The Mediterranean Diet is described as being one of the healthiest diets in the world. U.S. News & World Report ranks it third among overall best diets, describing it as “eminently sensible” with its emphasis on fruits and vegetables, whole grains, olive oil, fish and other healthy fare. Greek cuisine, being loosely tied to this lifestyle diet, is gaining more attention as researchers continue to link its authentic mix of whole grains, fruits, vegetables, lean meats and unsaturated fats to reducing risks of everything from heart disease to breast cancer. Like most regional cuisines, the ingredients used in Greek cuisine tend to be locally sourced and can take credit for the health benefits. However, it’s not only the ingredients that are responsible for the strong health benefits synonymous with Greek cuisine. Many traditional Greek dishes implement simple techniques and concepts that maximize flavor without compromising nutrition.

The Greeks probably did not set out to create some of the healthiest fare in the world. They were most likely just making delicious food using the resources available to them. Often, a backward approach is taken to healthy cooking by attempting to make well-loved food more nutritious. This tends to lead to disappointment. However, when food that is already delicious is also discovered as nutritious, it is a win-win, as is the case with much of Greek cuisine. Here’s a look at some traditional Greek dishes, and how an added twist or two can further maximize flavor and nutrition.

Portion Control
As with many culinary imports, the American version is often increased in size, with exaggerated portions. However, traditional Greek cookery uses a variety of methods that could be employed as portion-control tools. For example, skewering and grilling meats is a technique often used in Greek cooking. Skewers offer a limited amount of space and therefore allow for portion control. Also, alternating chunks of vegetables with meat can provide a nutritious bonus while downsizing the protein portion. Furthermore, grilling is a great way to impart flavor without adding unnecessary fat or calories.

**Spanakopita** (spinach pie) is wonderful as an appetizer or a side. These miniature spinach pies enclose fresh spinach, feta cheese and dried dill in folds of delightfully crispy phyllo dough.

**Souvlaki** is a Greek specialty that usually consists of chunks of lamb that have been marinated in oil, lemon juice, oregano and other seasonings, skewered, and then grilled.

**Dolmades** (stuffed grape leaves) are traditionally made with ground lamb, rice, onion, currants, pine nuts and various seasonings, and then baked or braised. Stuffed grape leaves are a favorite meze and one of the most traditional of all Greek dishes. They can also be served as a side dish.

**Appetizing Appetizers**
Perhaps coinciding with portion control is the notion of small plates, appetizers, tapas or what the Greeks call meze, a perfect way to indulge without overindulging. Because small plates continue to be all the rage these days, and can be a lucrative practice for restaurants when done right, they can also be a healthy practice. These types of dishes allow for the use of rich ingredients and flavor in bite-sized portions that do not overwhelm the palate or waistline of the customer.

**Spanakopita**
Use Swiss chard or another leafy green in place of spinach.

**Dolmades**
Substitute ground turkey and quinoa or chickpea and bulgur in place of lamb and rice.

**Doing Vegetables Right**
Tomatoes, zucchini, eggplant, cucumbers and spinach are just a few vegetable mainstays of Greek cuisine. They are highlighted in all sorts of ways in Greek cookery, from being packed in between flaky sheets of phyllo to roasted and puréed into a dip. Greek cuisine utilizes vegetables far beyond the norm and in a way that delights and tantalizes the taste buds.

**Greek salad** is one of the most famous salads available. Often, the designation of “Greek salad” on a menu just means that there’s some feta cheese and Kalamata olives thrown into a tossed salad mix, but traditionally, the ingredients are tomatoes, cucumbers, capers, onions, feta cheese,
olives and olive oil. The most notable feature of the traditional Greek salad is the lack of lettuce of any kind.

**Fassolatha** has allegedly been around since ancient Greek times. This classic bean soup is the national dish of Greece, representing the best of the Greek way of cooking: legumes, vegetables, herbs and olive oil. It can be made with tomato (red version) or lemon juice (white version).

Add barley, zucchini and leeks to this already hearty and nutritious soup, and top it with a dollop of Greek yogurt for an extra tangy note.

**Good-for-You Saucing**

Every culture has a sauce it is known for, and the Greeks are no exception. However, unlike many sauces weighed down by excessive fat and calories, Greek sauces are naturally low-fat and healthy. This is because the base is Greek yogurt. The Greeks utilize yogurt’s natural creaminess and tartness and pair it with fresh-tasting ingredients for the perfect accompaniment to various dishes.

**Tzatziki** sauce is traditionally made by combining Greek yogurt with lemon, garlic and crisp cucumbers, and is used as an accompaniment in Greek classics such as souvlaki or the infamous gyro.

**Perfect Seasonings**

From yogurt marinades to a squeeze of lemon juice here and there, if there is one thing that sets Greek cuisine apart from most it is its embrace of the sour taste sensation. Acid is abundant throughout Greek cuisine and is helpful when attempting to curb the saltiness of a dish. Feta, anchovies and olives are among the many ingredients used in Greek cooking that are naturally salty and should be used in moderation. However, as much as salty ingredients are included, Greek cuisine is also heavy-handed with acids, vinegars and herbs to help cut through the saltiness of dishes. Oregano, basil and mint are a few herbs generously strewn about in many of the traditional dishes.

**Melitzanosalata** is a classic meze in Greece and can be prepared in countless variations; however, it is usually made with roasted eggplant puréed with a little oil, garlic and vinegar.

Add artichokes, sundried tomatoes or roasted garlic for a slightly different flavor profile.

Add farro or another hearty whole grain along with garbanzo beans, and serve it as a main dish.

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The American Culinary Federation, Inc., established in 1929, is the premier professional organization for culinarians in North America. With over 20,000 members in more than 200 chapters nationwide, ACF is the culinary leader in offering educational resources, training, apprenticeship and accreditation. In addition, ACF operates the most comprehensive certification program for chefs in the United States. ACF is home to ACF Culinary Team USA, the official representative for the United States in major international culinary competitions, and to the Chef & Child Foundation, founded in 1989 to promote proper nutrition in children and to combat childhood obesity. For more information, visit www.acfchefs.org.

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