

# Mediterranean magic

FALL IN LOVE WITH THE MEDITERRANEAN THROUGH MAEVE O'MEARA'S DELICIOUS RECOLLECTIONS.

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There is something truly magical about the Mediterranean. Perhaps it's the impossible blue colour that makes you catch your breath again and again as you gaze out over the expanse of sea. Maybe it's the incredible buoyancy of the water – it's delicious to swim in and when you dive under, the shafts of sunlight dancing through the water make you wish you could breathe underwater and live there forever. And then there are the people who have settled around it – warm and welcoming and to top it off, amazing cooks.

I first fell in love with this beautiful sea half my lifetime ago and, as luck would have it, I've managed to return almost every year. I've even designed one of my food safaris around the Mediterranean to give me even more reason to make regular pilgrimages – a Greek Island safari that is woven around the sea and its bounty. There's a

In Croatia, my chef friend Dennis Valcich tells me, you learn to fish almost as soon as you can walk. With hundreds of islands along that beautiful Dalmatian coast, you're never far from the smell of fish grilling. "When I was growing up I ate fish every day and only had meat at Christmas time," he says. "And we had so many types of fish, including lovely sweet cuttlefish cooked in its ink." While Dennis suggests the cuttlefish, I'd add Croatian brodet to the top 100 meals you should try in your life. It's a celebration of the sea, with several different types of fish, scampi and mussels cooked in a rich base of garlic, tomato and white wine and served over soft polenta. As they say there "Ukusno!" ("Delicious!")

In Portugal, every little village on the sea seems to have a beguiling smell of sardines grilling over coals; the big plump Portuguese ones that go so well with a chilled glass of the pale green vinho verde wine.

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moment I look forward to every year, when we arrive in the village of Oia in Santorini. I open the whitewashed shutters to my favourite view in all the world – out from the clifftops to that incredible blue sea – so intense it seems to be floating in front of you. It's something you could look at your whole life and never tire of its beauty.

The other bewitching element of my love affair with the Mediterranean is the food. Some of the best meals of my life have been on the beaches, in small tavernas, on the decks of fishing boats and perched in the home kitchens a stone's throw from the sea. Freshly caught fish has a taste and texture that makes you realise how good simple fresh food can taste. A fish grilled on coals with a little salt, a squeeze of lemon and a drizzle of olive oil is one of the most spectacular things you'll ever eat.

Fatima Barroso, a dynamo who started Australia's first Portuguese restaurant 30 years ago, says you can't imagine Portuguese food without seafood, "We love our bacalhau and sardines but they are from the cold waters towards Scandinavia. From the Mediterranean we eat all kinds of fish and adore our vongole."

In Greece, it's a revelation seeing how that beloved delicacy, octopus, is caught and prepared for the pot. A small amount of olive oil is poured on the surface of the water to increase visibility down to the rocks and little crannies where octopi hide. When they're hooked up, they're quickly dispatched, then to make them tender, beaten and almost kneaded against a smooth rock until a foam begins to appear. The best octopus I've ever eaten was on the island of Evia. It was simply added to a big heavy based pot with no liquid



added and popped on a low heat. An hour or so later it was a dark rich red wine colour and incredibly tender and delicious.

One of my lasting memories of Tunisia is that lovely theatrical moment when the conical lid is taken off the tajine (clay cooking pot) and a waft of steam fragrant with cumin, a hint of cinnamon and preserved lemon greets you. We were in the small living room of a house on the Kerkennah Islands being looked after by a generous couple who cooked up the most delicious fish tajine served with couscous and chilli warm harissa. What a flavour and such generosity. Perhaps sunshine and seafood brings out the best in people.

The other great bonus of the Mediterranean is that so many people from there have come to Australia. Some have gone into our fishing industry (Port Lincoln is full of families from the one Croatian island); others have opened restaurants around the country. So, from the people who have taught us about good coffee and olive oil, there is much to learn about cooking seafood.

Over the years, I've been taught how to pick good seafood. It's always best to buy whole fish so you can see that their eyes are clear and bright and their gills are red (remember, you want to get as close as you can to that 'just from the sea' experience). You can ask your fishmonger to scale and fillet it, though this is an easy skill to learn.

Try not to cook it icy cold as anything you cook tastes better when the change from uncooked to cooked is not so extreme. (Try this with your next steak and see if you can notice the difference!) Be careful not to overcook fish as 10 seconds can mean the difference between marvellous and so-so. Remember, the heat in the fish will continue to cook it even after you've taken it off the heat.

Try to cook your seafood outside through the warm evenings ahead – after all, we are the 'prawn on the barbie' nation so let's extend that to many different types of seafood. Enjoy!



SARDINA/CORSICA  
Prawn and  
eggplant pasta

SARDINA/CORSICA  
Prawn and eggplant pasta

Serves 4

- ¼ cup olive oil
- 1 small onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 small carrot, finely chopped
- 1 celery stalk, finely chopped
- 6 finger eggplants, thickly sliced
- 2 tbsp char grilled eggplant pesto
- 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- 1 cup fish stock
- 5 saffron threads
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 sprig rosemary
- 20 green prawns, peeled tails intact, intestinal tract removed
- 350g shell shaped pasta
- 8 basil leaves, finely shredded
- ¼ cup shaved pecorino cheese
- 2 tbsp mullet bottarga, grated

1. Heat oil in a large frypan over medium heat; add onion, garlic, carrot and celery. Cook for 6–8 minutes or until vegetables are soft, add eggplant and cook for a further 6 minutes.

## + Wine

**Prawn and eggplant pasta:**

+ As this dish has many ingredients you'll need a wine that can match its flavour weight. We recommend the Allinda Chardonnay 2007. This rich, full bodied white has a real complexity and is texturally firm enough to cope with the eggplant, tomato and prawns. The length of flavour on the palate will ensure a happy union.

**Tunisian snapper**

+ Snapper is a delicate fish and the spices adorning it are fragrant. For this dish you could try a light, aromatic white such as Sauvignon Blanc, but a lighter bodied red such as Pinot Noir will work equally well.

**Stuffed squid**

+ This dish would again be a good candidate for lighter bodied reds due to the prosciutto, polenta and tomato. However, for a great match try the Tim Knappstein Riposte Riesling 2008. The combination of lime and lemon on the palate and sharp acids will cut through the squid. Its rich stuffing will complement the wine's zest.

**Tuna in dukkah with tomato garlic sauce**

+ You don't want to mask the simplicity of this dish, yet you want enough weight to cope with the spice, tomato, garlic and the bean puree. A young Hunter Semillon or Gewürtztraminer would be perfect.



TUNISIA  
Tunisian snapper

## Gourmet destinations

2. Add pesto, cook for 1 minute, stirring, then add tomatoes, stock, saffron and herbs. Reduce heat to low and cook, stirring occasionally for 25–30 minutes or until eggplant is soft. Add prawns and cook for 5 minutes or until prawns are cooked through. Season to taste.
3. Meanwhile, cook pasta in a large saucepan of boiling salted water until al dente. Drain and stir through sauce. Serve with shaved basil, pecorino cheese and grated bottarga.

### Wine Suggestion:

Allinda Chardonnay 2007

## TUNISIA

### Tunisian snapper

Serves 4

Pre-heat oven to 180°C

- 4 large red snapper fillets, pin boned and skin removed
- 1 tsp cumin seeds
- 1 tsp coriander seeds
- 1 tsp fennel seeds
- ½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp chilli flakes
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, finely sliced
- 3 cloves garlic, finely sliced
- ½ punnet cherry tomatoes, some halved
- 1 cup (250ml) fish stock
- 2 tbsp coarsely chopped flat leaf parsley
- Lime couscous (see recipe), to serve

1. With tweezers, remove any small bones from snapper fillets or alternatively ask your fishmonger to do this for you.
2. Heat a small frypan or skillet and roast cumin, coriander and fennel until aromatic. Combine with salt and chilli flakes and grind in a mortar and pestle.
3. Rub mixture on flesh side of the fish.
4. In an ovenproof dish, large enough to hold fish in one layer, heat oil, add the onion and garlic, cook for 2 minutes. Add fish, top with tomatoes, then pour fish stock into dish.
5. Bake for 15–20 minutes or until fish is cooked through.
6. Serve with lime couscous, a drizzle of the stock and garnish with coarsely chopped parsley.

### Wine Suggestion:

Hungerford Hill Pinot Noir 2007

## Lime couscous

Serves 4

- 2 cups (400g) couscous
- 2 cups (500ml) boiling water
- 2 limes, zest and juice

1. Combine couscous and water in a large heatproof bowl, cover and stand for 5 minutes or until water is absorbed, fluffing with a fork occasionally.
2. Stir through zest and juice.

## CROATIA

### Stuffed squid

Serves 4

- 12 small squid
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 3 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 100g (2/3 cup) basmati rice
- ½ cup (125ml) white wine
- 1 lemon zest and juice
- 1 cup (250ml) chicken or fish stock
- 1 fresh bay leaf
- 6 slices prosciutto, roughly chopped
- ¼ cup finely chopped chives
- 20g butter
- Polenta and tomato sauce (see recipes), to serve

1. Clean squid hoods and remove back bone and beak. Drain well. Chop tentacles and reserve.
2. Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a frypan. Add onion and garlic, sauté for 3 minutes. Add reserved tentacles and sauté for 3 minutes. Add rice, wine, zest, juice, stock and bay leaf, bring to the boil, and reduce heat to low. Cook covered until rice is tender (10–12 minutes). Season.
3. Meanwhile, in a separate frypan, add prosciutto, sauté for 3–5 minutes or until coloured and crispy. Remove from heat and add to rice mixture with chives.
4. Spoon or pipe (with a large nozzle) mixture into squid, leaving 1cm at the top and secure with a toothpick.
5. Pre heat oven to 180°C. Melt butter in an ovenproof frying pan; add squid and cook, turning regularly, until golden (3–5 minutes). Transfer to the oven and roast until cooked through (opaque) (5–10 minutes).

6. Thickly slice and serve with polenta and tomato sauce.

### Wine Suggestion:

Tim Knappstein Riposte Riesling 2008

## Polenta

Serves 4

- 3 cups (750ml) water
- 1½ cups (375ml) chicken stock
- 1 cup (170g) polenta
- ½ cup (125ml) cream
- ½ cup (40g) grated parmesan
- Salt and white pepper

1. Combine water and stock in a large saucepan; bring to the boil, then reduce to a simmer.
2. Gradually whisk in polenta and cook uncovered, stirring constantly for about 20–25 minutes or until mixture is thickened. Stir in cream and parmesan; continue stirring for 5 minutes or until mixture is thickened. Season with salt and pepper.

## Tomato sauce

Serves 4

- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- ½ tsp sugar
- 1 x 400g tin chopped tomatoes
- ¼ cup shredded basil leaves

1. Heat oil in a frypan over medium heat. Add onion and garlic, sauté for 3–5 minutes or until soft but not coloured.
2. Add sugar, cook for 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, then add tomatoes and cook for 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Remove from heat and add basil leaves.

## EGYPT

### Tuna in dukkah with tomato garlic sauce

Serves 4

- 4 x 80–100g skinless tuna steaks
- 1 cup dukkah (see recipe or purchased dukkah can be used)
- 2 tbsp vegetable oil
- 2 tbsp flat leaf parsley to garnish

CROATIA  
Stuffed squid



EGYPT  
Tuna in dukkah with  
tomato garlic sauce



1. Place dukkah on a tray, press tuna in dukkah firmly to coat both sides.
2. Heat oil in a large frying pan over high heat and add tuna in batches. Cook for 2–3 minutes each side or until golden on both sides and pink in the centre.
3. Serve, garnished with parsley with tomato sauce and fava bean puree or lentils and rice.

**Wine Suggestion:**

Jackson's Hill The Underblock  
Semillon 2008

**Dukkah**

Makes 2–3 cups

- ½ cup (80g) macadamia nuts
- ¼ cup (40g) blanched almonds
- 2/3 (100g) cup sesame seeds
- 1/3 cup coriander seeds
- ¼ cup cumin seeds

- 2 tbsp fennel seeds
- 1 tsp sea salt flakes
- ½ tsp freshly ground pepper

1. Pre-heat oven to 180°C. Place macadamia nuts and almonds on a tray and roast for 5–8 minutes or until golden.
2. Place sesame seeds in a heavy-based frypan, dry frying over medium heat, stirring often until lightly toasted. Tip immediately into a bowl to prevent them burning and set aside to cool.
3. Repeat process with coriander, cumin and fennel seeds. Heat until aromatic. Set aside to cool.
4. When cool, combine nuts with seed mixture, place in a food processor and process in short bursts, until coarsely ground.
5. Season with salt and pepper.

**Tomato garlic sauce**

Serves 4

- 1 tbsp oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, crushed
- 1 cup tomato puree
- ½ tsp sugar
- ¼ tsp cayenne pepper
- ½ tsp ground coriander
- ½ tsp ground cumin
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- Salt and pepper to season
- 2 tbsp chopped flat leaf parsley

1. Heat oil in a saucepan over medium heat. Add onion and garlic, sauté for 3–4 minutes until soft but not coloured.
2. Add tomato puree, sugar, spices and vinegar. Cook for 15–20 minutes.
3. Season with salt and pepper and stir through parsley.

**Bean puree**

Serves 4

- 2 x packets frozen broad beans
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp ground cumin
- 1 pinch cayenne pepper
- 1 lemon, juice only
- Salt and pepper to season

1. Cook broad beans in a large pot of boiling water according to directions on packet or until tender. Drain, cool and peel.
2. Heat olive oil in a large frying pan, add onion and garlic and sauté over a low heat for 10–15 minutes or until caramelized but not too dark. Add peeled broad beans, paprika, cumin, cayenne pepper and lemon juice to mixture and stir to combine.
3. Place mixture in a food processor and process until it resembles a paste, season with salt and pepper. ■