



Gastronomic Crete

Ambrosia and *díaita*, from land to table

26 September–4 October 2021

(MH 960)

9 days • £3,580

Lecturer: Rosemary Barron

A tour celebrating Cretan gastronomy, from ancient to modern, country simplicity to epicurean sophistication.

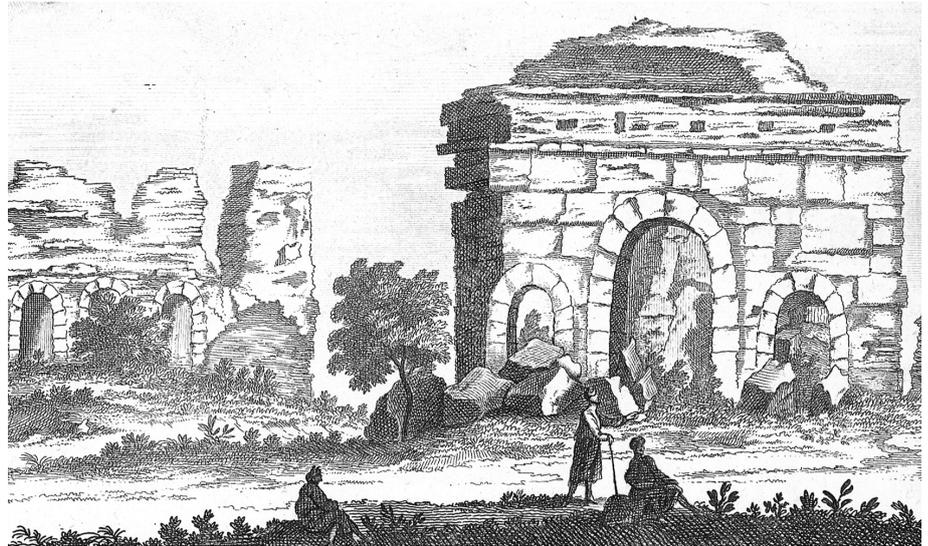
Feast in the mountain foothills, taste wine at a vineyard overlooking ancient Gortyn and meet restaurateurs championing new Cretan cooking.

Visit some of the archaeological highlights of the island with a local guide.

Gastronomically-speaking, the Greek island of Crete is a place like no other. The Greek word *gastronomia*, the art and science of good eating and drinking, has its roots in Linear B, the language of the Minoans. With their knowledge of the natural world and their advanced farming and artistic skills, these early Cretans and their diet, or *díaita* (Greek, meaning ‘way of life’), became a source of myth and legend for the classical Greeks. Crete’s honeys, herbs, olive oil, fruits, cheeses and wines were renowned, and traded, throughout the empire – North Africa, Sicily, Asia Minor – in Byzantine and Ottoman Constantinople, and medieval Venice. Five hundred years later, Cretans are still celebrating their magnificent foods and we are beginning to understand the true meanings of gastronomy and diet.

Crete is endowed with a far richer biodiversity of flora, and more endemic species, than any other European island. Today, herb-covered foothills, olive groves and ancient terraced hillsides covered in vines still define the landscape. Carob trees offer summer shade, and abundant almond blossom promises luscious, honey-soaked nut cakes and pastries later.

There is no gentle pasture here, nor spare grain; livestock and Cretans alike forage for wild greens (*horta*), herbs and fruits. These nutrient-dense plants provide rich grazing for the sheep and goats whose milk, in turn, makes exquisite fresh cheeses – *myzithra*, *anthotyro* – aged *graviera* (mountain sheep cheese), the best yogurt made anywhere, fine-flavoured meats and game and memorable *glyko tou koutaliou* – ‘spoon sweets’ of wild fruits, quince, citrus blossom or tiny figs.



Crete, ruins, 18th-century copper engraving.

The supreme quality of Cretan olive oil is well-known to connoisseurs, so too is the sweet richness of the island’s thyme honey and sun-kissed sultanas and raisins. Curious wine-lovers are in for a treat. Grape varieties in Crete date back to antiquity, and we shall be tasting the finest. A new generation of wine-makers is bringing alive the old flavours, including Cretan malmsey, the favourite tippie of Shakespearean England.

As we travel south from Heraklion, through the central mountains, then west to Chania, we shall meet many Cretans – home-cooks, wine producers, bakers and farmers, visit street markets, *kafenio* (cafés serving coffee the traditional way), tavernas – dedicated to fabulous fish and seafoods, meats, *mezes* or grills – and restaurants using local ingredients that would make chefs elsewhere envious. We shall too meet home-cooks, wine-producers and bakers as we immerse ourselves in this unique island’s gastronomic life and gain a deeper understanding of a how and where gastronomy, diet and culture meet.

Itinerary

Day 1: Heraklion. Fly at c.12.15pm from London Heathrow to Heraklion via Athens (Aegean Airlines). Arrive at the hotel in time for a meze supper. First of three nights in Heraklion.

Day 2: Heraklion, Knossos. The tour begins with a visit to Knossos, where the excavations and reconstructions at the former capital of Minoan Crete enrich our understanding of early civilisation and Cretan *díaita*. From here we drive inland to a beautifully situated country homestead. Pies, from tiny parcels to the magnificently huge, and stuffed with savoury or sweet fillings, are a feature of Cretan cuisine. A fine, local cook demonstrates her pie-making skills, before entertaining us to lunch at her home. Return to Heraklion and an introductory lecture.

Day 3: Heraklion. This morning we explore Heraklion market on foot and some of the specialist producers and shops therein. At its heart, a family bakery has deep roots in the Cretan baking tradition. The superb Archaeology Museum has an exceptional collection of Minoan artefacts. Break for some free time before dinner at Peskesi, a restaurant specialising in modern Cretan cooking.

Day 4: Heraklion to Zaros. Heading south-west into the glorious rural hinterland, visit a sophisticated, family-owned winery cultivating island grape varieties. In contrast, the warm and sometimes boisterous inhabitants of the mountain settlement of Zaros welcome us into the fold. Hospitality is heartfelt but facilities more basic than in Heraklion and Chania, this is a genuine insight into Cretan village life. The next two nights are spent here.

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continued

Day 5: Zaros, Phaestos. Phaestos is the second largest Minoan palace and its setting is perhaps the most evocative. After a coastal lunch, sample more native varietal wines at a beautifully-sited winery on the rocky, calciferous slopes of Orthi Petri. Overlooking parts of ancient Gortyn, organically-cultivated grapes are grown here at an altitude of 500m.

Day 6: Zaros, Chania. Cross the Psiloritis mountains to Chania. In the Venetian harbour town, we bring together myriad threads of the Cretan food story while surrounded by a vibrant past. The Minoan remains of Kastelli lie under the Venetian walls embedded with re-used Greek columns. Down by the harbour are both the Turkish mosque and the synagogue. We focus on Crete's gastronomic life in Venetian and Byzantine times. First of three nights in Chania.

Day 7: Chania. Start with a visit to the market and an opportunity to explore the specialist foods shops and local delicacies to be found in the small streets and alleys around the harbour. Free time to continue at leisure, or to visit one of the numerous museums (these include archaeology, Byzantine and Maritime histories).

Day 8: Chania. Ets Hayyim Synagogue is a fitting location in which to discuss the history of Jews in Crete, as well as the Jewish/Cretan dishes for which its former spiritual director, Nikos Stavroulakis, was well known. A lunch of local specialities precedes a visit to a family-owned olive mill producing organic olive oil using millstones and presses. Our final appointment is dinner at a pioneering restaurant with a sea view.

Day 9. Fly to London Heathrow via Athens arriving c.3.30pm.

The opening of sites on Crete can be influenced by local or national politics at the time of the tour. This may mean that at short notice not all sites listed can be visited.

Lecturer

Rosemary Barron. Food, wine and travel writer with a specialist knowledge of Greece. In the 1980s, she ran a pioneering, village-based cookery school on Crete and Santorini that focused on seasonal rhythm, local culinary skills and a rich food story. She has had papers published by the Oxford Symposium on Food & Cookery, and features in the UK and international media. Her books include *Flavours of Greece* and *Meze: Small Bites, Big Flavors from the Greek Table*.

Practicalities

Price, per person. Two sharing: £3,580 or £3,230 without flights. **Single occupancy:** £3,820 or £3,470 without flights.

Included: flights (Euro Traveller) with Aegean Airlines; travel by private coach throughout; accommodation as described below; breakfasts, 4 lunches, 6 dinners with wine; all admissions; all tastings; all tips for drivers, restaurant staff, guides; all state and airport taxes; the services of the lecturer and a national guide.

Accommodation. Atlantis Hotel, Heraklion (hotelatlantis.com): modern 5-star hotel close to the Venetian port and the Archaeological Museum. **Hotel Keramos, Zaros:** a family-run rural guest house with few pretensions in a busy working village. If you prize luxury over authenticity, this tour is not for you. Rooms are spacious but décor old fashioned, showers not baths, no toiletries, good WiFi. **Kydon Hotel, Chania** (kydon-hotel.com): 4-star hotel, spacious rooms, well situated close to the old town and port. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use.*

How strenuous? There is a fair amount of standing and walking on this tour. Meals can be long and large and so expect some late nights. If you have dietary requirements it is advisable to contact us before booking. Average coach travel per day: 38 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.