

by Ron James

THE CHEF

Jim Botsacos watched his grandmother make veal with peppers through new eyes - those of a student at the famous Johnson and Wales cooking school in Providence, R.I.

When she threw the chopped peppers, onions and chunks of veal into the electric skillet, he gently chided her: "Grandma, you're supposed to caramelize the veal, take it out and then saute the vegetables, not dump it all in at one time."

"This is the way I've always done it," she said. "And its always good, isn't it Jimmy?"

"Yes, of course, grandma," he answered.

But it was the first time the young chef realized he could make traditional dishes better by using his newfound culinary skills and techniques. The lesson would serve him well in the future.

Born and raised in New York City, Botsacos and his Greek-Italian family celebrated food every day. Most of his relatives were either in the food business or loved to cook.

After cooking school, Botsacos hit the culinary fast track, first at Manhattan's famed '21' Club under Alain Sailac, where he became executive sous chef by the time he was 24, and then as executive chef at Steve

Hanson's Park Avalon and the 450-seat Blue Water Grill.

JIM BOTSACOS - Jim Botsacos, author of 'New Greek Cuisine,' is chef at Molyvos, one of New York's most exciting restaurants. CNS Photo courtesy of Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group.

LEG OF LAMB - At Molyvos, Jim Botsacos serves leg of lamb family-style, by presenting the whole leg to the table, and then carving it to order in the kitchen. CNS Photo courtesy of Doubleday Broadway Publishing Group.

While on vacation in 1996 with his new wife Maria, Botsacos got a call from friend and restaurateur Nick Livanos, who wanted the young chef to be involved in a "white tablecloth" restaurant called Molyvos.

"I was intrigued with the idea of reaching into my own heritage for a new direction in my culinary career," Botsacos writes in the forward to his recent cookbook "New Greek Cuisine" (Broadway, \$29.95). "I immediately returned to New York and within hours was on a plane to Greece with the Livanos family."

In Greece, Botsacos immersed himself in Greek culture and cuisine, discovering many new ingredients and dishes. In 1997, with lessons and recipes in hand and a firm foundation in classic cooking, Botsacos made Molyvos one of New York's most exciting restaurants. It has received rave reviews from diners and critics alike, including a three-star rating from The New York Times. And yes, he does offer veal and peppers on the menu - but he does it his way.

THE DISH

Our featured dish is the classic Greek Roasted Leg of Lamb With Marinated Tomatoes.

"For my entire life, every celebration - birthdays, Easter, whatever - will find some type of lamb on the table," Botsacos writes. "This is my interpretation of a dish that both my mother and my grandmother made.

"At Molyvos, with 24 hours' notice, we will serve this dish family-style. We present the whole leg to the table, and then it is carved to order in the kitchen. At home we serve it with simply roasted potatoes and vegetables."

Ask the butcher to debone the lamb.

THE WINE

A celebratory meal such as this calls for a wonderful Darioush 2004 Signature Russian River Pinot Noir (\$48). This elegant wine has the necessary character to complement the rich savory lamb and marinated tomatoes. The wine has soft tannins, and silky layered flavors of blackberries and cinnamon with a touch of licorice at the finish.

Darioush is located on the Napa Valley Silverado Trail and is one of Napa's newest and best wineries. It is a must-see when visiting wine country. The stunning architecture reflects the heritage of owner Darioush Khaledi, who imported the same stone used in the ancient Persian temples of Persepolis.

ROASTED LEG OF LAMB WITH MARINATED TOMATOES

1 (7- to 8-pound) leg of lamb, main bone removed, shank bone intact

Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

1 garlic clove, quartered

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 1/2 teaspoons dried Greek oregano

1/2 cup dry white wine

2 1/2 cups chicken stock

Marinated Tomatoes (recipe follows)

Herbed Bread Crumbs (recipe follows)

Yields 8 to 10 servings.

Lay out lamb flat on clean work surface. Season top with salt and pepper, to taste. Starting at narrow end, roll up lamb up, cigar-fashion. Using kitchen string, tie meat in place so that it will hold its shape and cook evenly.

Make 4 small slits in lamb. Insert 1 garlic sliver into each slit. Lightly coat lamb with olive oil. Sprinkle oregano over lamb and again season with salt and pepper, to taste. Wrap in plastic wrap and refrigerate for 3 to 12 hours.

When ready to roast, preheat the oven to 450 F.

Remove lamb from refrigerator, unwrap, and place in large roasting pan. Place in preheated oven and roast for 25 minutes.

Remove lamb from oven and add wine to roasting pan. Add stock, reduce oven temperature to 400 F and return pan to oven. Roast, basting frequently with pan juices, for 40 to 50 minutes. If pan juices dry up, add stock or water as needed.

Remove lamb from oven. Spoon thin layer of Marinated Tomatoes over lamb, pressing down slightly to make them adhere. Return lamb to the oven and roast, basting every 5 minutes, for 10 minutes. Sprinkle on Herbed Bread Crumbs, lightly pressing to make them adhere. Roast for 5 minutes.

Remove lamb from oven and allow to rest 15 minutes before cutting strings and slicing for serving.

MARINATED TOMATOES

2 beefsteak tomatoes, peeled

2 garlic cloves, minced

2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1/2 teaspoon dried Greek oregano

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

Yields about 2 cups.

Quarter tomatoes. Using small, sharp knife, carefully remove and discard core, pulp and seeds. Cut tomatoes into small dice and place in small mixing bowl. Add garlic, parsley, and oregano, tossing to blend. Drizzle

with olive oil and season to taste with salt and pepper. Set aside to marinate at room temperature for at least 1 hour before using.

HERBED BREAD CRUMBS

1 cup fresh bread crumbs

1 garlic clove, minced

1 teaspoon dried Greek oregano

Juice of 1 lemon

1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil

Coarse salt and freshly ground pepper

Yields about 1 cup.

Combine bread crumbs, garlic and oregano in small mixing bowl. Squeeze lemon juice over mixture, tossing to blend. Drizzle with olive oil and season to taste salt and pepper. Crumbs should stick together when pinched; if not, add a bit more olive oil.

- "The New Greek Cuisine."

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Ron James welcomes comments and suggestions. E-mail him at ronjames@perfectpairings.us. Listen to his "Gourmet Club" radio show and see archives of previous columns at www.perfectpairings.us.

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Food and Wine: Culinary renewal of battle of Thermopylae by Ron James