. One method. Ancient—and extraordinary.

EXTRAORDINARY FOODS 207-828-2000 | ROGERSCOLLECTION.US