



# MAEVE O'MEARA

By RAQUEL NEOFIT

She's graced our televisions for years enticing us with cuisines of the world – this Autumn, presenter, author, journalist and food aficionado **MAEVE O'MEARA** caught up at Vanilla to chat about **GOURMET SAFARI**, life and family.

Maeve launched Gourmet Safaris for foodies wanting to learn more about the cuisine in their local cultural districts. Interest spiked and the television series, *Food Safari* was born. Maeve's success has fuelled the food passion of her followers all over the country and even has her taking devotees overseas to Greece, France and Italy.

## **Maeve, what fuelled your passion and desire to chase this food dream?**

I was actually a refugee from channel 9's Sunday Show who washed up on the shores of SBS – it was great. It was such a crazy place to work, I loved it. And it had a great food culture – staff there are from 60 different cultures.

People would gather in the tearoom to talk about delicious things they'd eaten at home or in restaurants the night before – I felt I'd landed in heaven.

One of the Greek subtitlers would take us on forays into her world, we'd start at tavernas and then find ourselves in nightclubs where they'd light up whiskey on the dance floor and break wheelbarrow loads of plates. You'd feel like you were on a remote Greek island but you were in the Sydney suburb of Belmore. I love that about Australia!

## **How did your production company and the television series come to life?**

We started Kismet in 2005 with my partner Toufic Charabati, an editor, producer and a fabulous director.

He came up with the Gourmet Safari concept after coming to one of my food tours and seeing the sort of questions people were asking – they wanted to know all about the ingredients and simple dishes they could make, they wanted lots of tips and they wanted the real deal, authentic recipes, not dumbed down ones. It was amusing that it was a Lebanese walking safari, as that's Touf's background, but he realised there was a great TV show to be done that created a bridge between worlds.

## **What's one of the things you love most about Food Safari?**

The sheer wonderfulness of launching out every day to film something that's close to your heart, the honour of going into people's homes and lives and capturing family recipes, and helping people to sparkle - it's a joy. The days are long but the food and the generosity of people is always amazing.

## **You've expanded so much, how did you find all these local shops and restaurants?**

A lot of people I've met over twenty years of seeking out

authentic food from across the cuisines. Many of the people we film and visit on our Gourmet Safari are friends and that's such a bonus, hearing how everyone's lives are going and feeling connected to such inspiring people. I was delighted this week that we were invited to India by a chef friend to attend his son's wedding.

The other 'finds' come from our two talented researchers.

## **Why jump into producing the show yourself?**

I think after a few years in television it's a good feeling to run your own race.

## **Three teenagers, that's a fulltime job on its own, how do you find the work/life balance with such a demanding schedule?**

I know it's not always easy to have parents away but actually it's never for very long... I hope for each of my children there is understanding about following your dreams.

## **Should we keep an eye out for a new breed of O'Meara journo or foodies?**

Watch this space... My boy is doing a design degree and the girls are still at school. I think the job market is changing so

rapidly that the jobs they end up doing may not even have been invented yet. They do know good food and it's a joy to sit around a table with them.

## **Tell us about your overseas Gourmet Safaris, it's a long way to go if you end up with a dull group.**

You know, I've never had a dull group. Maybe it's the food thing that helps; people who are interested in something and appreciate the clever things we weave into our itineraries are never dull. We've had our groups dancing with a whole village to bouzouki music in village squares, and swimming off luxury catamarans.

## **What's your favourite country and why?**

Australia - we have the best mix of cuisines in the world, a great climate and such a nice relaxed way of being. You realise how stiff and stuffy things can get when you start dealing with other countries.

That, said I do love all the places we visit on our safaris. The longest continuous travel has been to **GREECE** – we visited four islands – Evia, Limnos, Lesbos and Santorini.



Join Vanilla writer, **Raquel Neofit**, as she ventures out with **MAEVE O'MEARA** and a dedicated group of foodies for a Gourmet Safari Greek Walking Tour of Oakleigh, discovering Maeve's favourite hidden goldmines of Greek delicacies.

As we headed into Eaton Mall on a comfortable Saturday morning in February, it felt like we had been transported to a European town. Café tables throughout the mall were quickly filling up, proof new business owners are feeling confident joining this vibrant local community.

We began our day at Mezedakia family restaurant with a strong Greek coffee and baklava, while Maeve explained what lay in store for us. It was a treat to see the expressions of surprise when everyone realised the founder of Gourmet Safari herself was our guide for the day's tour. Even without her right-hand woman, Vicki Peppos – Oakleigh's regular Gourmet Safari Greek expert – Maeve didn't miss a beat and was an enthusiastic and knowledgeable guide.

## VANILLA BAKEHOUSE



Marco

Next stop Vanilla! Our host Helen Spanos couldn't help but laugh when Maeve asked her, 'who came first, the Greeks or Vanilla?' When we entered the Bakehouse we were hit with an intoxicating aroma of sweet treats hot from the oven in an oasis few people ever experience. As we're handed freshly sugared *Bougatsa*, we share a few giggles listening to those who struggle grasping the curls and turns of the Greek language. 'Greeks and Italian have this for breakfast, not bacon and eggs,' we were told as Chef Marco sugars the pastry coated hot-custard delicacy.



Bougatsa

We marvel at freshly made Loukamades feeling tempted to steal some and run. Meanwhile fine confectioners' sugar floats in clouds around us, as Marco generously applies it on the traditional Greek sweets with the funny name *Kourabiedes*. This is paradise.

## VANILLA CAKES & LOUNGE



Helen & Maeve

We then head to Vanilla Lounge for a lesson in frappe and a final touch of Greek hospitality by way of *Loukoumades* (Greek 'dough balls'). As we lick our fingers, Helen gives us a brief history of the success story called Oakleigh's Eaton Mall.

After 44 years in the hospitality industry, Helen shares her love of food and pastries with her entire family and is still always excited about new products and new techniques. She expresses how blessed she feels to be able to be a part of such a wonderful, family orientated community here in Oakleigh and the Mall.

## KALIMERA - SOUVLAKI ART

'This is the hottest ticket in town!' Maeve proclaims as we enter Kalimera to heady scents of marinated pork and chicken. 'This is Sylvia, she married Mister Souvlaki from Greece and they opened this beautiful souvlaki bar'. It is not easy to find in Melbourne pork souvlaki that tastes the same as in Greece. It's all about mastering the 'souvlaki art'.



Sylvia & Maeve



## ALPHA FOODS MARKET

At Alpha we learn about – and eat – olives and feta, then taste homemade dips while Daphne explains the tastes and characteristics. She tells us it's the soil in Kalamata that makes these olives so special, it has a specific taste, and advises us to buy them whole. 'When they are pitted, they squeeze out the juice of the olive too. It may not be nice to spit out the pip, but the olive is better and hey', she exclaims with her hands in the air shrugging her shoulders, 'it's the Greek way!'



QUALITY BUTCHERS & WHOLESALE MEAT

Did you know northern Greeks prefer an aged sausage that's eaten sliced into small pieces with red wine? Or that those Southern boys prefer fresher sausages with eggs for breakfast? Aged for five days Southerners like their sausage flavoured with the likes of orange and red wine, whereas the Northerners lean towards a leek sauce in their sausage because it helps to keep them warm in the cooler weather.

## HOUSE OF PITTES

Across the mall is the House of Pittes run by lovely Renata who introduced us to her Greek chef Ari as he prepares their breads and pastries in the kitchen upstairs. We get a quick lesson in making Tiropita and marvel at Ari's skilled hands folding wafer thin sheets of pastry, creating classic feta Greek specialties. 'A beautifully made pita is an extraordinary thing', Maeve exclaims. We then head downstairs to fill up on hot spanakopita.



Chef Ari

## ATHENA FOOD MARKET - Theo and Eve



Theo & Maeve

Athena Deli is next on our agenda and Theo and Eve introduce us to lots of 'little tastes'. Greek beans, halva and Dodoni yogurt, even Crete's famous thyme flower honey lines their shelves. It's hard not to gape in wonder as Theo slices through a giant Halva that resembles a perfectly crafted marble wall.

## NIKOS QUALITY CAKES

We then venture over to Nikos Quality Cakes where vibrant Matoula, known to the locals as Matty, tells us all about the sweet tooth habits of Greeks.



## PANAYIOTI THE FISH GUY - O'Psaras on Portman



Panayiotis - THE FISH GUY  
Maeve in the fish market

As we snacked on freshly sautéed calamari and prawns, Panayioti spoke about the importance of fresh fish and simplicity. 'Seafood is pretty simple and I think we've complicated it', he says. 'Keep it wholesome, clean and simple.'

We learn how Greeks in Greece prepare their seafood and explore ideas on how it's consumed and prepared. He talks us through a fishy breakfast of salted sardines and silver whiting, from small fish to squid and giant fish that rule the ocean.



Eva & Maeve



Join Oakleigh's local Safari guide, **VICKI PEPPOS**, as she shares her knowledge guiding you through the delights of Oakleigh



Gourmet Safari on the run. An impromotu stop at Lemnos for some road side BBQ snags



Some of the many courses served at Mezedakia for lunch

## MEZEDAKIA

As our day reaches its close, we head back to Mezedakia with full tummies, but this is not the end of the delicious world of Greek cuisine. We still have to make room for Maria's mezedes.

At the start of our adventure, Maeve told us no-one ever leaves hungry on Gourmet Safari, and as we rolled down the street towards home, we knew she was true to her word...

For further information please contact:

**p:** 02 8969 6555 or

visit: [www.gourmetsafaris.com.au](http://www.gourmetsafaris.com.au)