

# SECRETS OF FAT-FREE GREEK COOKING

ELAINE GAVALAS

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*New York*



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*This Book is Dedicated With Love and Gratitude To*

*Stuart, My Soulmate and Guardian Angel,  
Who Makes Everything Possible,*

*and*

*To the Memory of My Mother, Ismene,  
My Brother George,  
My Grandparents,  
and My Beloved Friend Joanna Bardis.*

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Finally, endless thanks to you, dear reader and cook. I pass the torch to you.

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# Introduction

The Greek passion for food and living is legendary. Greece, the magical land of glorious myths and noble heroes, has given us its priceless art, architecture, and philosophy. It has also provided us with Greek cuisine of great distinction rooted in the fundamental principles of cooking. The ancient art of Greek cooking has a purity and simplicity that has remained practically unchanged throughout the centuries.

I have enjoyed many of these recipes my entire life. I first learned to cook traditional Greek food by watching my mother and grandmothers follow recipes that were handed down from previous generations. As an exercise and nutrition specialist, I have shared these recipes, for their delicious, wholesome and heart-healthy values, with colleagues and patients. My recipes are derived from traditional Greek rural cuisine, and I have carefully chosen vegetarian, fish, and meat dishes that are naturally low in fat or fat-free. In some cases, I have modified the original recipe to lower the fat content while retaining the robust flavors and zest. The Greek culinary lifestyle includes most vegetarian and fish dishes—ingredients that are readily available to them.

Recently, science has discovered that the Greek Mediterranean people have the lowest rates of diet-linked disease and the longest life expectancy in the world. Health professionals now recognize that traditional Greek rural cooking is the perfect antidote to the American high-fat and high-calorie diet.

Perhaps the Greeks, who follow the two golden rules of Pericles, have the right idea: “In all things moderation is best” and “Know thyself.” It is this balance and harmony in life that is the Greek ideal and it is reflected in their art, lifestyle, and cooking.

I invite you to share with me an ancient inheritance inspired by legendary gods and noble heroes—the glories of ancient Greece, and the timeless Greek cuisine, which have as much relevance in our lives today as they did millenniums ago.

## Nectar of the Gods

### Mastering Fat-Free Greek Cooking

In addition to giving the world superlative architecture, literature, philosophy, and mythology, the Greeks have also given us the fine art of cooking. Thousands of years ago, the ancient Greeks elevated cooking to an art form and provided the world with its first chefs. Food was such an important and integral aspect of Greek daily life, even the great philosopher Plato debated on how fish should be prepared.

Authentic Greek cuisine has not changed much since the time of the ancient Greeks. Feasting on this fine cuisine provides a timeless link to legendary gods and noble heroes. Traditional Greek rural cooking is naturally low in fat, using simple wholesome ingredients, fresh vegetables, and little meat and oil.

In this chapter, you will be introduced to a variety of products to help you create low-fat, mouth-watering Greek delights. You will also learn the importance of reducing dietary fat and will be given guidelines to help assist you in budgeting your daily fat intake. In addition, you will find a glossary of wondrous Greek ingredients to use in your low-fat and fat-free Greek-style dishes.

## REASONS TO FIGHT FAT

There are many excellent reasons to fight fat; the most common being the desire to lose weight. Reducing your daily fat intake is a good way to achieve this goal because fat is a concentrated source of calories, with more than twice the calories of carbohydrates or protein. If you compare a cup of olive oil (pure fat) with a cup of flour (almost pure carbohydrates), you'll see that olive oil has over 1,900 calories while flour has only 400 calories. It's obvious that most of our calories come from fat.

When eaten in excess, fat is readily converted into body fat. Excess carbohydrates are also stored as fat, but the physiological process that converts carbohydrates burns up some of them. This means that a high-fat diet will create a weight gain that is 20 percent higher than a high-carbohydrate diet, even though both contain the same amount of calories. A high-fat diet is a double-edged sword—it's high in calories and is the kind of nutrient most readily stored as body fat.

An even more important reason to fight fat is for the prevention of diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and high blood pressure. And different types of fat—saturated, polyunsaturated, and hydrogenated—present their own unique problems. Saturated fat, which is found in meat, butter, cheese, and margarine, has been found to raise blood cholesterol levels, increasing the risk of heart

disease. Excessive amounts of polyunsaturated fat, found in vegetable oils such as corn, sunflower and safflower, can contribute to heart disease and cancer.

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Hydrogenated fats, such as margarine, are made by adding hydrogen to liquid vegetable oils, making the liquid oils more solid. This extends the product's shelf life and improves its baking and cooking qualities. Unfortunately, the hydrogenation process also transforms the oils into trans fats, which act very much like saturated fats. Trans fats raise levels of LDLs (low-density lipoproteins), or "bad" cholesterol, and lower levels of HDLs (high-density lipoproteins), or "good" cholesterol.

Monounsaturated fats, found in olive oil, canola oil, avocados, and nuts, have no known harmful effects, other than being a high source of calories, like all fats. However, olive oil has been found to bestow some health benefits that include reducing the LDLs while maintaining the HDLs. Olive oil has also been found to give protection against tumor development, while reducing the risk of contracting breast cancer. Although olive oil is not a cure-all, it has been shown to be beneficial when used in moderation, and is an integral part of Greek cooking.

With all of the problems caused by excess fat, you may think you need to completely eliminate fat from your diet. That is absolutely not true. Some dietary fat is necessary in maintaining cell walls, storing and circulating fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, and K), and in performing other functions that assist a healthy body.

As described above, olive oil provides a number of health benefits. In addition, linoleic acid, a polyunsaturated fat found in oils such as corn, soy, and safflower, as well as in walnuts, pine nuts, and sunflower and sesame seeds, is necessary for good health. The average adult requires a daily minimum of 3 to 6 grams of linoleic acid (about two tablespoons of polyunsaturated vegetable oil or two tablespoons of nuts or seeds). Another essential fat—linolenic acid—is also important for good health. It is found mainly in fish and green plants.

Although some fat is essential for good health, the typical American diet includes too much fat. The perfect remedy for this problem can be found in the advice of the ancient Greeks: "In all things, moderation is best." Eat minimal amounts of olive oil and other fats, as part of a diet rich in whole grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruits, with moderate servings of fish, nuts and seeds, and lean meat.

## FAT-FIGHTING TECHNIQUES

Now that you understand the importance of fighting fat, you'll need to develop your own personal fat budget. The following information will show you how.

### **Budgeting Your Fat Intake**

In the average American diet, at least 40 percent of the calories are derived from fat. However, the American Heart Association and the American Dietetic Association recommend that only 20 to 30 percent of our daily caloric intake come from fat, with 10 percent or less coming from saturated fat and 30 milligrams or less coming from cholesterol.

The amount of fat you should eat every day is based on your calorie intake. Individual calorie needs differ according to weight, age, gender, activity level, and metabolic rate. Generally, however, in order

for most adults to maintain their weight, they must consume about 15 calories for each pound they weigh.

To establish your personal maximum daily calorie and fat intake, follow the steps below.

1. First, determine the number of calories your body needs in one day. This number will depend on your body weight. For example, if you weigh 140 pounds, you would need to consume 15 calories for each pound you weigh—approximately 2,100 calories:

$$\begin{array}{r} 140 \text{ pounds (average body weight)} \\ \times 15 \text{ calories (per pound)} \\ \hline 2,100 \text{ total daily calories (needed to maintain body weight)} \end{array}$$

2. If you wish to limit your daily fat intake to 20 percent of your daily calories, multiply the total daily calories by 0.20 (20 percent) to determine the maximum number of those calories that should come from fat:

$$\begin{array}{r} 2,100 \text{ total daily calories} \\ \times 0.20 \text{ (20 percent)} \\ \hline 420 \text{ total calories from fat} \end{array}$$

3. As 1 gram of fat has 9 calories, divide the total calories from fat by 9 to determine the total daily fat-gram allowance:

$$\begin{array}{r} 420 \text{ total calories from fat} \\ \div 9 \text{ calories per fat gram} \\ \hline 47 \text{ total daily fat grams} \end{array}$$

4. As no more than 10 percent of one's daily calories should come from saturated fat, simply multiply the total daily calories by 0.1 (10 percent), then divide by 9:

$$\begin{array}{r} 2,100 \text{ total daily calories} \\ \times 0.1 \text{ (10 percent)} \\ \hline 210 \text{ total saturated fat calories} \end{array}$$

$$\begin{array}{r} 210 \text{ total saturated fat calories} \\ \div 9 \text{ calories per fat gram} \\ \hline 23 \text{ total saturated fat grams} \end{array}$$

To summarize, a typical, moderately active 140-pound adult should consume approximately 2,100 daily calories. No more than 420 of these calories (47 grams) should come from fat, with less than 210 calories (23 grams) coming from saturated fat.

The Recommended Maximum Daily Fat and Calorie Intakes table on page 6 lists two recommended maximum daily fat gram budgets—one based on 20 percent of calorie intake, and the other based on

25 percent of calorie intake. If you are overweight, choose your goal weight and follow the appropriate allowances. Even though you have budgeted a certain amount of fat grams per day, you don't have to eat that many grams, just don't go over budget. When reading the table, keep in mind that the figures are approximate.

## Going Too Low

Most people need to lower their daily fat intake in order to maximize their health. But how low should you go? As you have seen, some fat is necessary for good health, so you should not consume less than 20 grams of fat per day. If you eat a balanced diet of natural whole foods, it would be almost impossible to eat less than this. However, if you eat a diet of only fat-free refined and processed foods, you could be at risk for a deficiency of both essential fats and valuable nutrients. The authentic Greek recipes in this book contain natural, whole foods and minimize the use of refined and processed ingredients.

If you have a specific medical condition, be sure to check with your physician or health professional before making any dietary changes. Be aware that a very low-fat diet is not for everyone.

### Recommended Maximum Daily Fat and Calorie Intakes

Weight in pounds	Recommended Daily Calories (15 calories per pound)	Total Fat Grams (20% of total daily calories)	Total Saturated Fat Grams (25% of total daily calories)
100	1,300–1,500	29–33	36–42
110	1,430–1,650	32–37	40–46
120	1,560–1,800	34–40	43–50
130	1,690–1,950	38–43	47–54
140	1,820–2,100	40–46	51–58
150	1,950–2,250	43–50	54–62
160	2,080–2,400	46–53	58–67
170	2,210–2,550	49–57	61–71
180	2,340–2,700	52–60	65–75
190	2,470–2,850	55–63	69–79
200	2,600–3,000	58–66	72–83

NOTE: Recommended Maximum Daily Fat and Calorie Intakes table, as well as much of the information on fats and calories, has been reprinted from *Secrets of Fat-Free Cooking* by Sandra Woodruff, RD (Garden City Park: Avery Publishing Group, 1995).

## Be Aware of Calories

Over the past decade, many Americans, in an effort to lose weight, have made a conscious effort to reduce their fat intake. Yet, the average person weighs eight pounds more today than in 1976, and one out of three Americans is considered obese. How is this possible? The answer is twofold—people e



more calories now than they did a decade ago, and they exercise less.

~~The recent deluge of fat-free products is a big contributor to this rise in obesity. Simply because food is low-fat or fat-free doesn't mean you can consume unlimited quantities of it. Many low-fat products have as many or more calories as the full-fat versions. And an excess of calories (whether from fat-free or high-fat foods) will be converted to body fat.~~

I am not suggesting that you should not eat fat-free foods to lose weight. Simply make wise choices. Establishing a fat-free budget and choosing mainly nutrient-rich foods will help you reach and maintain a healthy body weight.

## Reading Food Labels

Understanding the terminology on food labels (see inset on page 8) and knowing how to read the nutritional data will enable you to quickly tally your fat intake for the day. To easily stay within your dietary fat guideline, limit your foods to those that are naturally low-fat and have 30 percent or less of their calories derived from fat. Since fat is listed in grams on nutritional labels, use the standard nutritionist formula below to calculate the percentage of fat calories in your food.

To illustrate, let's use a graham cracker that has 120 calories and contains 4 grams of fat per serving. To find the percentage of calories from fat, follow these simple steps:

1. First, establish the number of fat calories in the cracker by multiplying the number of fat grams (4) by the number of calories in a gram (9):

$$\begin{array}{r} 4 \text{ total fat grams} \\ \times 9 \text{ calories per fat gram} \\ \hline 36 \text{ total fat calories} \end{array}$$

2. Next, take the cracker's total number of calories per serving (120), and divide it by the total fat calories (36) to arrive at the percentage of calories from fat (3):

$$\begin{array}{r} 120 \text{ total calories} \\ \div 36 \text{ total fat calories} \\ \hline 3 \text{ percentage of calories} \\ \text{from fat} \end{array}$$

You may find that you have been following your established fat budget, but are having trouble reaching your weight-management goals. If you fall into this category, consider whether you are staying within your calorie budget, too.

## NATURALLY HEALTHFUL GREEK COOKING

With its generous use of fruits, vegetables, and complex carbohydrates, and small amounts of meat and dairy products, traditional Greek cuisine is naturally nutritious and low in fat. Although authentic

Greek cuisine dates back thousands of years, recent Western influence has caused a loss in its culinary heritage. In an effort to cater to Greece's tremendous tourist population, many big city restaurants and resorts now serve growing numbers of burgers and other fast food fare. The last bonds to the old, pure Greek cuisine are found mostly in the rural villages, where the age-old traditions are still followed.

Recently, medical researchers have rediscovered that traditional Greek cuisine is the healthiest food in the world. Scientific evidence shows that the rural people of Greece have the lowest rates of diet-linked disease and the longest life expectancy of any other people. The traditional Mediterranean diet includes generous amounts of grains, fruits, vegetables, beans, and nuts that are consumed every day. Cheese and yogurt are also daily fare. Other foods, such as fish, poultry, eggs, and sweets, are eaten a few times per week, while red meat is eaten sparingly—a few times a month. Olive oil is used liberally, wine is consumed in moderation, and regular physical activity is encouraged. Health professionals have recognized that traditional Greek rural cooking is the perfect antidote to the typical American high-fat, high-calorie diet.

Because of these findings, the Western world has a renewed interest in authentic Greek foods. A new generation of chefs and nutritionists are adapting generations-old Greek recipes to reflect modern needs. Many of the recipes presented in this book are family treasures that have been handed down over many generations, while others have come from relatives and friends who still live in the rural villages of Greece today.

Before beginning the recipes, let's take a look at ingredients that are commonly used throughout this book to create low- and no-fat authentic Greek dishes.

## INGREDIENTS

The ingredients used in this book's recipes can be found in most supermarkets, natural foods stores, and Greek or Middle-Eastern markets. If you are unable to find a particular item, refer to the Resource List on page 141. It will help guide you to a manufacturer or store that sells the product.

### Dairy Products

Dairy products, especially cheese and yogurt, are important daily staples of the traditional Greek diet. Fortunately, nonfat and low-fat dairy products are widely available in most supermarkets, making it possible to include these ingredients in your favorite Greek dishes.

**Feta Cheese.** The most popular and beloved Greek cheese is feta—a sheep's-milk cheese that is preserved in a salty brine, and has a creamy, tangy, pungent flavor. It is white and crumbly, yet firm enough to hold its shape when cooked. Fortunately, feta is widely available in the United States, where it is used in cooking, as well as enjoyed plain. There is no substitute for feta's distinctive taste.

Although traditionally made from sheep's milk, feta cheese can also be made with goat's milk. Almost all most Greek villagers prefer drinking

# Understanding Food Label Terms

Recently, in an effort to alleviate confusing and misleading terminology found on food labels, the following definitions for commonly used terms were established.

## FREE

The product contains virtually none of a particular nutrient.

- **Calorie-Free**

The product contains less than 5 calories per serving.

- **Cholesterol-Free**

The product has less than 2 milligrams of cholesterol and no more than 2 grams of saturated fat per serving.

- **Fat-Free**

The product has less than 0.5 gram of fat per serving.

- **Sodium-Free**

The product has less than 5 milligrams of sodium per serving.

- **Sugar-Free**

The product has less than 0.5 gram of sugar per serving.

## LIGHT (or LITE)

This term can mean a number of different things. The light product could have a third less calories than the higher-calorie version, or it could contain no more than half the fat of its higher-fat version.

“Light” can also refer to a product that has, at most, half the sodium of its higher-sodium counterpart. If this is the case, the product must say “light in sodium.” However, if the light-in-sodium food is also a low-fat or low-calorie food, it can just be called “light.”

The word “light” can also appear on products like brown sugar, corn syrup, and molasses to describe the product’s color.

## LOW

The product is low enough in a particular nutrient to allow frequent use with little danger of exceeding the Recommended Daily Value.

- **Low Sodium**

The product has no more than 140 milligrams of sodium per serving.

- **Low Calorie**

The product has no more than 40 calories per serving.

- **Low Cholesterol**

The product has no more than 20 milligrams of cholesterol and 2 grams of saturated fat per serving.

- **Low-Fat**

The product has no more than 3 grams of fat per serving. Frozen entrées, however, are allowed to contain 3 grams of fat for every 3.5 ounces. And 2-percent milk,

which contains 5 fat grams per cup, is still considered low-fat.

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• **Low Saturated Fat**

The product has no more than 1 gram of saturated fat per serving, and no more than 15 percent of calories from saturated fat. Also, no more than 1 percent of its total fat can be a trans fat. The exceptions to this rule include frozen entrées and meals, which can contain up to 1 gram of saturated fat per every 3.5 ounces.

**REDUCED or LESS**

The product has at least 25 percent less of a nutrient such as fat, sugar, sodium, or calories than does the original version of the product.

goat's milk, sheep's milk is used for cheese making. Almost every village household makes its own feta cheese—a process that can take several weeks. It is stored in a container of brine, and will keep for up to a year. Freshly made feta is milder and creamier than mature feta, which tends to have a more powerful flavor.

Feta cheese is naturally lower in fat than cheese made from cow's milk. A single 1-ounce serving has a total of 6 grams of fat, 4 of which are saturated. While this may still be a bit high, know that there are a number of reduced-fat feta cheeses available in most supermarkets. Alpine Lace, for instance, produces a flavorful reduced-fat feta cheese that contains 33 percent less fat than regular feta, with 4 grams of total fat and 2.5 grams of saturated fat in a 1-ounce serving.

**Kefaloteri Cheese.** Kefaloteri is a goat's-milk cheese with a distinctively sharp taste. It is often grated and used in Greek cooking. Typically, kefaloteri contains 8 grams of fat per ounce, and isn't available in a low-fat version. However, since just a small amount of this flavorful cheese goes a long way, you can feel free to use it in a number of recipes. Or you can substitute low- or nonfat Parmesan cheese, such as Kraft Free or Weight Watchers, for the kefaloteri with authentic-tasting results. Somewhat difficult to find, kefaloteri is generally available in some major supermarkets and more gourmet shops. See Resource List on page 141 for other sources.

**Milk.** Whole milk is the highest fat milk available, containing 8 grams of fat per cup. Instead, choose skim milk with only 0.5 grams of fat per cup, or 1-percent milk (1 percent fat by weight) with 2 grams of fat per cup.

**Yogurt.** Yogurt is a frequently used ingredient in authentic Greek cooking. It provides many health benefits and is an important component in longevity. For your low-fat cooking needs, select nonfat and 1-percent low-fat plain yogurt. (To make homemade yogurt, see recipe on page 24.)

**Light Butter.** You can substitute light butter and low-fat vegetable spreads for butter in your baked goods with some recipe modifications that will be discussed later in this book (see Baking With Light Butter and Reduced-Fat Margarine on page 124). Light butter has half of the fat and calories that butter has, and low-fat vegetable spreads have a quarter of the fat, while providing the same delicious results in baked goods. Light butter, such as Land O Lakes Light Butter, contains 6 fat grams per

tablespoon. Low-fat vegetable spreads, such as Land O Lakes Spread With Sweet Cream, contain 8 grams per tablespoon.

## Meats and Poultry

Due to religious and cultural traditions, meat is rarely eaten in Greece. The traditional Greek rural diet has always been largely vegetarian. The Greeks typically prepare lamb or chicken in small amounts a couple of times a week, accompanied by large portions of grains and vegetables.

**Lamb.** In Greece, lamb dishes are traditionally prepared and served on holidays and other special occasions. Certain cuts of lamb are naturally low in fat and calories, as seen in the following table. For the leanest cuts, choose shank portions of young spring lamb that have been trimmed of all visible fat. A meat is considered “lean” if it contains less than 10 grams total fat with less than 4 grams saturated fat per serving. “Extra lean” meat contains less than 5 grams total fat with less than 2 grams saturated fat.

### Leanest Cuts of Lamb

Cuts (3 ounces cooked)	Calories (grams)	Total Fat (grams)	Saturated Fat (grams)	Cholesterol (milligrams)
Leg, shank	153	5.7	2	74
Leg, whole	162	6.6	2	76
Leg, sirloin	173	8.0	3	78
Loin Chop	183	8.0	3	80
Ground (80% lean)	240	17.0	7	82

**Ground Beef.** Beef is rarely eaten in Greece, and when it is, it is generally ground and used sparingly in such dishes as *Pastitsio* (baked macaroni with meat filling, page 105) and *Gemistes* (meat-stuffed vegetables page 106). Ground beef can be very high in fat—as much as 33 percent. To reduce the fat content, always buy the leanest ground beef available—96-percent lean ground beef has 4.9 grams of fat per 3-ounce cooked serving. After browning the beef, place it in a colander and allow the fat to drain. This can reduce the fat content by as much as 50 percent. You can also rinse the meat with warm water to further reduce the fat content.

**Chicken.** Chickens are raised by most villagers for their meat and eggs. The chickens on a typical Greek farm are free-ranging. They feed among the olive groves and fig trees, and only the youngest hens are killed for food. These free-ranging hens have a superb flavor—quite different from the bland, though tender, chickens to which Americans are accustomed. Chicken meat, particularly skinless breast meat, is low in fat, with 147 calories and 4 grams of fat per 3-ounce serving.

Chicken is lower in fat than most cuts of red meat and is recommended for low-fat cooking. However, chicken eaten with the skin on may contain more fat than some cuts of meat. The following

table compares the fat and calorie content of different chicken parts.

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## Seafood

Fish is plentiful in Greece and has been an important part of its people's diet since antiquity. The local Greek fish caught in the warm waters of the Aegean, Ionian, and Mediterranean Seas are different from those caught in the colder waters of the Pacific and North Atlantic Oceans. The recipes in this book call for fish varieties that are either the same or similar to those used in authentic Greek cooking. Fish fillets, such as fillet of sole and flounder, as well as scallops and shrimp, are easily found in most supermarkets, and are used in this book. Fish roe or caviar (tarama) used in some traditional Greek dishes like Taramosalata (page 26), can be found in some supermarkets and specialty stores.

Since fish and shellfish are low in fat and cholesterol, yet high in protein and important nutrients, they are a natural addition to a well-rounded, low-fat diet. Fish oils contain beneficial omega-3 fatty acids, which have been shown to reduce blood cholesterol and blood pressure, as well as prevent the formation of dangerous blood clots.

The fish most commonly used in Greek cooking and those called for in the recipes in this book include the following:

**Cod (*Bakaliaro*).** Popular in both Greece and the United States, cod is a lean, mild-flavored white fish that lends itself to a variety of dishes. A smaller cod is called scrod. Cod has 0.8 gram of fat per 4-ounce serving.

## Fat Content of Chicken

Cuts (3 ounces cooked)	Calories	Total Fat (grams)	Fat % (calories)
White meat, skinless	147	3.8	23
White meat, with skin	168	6.6	35
Dark meat, skinless	174	8.3	43
Dark meat, with skin	215	13.4	50

**Flounder and Sole (*Glossa*).** Generally sold in fillets, these flatfish have lean white flesh, and are enjoyed in both Greece and the United States. Mild, sweet-flavored flounder and sole have 1.4 grams of fat per 4-ounce serving.

**Greek caviar (*Tarama*).** Greek fish roe come from carp. Tarama—a red caviar—has only 0.5 gram of fat per tablespoon. Found mainly in gourmet specialty shops and Greek and Middle Eastern markets, tarama caviar can be substituted with other varieties of red caviar.

**Haddock.** This North Atlantic fish is firm-textured and flavorful. It has 0.8 gram of fat per 4-ounce serving.

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**Halibut.** This firm-textured, mild-flavored flatfish is usually sold as steaks. Popularly baked sautéed, it has 2.6 grams of fat per 4-ounce serving.

**Red Snapper** (*Sinagreetha*). This fish, with its rosy-hued skin and mild flavor, is usually sold as steaks. It has 1.5 grams of fat per 4-ounce serving.

**Salmon.** The flesh of this firm-textured, flavorful fish varies in color from light pink to deep red. Available as whole fish, fillets, or steaks, salmon is quite versatile and can be steamed, broiled, or baked. It has 3.9 grams of fat per 4-ounce serving.

**Shrimp** (*Garides*). Shrimp are enjoyed in a number of Greek dishes. Their cholesterol content—17 milligrams per 4-ounce serving—is higher than that of most fish; however, the same amount has only 2 grams of fat.

**Swordfish** (*Xifias*). This dense-textured, meaty fish has a rich, delicate flavor. Swordfish steaks are perfectly flavored with lemon juice, Greek herbs, and spices. It has 4.6 grams of fat per 4-ounce serving.

## Pasta

Frequently used in traditional Greek cuisine, pasta is an ideal food for low-fat cooking. It is practically fat-free, very low in calories, and provides essential carbohydrates and nutrients to the diet. Most pastas are made from semolina, a refined durum wheat. Whole grain pasta varieties, which are also available, contribute much-needed fiber and B-vitamins.

Pasta comes in many shapes and sizes. The following varieties are commonly used in Greek cuisine.

**Elbow macaroni.** Small, curved pasta tubes, elbows are commonly used in Greek vegetable salads.

**Hilopites.** These small, flat, square-shaped noodles are typically homemade in Greece, and are available in a number of Greek markets and gourmet specialty shops (see Resource List on page 141). Orzo can be substituted for hilopites in any Greek recipe.

**Orzo** (Manestra). Resembling elongated grains of rice, orzo is used in many traditional Greek soups and casseroles.

**Rigatoni.** Short tubes of pasta with ridges, rigatoni is enjoyed topped with sauce, or baked in traditional macaroni casseroles.

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**Ziti.** A short, tube-shaped pasta, ziti is frequently baked in a number of traditional Greek casseroles.

## Herbs, Spices, and Flavorings

Greeks have always had a sacred relationship with the hundreds of different herbs that grow in the soil. A Greek Orthodox priest still offers a blessing by dipping a bunch of sweet basil leaves into holy water, then anointing the recipient with it. Ancient Greek folk medicine, which is based on herbal remedies, has been passed on from family to family for thousands of years, and continues to be practiced today.

In addition to being used for their medicinal qualities, herbs are also integral to the flavor and texture of Greek cuisine. Fresh herbs are available year-round in most American supermarkets, but when fresh is unavailable, you can substitute one teaspoon of a dried herb for one tablespoon of the fresh variety in most recipes.

If you wish to dry your own fresh herbs, simply arrange the cleaned herbs in a single layer on a baking sheet. Bake them in a preheated 200°F oven for 20 minutes, then open the oven door slightly and continue to bake another 15 minutes, or until the herbs are dry and crisp. Allow the dried herbs to cool for 45 minutes, then store them in an airtight container.

A list of common herbs and spices used in Greek cooking follows. Although most are readily available in major grocery stores, a few are available only in Greek markets or through mail order (see Resource List on page 141).

**Bay leaves.** Sharp, pungent bay leaves come from the bay laurel shrub and are frequently used whole in Greek stews, soups, and tomato sauces. They should be used sparingly, as one leaf is strong enough to flavor a large pot of soup or stew. Dried bay leaves are commonly found in the spice section of supermarkets.

**Cinnamon (*Kanella*).** This sweet aromatic spice comes ground or in rolled sticks. It is commonly used in Greek cooking for spicing meat and macaroni dishes, as well as flavoring breads and pastries.

**Cloves (*Garifalo*).** The dried flower buds of a tropical evergreen tree, cloves, like cinnamon, are used in Greek cooking to flavor breads and pastries, as well as meat and macaroni dishes.

**Garlic.** An essential herb in Greek cooking, garlic is used as a medicinal aid as well. (Scientific studies show that garlic can lower blood pressure and stimulate the immune system.) In the dishes of Greece, fresh garlic, with its superb flavor, is preferred over powdered varieties.

**Lemons (*Lemoni*).** Fresh lemon juice is an essential ingredient in Greek cooking. If fresh is not available, reconstituted lemon juice may be used.



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