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# A GOURMET GUIDE TO THE GREEK ISLANDS

by Matthew Wexler



Restaurant on Mykonos

Photo: imaginography

I'm living my best Dionysian life. Sitting in an Athens cafe, the only clouds that appear are in my chilled glass of ouzo, clinking ice cubes releasing its anise scent. I leisurely turn the glass in my hand, the other holding a copy of Dan Jones' *Queer Heroes of Myth and Legend*, a pocket-sized book celebrating gay gods and sapphic saints through the ages.

Born twice (once from his mortal mother, then again from Zeus's thigh, according to Jones), Dionysus, the bisexual god of wine and fertility, had a fling with the sexy satyr Ampelos before marrying the Cretan princess, Ariadne. How fortuitous! Crete is among the ports on my itinerary aboard the *Azamara Pursuit*, which LGBTQ+ tour operator **OutBound** ([iamoutbound.com](http://iamoutbound.com)) has chartered for a queer-centric Aegean adventure.

Beginning in Athens, the *Azamara Pursuit* will whisk me away to Santorini, Crete, and Mykonos, among other ports of call, all of which brim with history and culinary traditions. My interests lie in digestible discoveries rather than ancient ruins, though they go hand in hand. From the production of small-batch olive oils and the rarely exported Assyrtiko (one of the world's oldest white wine varieties), Greeks have one thing in common: they work to live. I've arranged some mouthwatering on-the-ground experiences as memorable as the Acropolis at sunset.

#### ATHENS: WHERE A FEW EUROS CAN EQUAL A FEAST

Over the years, Athens has become an epicenter for fine dining, boasting 12 Michelin-starred restaurants and another 23 with Bib Gourmand and Selected ratings, but I'm taking these first couple of days to dip my toe (and pita) in more casual finds.

Theo Afkoudias, a co-founder of **Monobrow Gay Tours** ([monobrowgaytours.com](http://monobrowgaytours.com)), spends an afternoon with me exploring the city, from the Central Market where vendors sell everything from freshly caught fish to fragrant spices, to the narrow streets of Anafiotika in the shadow of the Acropolis. Theo's advice is simple: look at the price of a Greek salad. With so many tourist-centric establishments, it's easy to get caught up in the moment. Yes, sometimes a table with a view is worth the extra expense, but affordable Mediterranean cuisine is plentiful, and if you're paying more than nine or so euros for this classic

combination of tomato, cucumber, green peppers, feta cheese, and a glug of good olive oil, make sure it's worth it.

Sometimes it's nice to have someone else do the planning. In Greece's "work to live" spirit, I sign up for a culinary exploration with **Secret Food Tours** ([secretfoodtours.com](http://secretfoodtours.com)). The company, founded in 2013 by friends Nicolas Jacquart and Oliver Mernick-Levene, has expanded to over 100 cities worldwide. My guide, Eugenia, navigates our group of 10 through the crowded streets, with plenty of stops to savor local cuisine.

Greek coffee can be appreciated at any time of day, especially at **Kafeneio Oraia Ellas** ([oraiahellasrestaurant.gr](http://oraiahellasrestaurant.gr)) a legendary cafe that's been serving unfiltered brews to politicians, artists, and travelers since the mid-19th century. I caffeinate to my heart's content, though the accompanying Turkish Delight, overly sweet and heavily perfumed with rose water, stays on the saucer.

Our next stop, **To Koulouri tou Psyrri** ([tokoulouritoupsyrri.gr](http://tokoulouritoupsyrri.gr)), is an all-night bakery that serves the city's most famous carb-load. The sesame-crusting rings may remind some of Montreal-style bagels with their kiss of sweetness, and they are an ideal on-the-go bite after an ouzo-filled night.

Ironically, ouzo, Greece's famous anise-flavored liquor, arrives in abundance at our next stop, **Atlantikos** ([ristorante-atlantikos.weeblyte.com](http://ristorante-atlantikos.weeblyte.com)), a "fish shop" specializing in day-caught seafood. Located on a nondescript side street with tables spilling over into the sidewalk, it's a spot to arrive with friends to sample as much as possible. Dishes overflow with fried anchovies, grilled calamari, and a heaping Dakos salad, featuring a crispy and dark Cretan barley bread.

As for that Michelin meal? I've saved the showpiece for my final night after disembarkation.

#### LIQUID GOLD IN A VENETIAN HARBOR TOWN

Most travelers arriving in Crete by sea will spend the day in the port town of Heraklion. Located on the north coast, it's a quick drive to visit Knossos, one of the six UNESCO-recognized archeological sites of Bronze Age Minoan civilization. Local agriculture and art flourished here, which I take as a sign to head west to the town of Rethymno with one thing in mind: olive oil.

The old town is filled with cafes and retail shops with more unique



Dionysus Statue



Catch Of The Day In Crete



Photo: Secret Food Tours

Athens Secret Food Tours

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offerings than you'll find near Heraklion port. Minoans cultivated beekeeping on a large scale, and that tradition is still evident in local honey, beeswax candles, and other products. If you simply want to kick back and enjoy the view, Rethymno's Venetian port overflows with waterfront restaurants serving fresh seafood and gorgeous sunsets. Monobrow Gay Tours has arranged a private olive oil tasting at one of the island's most notable restaurants.

While a student at Athens Law School, 19-year-old Katerina Kekalou discovered an abandoned building in her hometown. With fearless abandon, she opened **Avli** (avli.gr) in 1987 as homage to her family's recipes and a nod to Crete's rich agricultural traditions. The operation has expanded over the years, now including a hotel, cooking classes, and a comprehensive wine collection. But it's Chef Vasilis Leonidou who's brought the olive oil "A" game.

Leonidou's formal culinary training at Le Monde Edu sparked an interest in wine, which eventually expanded to olive oil, for which Crete is known. While exemplary in the kitchen, the chef wanted to learn more about the origin stories of his ingredients. He became a

Master and Sommelier of Olive Oil by the International Olive Oil Academy in Lago di Garda, Italy, and a year later, moved to Crete. Today, Leonidou serves as Avli's executive chef, teaches at the local culinary school, and conducts tastings and workshops for guests who want to take their olive oil knowledge to the next level.

The restaurant's flower-filled courtyard serves as our classroom. Leonidou has staged a bountiful table showcasing some of the restaurant's most prestigious olive oils. Over the next two hours, we smell, slurp, dip, and drizzle the liquid gold from assaggiaoli, blue-hued glass tasting cups to ensure recipients don't judge an oil by its color alone.

We taste three unique olive oils: Petalas (handpicked and cold-pressed Koroneiki olives with a peppery and smooth finish), Eladaki (an organic, blended edition), and Ages (a limited-edition, early harvest from the mainland village of Makri and pressed within 90-minutes of harvest). While the taste differences are subtle, Leonidou's charm and expertise shine as bright as the Greek sun god, Helios.

The meal that follows at Avli embodies the best of rustic fine dining. Intentional, beautiful ingredients like fresh tomatoes, herbs, and cu-



cumbers, paired with a more substantial braised lamb and seasonal vegetables. We all linger as long as possible after our amazing dinner, but there's a ship to catch, and wine country awaits.

### VOLCANIC WINES AND VILLAGE VIBES IN SANTORINI

My next port of call, Santorini, is easy to navigate thanks to **Santorini's Luxury Travel** ([santorinisluxurytravel.com](http://santorinisluxurytravel.com)), which lives up to its name with a private car and guide to transport me to several notable wineries and a quirky culinary experience in a less-touristy village.

Volcanic activity has defined Santorini's history, as well as its distinctive wine culture. Only five grapes are indigenous to the island, with Assyrtiko, a bright, acidic, and mineral-forward white at the forefront.

Reaching my car requires a nearly vertical trip on the Teleferico. This gondola cable car transports visitors from the old port, Fira Skala, to the bustling shops and cafes located over 700 feet above sea level. Those seeking a more traditional ascent can walk the switchback path, but for responsible tourism, avoid using mules, despite the alluring photo opportunity.

"A wine with the aromas of catastrophe and primitive fear, grown under the volcano's breath and threat, can only trigger passions, forceful love, and demand moments of devotion," writes Greek journalist Meropi Papadopoulou. The statement rings true when one observes the lengths winemakers will go to cultivate the arid but mineral-rich soil.

To protect the grapes from the searing sun and high winds, vines are pruned into a *kouloura*, a wreath-like basket that rests on the soil. I witness this unique growing system firsthand at **Estate Argyros** ([estateargyros.com](http://estateargyros.com)), which dates back to 1903 and has some vines over 200 years old. The family-run operation, at its height, produced upward of 300,000 bottles per year, but drought and soaring temperatures have limited production in recent years, despite the age-old protective growing method. With a bit of research, most of the estate's portfolio can be found online. Still, nothing compares to sipping the Cuvée Palatia, a blend of grapes from seven of the estate's notable vineyards, in its light-filled tasting room. Fermented and matured in stainless steel tanks, the wine's bracing notes of citrus, lemon, and white pepper speak to the vineyard's rich history.



Less than a half-mile to the north is **Artemis Karamolegos Winery** ([artemiskaramolegos-winery.com](http://artemiskaramolegos-winery.com)). Also family-run (thanks to grandpa, who started making wine in 1952 for family consumption), Artemis focuses on Assyrtiko for its portfolio, and experiments with concrete and clay vessels to extract variances among the vintages and vineyards. Single vineyard selections deliver a wow factor for those seeking to impress your dog- or house-sitter with an extra-special gift, but if you're going to ship a case home, look no further than the Terra Nera Rosé, made from 60% Assyrtiko and 40% Mandilaria. Expect bright cherry and strawberry notes, with a subtle floral kiss and long finish.

The on-site restaurant, Aroma Avlis, offers picturesque al fresco seating adjacent to the vineyard, as well as a must-try interpretation of *domatokeftedes*, Santorini-style tomato fritters with fresh herbs and feta cream. Never mind that an entire meal awaits at the day's final stop.

The **Gastronomy Center Santorini** ([thegastronomycentersantorini.com](http://thegastronomycentersantorini.com)), located in the small village of Megalochori, offers the opportunity for hands-on experience, or simply sit back and enjoy a degustation menu while the experts do the work. Getting there is half the fun, winding through the narrow, cobblestone streets, shadowed by

Photo: Igor Nirmann



Spicy Olives With Greek Olive Oil



Antonino's Italian Flavors

Photo: Domes Noruz Mykonos

Photo: Santorines



Al Fresco Dining on Santorini

Cycladic architecture and the village's famous tiered bell tower.

The afternoon withers away as we sit on the terrace and the neighborhood cats pay a visit, hoping for a discarded shrimp tail or other delight. The wine flows freely as the courses appear: bruschetta with fresh oregano, a hearty salad of local greens, simply dressed with lemon and Greek olive oil, and a bountiful saffron-hued risotto. Dessert reminds me of the bobota (cornmeal cake) I had in Athens, but here it's served with a scoop of mastic ice cream, its pine scent cutting through the sweetness.

### MYKONOS NIGHTS (and one indulgent afternoon)

Outbound has arranged for our vessel to dock overnight in Mykonos, anticipating sun-drenched days at **Jackie O' Beach Club** (jackieomykonos.com), the go-to spot for barely clad gay travelers, and late nights at its sister venue in town. The winding streets overflow with retail shops, cafes, and bars, but I've set my sights north of the port for two memorable meals.

Arriving just before sunset, I step into **Cavo Tagoo** (cavotagoo.com), a luxury hotel that hugs the sea. The vibe is buzzy without being overbearing as a DJ spins pulsating, ambient music and guests meander about, sun-kissed and content. Its on-site

restaurant, **Meraki**, embraces Greek and Mediterranean ingredients, served family-style, but with a sophistication that matches the stylish crowd.

Standout dishes include miso-glazed eggplant served nigiri-style with crispy quinoa and yuzu dressing, peeled Santorini cherry tomatoes with fresh goat cheese, thyme, and a white vinegar dressing, and orecchiette with sea urchin and king crab that would make Poseidon proud. Under normal circumstances, I feign disinterest in dessert. Still, Meraki's take on galaktoboureko (phyllo, custard, and a sweet syrup) can't be missed, here evoking cr me catalana with its br l e top and flecks of gold leaf. While the spacious, open-air room offers plenty of table seating, consider dining on one of the 12 premier floating day beds, which magically hover over the pool.

I spend the following afternoon ensconced at **Domes Noruz Mykonos** (domesresorts.com), a serene adult-only five-star spa and hotel. The property has graciously offered to accommodate me for a day, and I immediately see why it's one of the most coveted spots on the island. It's natural stone harkens to Mykonos's early architecture, before a solution of lime, salt, and water became common to reflect the intense Mediterranean sun. I've got one thing in mind after a few hours of reading and sunbathing: lunch on the terrace at **Antonino's**.

The Italian-inspired menu offers a fresh, seasonally inspired take on favorites like burrata, blistered pizzas, crispy squid with charred lemon, and thick-cut fresh rigatoni with tomato and shrimp. The ros  (4-6H Agiorgitiko, made from the Peloponnese varietal) makes a perfect bedfellow. It's easy to drink, snack, and nap the day away, but after a quick refresh, I've got one more stop to make.

For the ultimate Mykonos nightcap, head to **Lola Bar** (lola-bar-mykonos.com) named after the devil's seductress in *Damn Yankees*. The quirky, fuchsia interior, and Golden Age musical decor provides an alluring backdrop for a martini or specialty cocktail and socializing with the mostly tourist and show-tune loving crowd. Those looking for an encore can imbibe until the early morning at **Jackie O' Town Bar**.



Photo: Prosign



Lunch in Oia, Santorini

Photo: Tomas Marek

**DINING LIKE AN OLYMPIAN: ATHENS’ MICHELIN-STARRED GEM**

When it comes time to disembark the *Azamara Pursuit I* I have only one destination and experience in mind, a Michelin-star meal at **Spondi** (spondi.gr), one of Athens’ premier dining spots, with Theo and Thanasis.

Our four-hour meal, a multi-course discovery menu that begins with a series of amuse-bouche and concludes with an intoxicating dessert of raspberry, cocoa, and black garlic, feels like a Heracleian accomplishment. Chef Arnaud Bignon has long championed Greece’s bounty of local, seasonal products with an interpretation that combines classic French training with modern techniques and flavor profiles.

As the restaurant approaches its 30th anniversary, Bignon tells me that dining trends tend to happen every 10 years, but one thing remains consistent: “An unwavering focus on the quality of our products, the imperative for our guests to feel at home, and a commitment to our own distinct philosophy.”

But nothing can prepare me for the housemade smoked butter, or the scent of épouisses as the lid of the tableside cheese cart reveals what’s underneath. End-of-summer seasonal ingredients include figs (paired with a foie gras parfait), Cretan cucumber (a refreshing bite alongside sea bass and piquillo pepper), and purple eggplant (appearing with blue lobster, peanut, and kaffir lime).

“Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that dining at Spondi is everything a culinary experience needs to be,” says Bignon, “a harmonious blend of tradition and innovation.”

This al fresco meal with new friends embodies all that Greece has gifted me over the past week: a unique sense of place, the desire to live in the moment, and a hunger for food traditions that stand the test of time. ■



Spondi



Spondi