

White chalk cliffs in Sarakiniko,  
Milos Island

# OUT OF THE BLUE

On a recent trip to the Cyclades region, **Flip Byrnes** samples a simpler life, along with island flavours, and discovers it's the perfect appetiser to a deeper Greek experience.

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When the late, great Anthony Bourdain came to Naxos to plunder its secrets to turbo-charged food flavours, he chose a woman named Giuliana, the warmest, most patient woman on the Cycladic isle, as his palate navigator. She also happens to be merciless in the kitchen. No vegetable is safe when Giuliana wields her knife, whipping up stuffed vegetables, a deity of Greek cooking.

I fear Bourdain has set the bar high. Food lover I am, expert knife-wielder? Ah, no, so it's lucky the Grecian meltemi winds have blown me to Giuliana's cutting board. The most efficient way to slice through the top layer of tourism is via an invitation into a local's kitchen. But we're not all Bourdains with global contacts. Luckily Giuliana is the mother-in-law of the **Naxian Collection's** owner Yiannis, and cooking with her is available to hotel guests as a special insider experience.

The start of our adventure is a two-minute stroll from our two-storey villa – Giuliana's nine-year-old granddaughter leads my two pre-schoolers to the organic garden. This isn't an architectural garden, it's more like *Where the Wild Things Are*, hiding bounty that lured the pirates who once pillaged these coasts. If you don't have some sort of garden allotment for your own table, you aren't Naxian; most grow their own vegetables, which are treated more like cousins than foodstuffs.

"These are my tomatoes," says gardener Zanos, holding two misshapen tomatoes like a proud father. "The beauty," he says, "is on the inside."

Naxians don't buy plants.

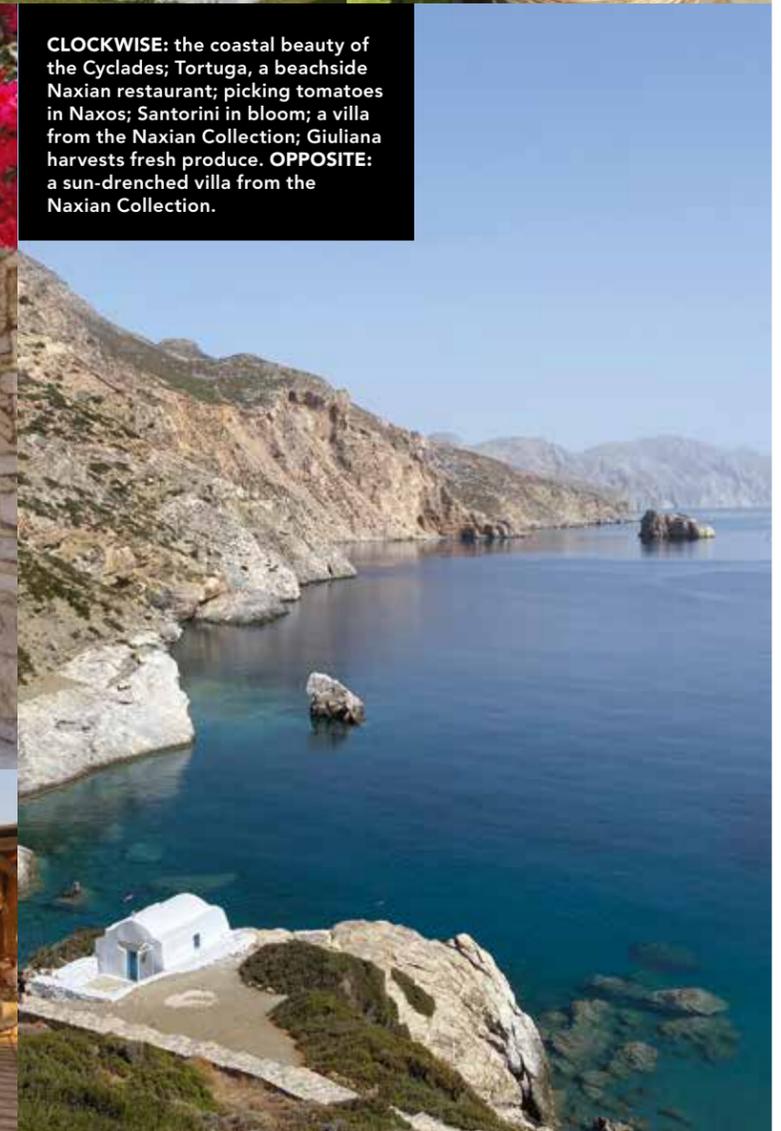
Most garden goods have been gifted by friends and family, explaining the eclectic cast of characters: there are needy baby zucchinis, a lone-ranger sunflower, introverted watermelons hiding beneath foliage, a hardy gang of 15 different types of tomatoes and, through the eggplants, I spy Giuliana and my daughters picking flavour-intense Naxian potatoes.

For our meal of *gemista* (stuffed vegetables), we pick tomatoes, zucchinis and eggplant. We also pause to sniff the lavender and peppermint before arriving to the sun-dappled outdoor kitchen. And this is where things become interesting. Giuliana speaks no English, and I no Greek, yet through charades we chop, laugh and swap wordless stories.

At some point among cucumbers and capsicums, a friendship simmered; we deviated from a cooking class and took a sidestep into Giuliana's rich life. With a bonus, mouth-watering feast.

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**CLOCKWISE:** the coastal beauty of the Cyclades; Tortuga, a beachside Naxian restaurant; picking tomatoes in Naxos; Santorini in bloom; a villa from the Naxian Collection; Giuliana harvests fresh produce. **OPPOSITE:** a sun-drenched villa from the Naxian Collection.





**CLOCKWISE:** breathtaking views of the caldera in Santorini; lobster and burrata at Tortuga; Guiliana prepares stuffed vegies; lunch with a view in Santorini.



**CLOCKWISE:** sailing in Paros; salads don't get any fresher on Naxos; peppercorn and cinnamon beef; the 'hiding lambs' revealed; Achilles prepares the 'hiding lamb'.



**“FOR A STITCH IN TIME WE’RE GREEK, A PART OF THIS AFTERNOON TAPESTY OF SIMPLE LIFE.”**

This immersive experience is an entree to our next on neighbouring Paros, a 45-minute ferry ride away. In raptures over the olive oil at the newly opened **Taverna Agyra** in Drios, the young owners allow us to buy a bottle. “Oh, and our uncle, the maker, is also offering cooking lessons.” So that’s how we end up waiting by a tin-topped vegetable shack on the side of a road the next day. Achilles pulls up in a billowing cloud of dust and smiles to lead us to his house.

Achilleas is right, we would never have found this alone as we wind down a Minotaur’s labyrinth of unpaved lanes to their seaside home, a 4000-square-metre oasis. Cicadas sing and goats graze. Not only are Achilleas and wife Glikeria successful former restaurateurs, but they are sitting quietly on four gems, gorgeous little houses for rent named for their surroundings: Olive, Jasmine, Lavender and Dahlia.

**Flora Apartments** could possibly be Paros’ best-kept secret, and previously only known by word of mouth (they now have a sleek website – floradrios.gr). Lucky guests are so close to the Aegean that three beaches are within a fork’s toss and the property is wreathed in the aroma of herbs and sunbaked soil. Today, against this cinematic backdrop, we’re doing a dish which had their customers forming disorderly queues whenever it featured as a special; *kleftico*, or ‘hiding lambs’.

This dish is a cultural anchor from their origins near Meteora. Lamb theft wasn’t uncommon, especially by lamb and goat-loving bandits who would then conceal the delicious odours of their nefarious gains by cooking underground. Achilles’ twist is wrapping them in

adorable individual baking-paper ‘nests’, a typical creative Achilleas touch.

The best part of ‘hiding lambs’ is that it’s happy to do its own thing while you get on with more serious business – like snorkelling. So after assembling the little nests with lamb leg morsels marinated in salt, garlic and lemon, with vegetables (zucchini and carrots), parsley, slices of *xynomizithra* (a local goat’s cheese) and sauce, tied with twine, we follow an olive tree-lined path to one of the most beautiful beaches on Paros (and there are many), **Golden Beach**.

Two hours later, we return to a Greek moment you won’t find in any tourist book. The patio table has been set as we sit for a 3pm lunch. On the horizon a sailboat drifts with empty sails, bees buzz industriously, and Achilleas unveils our little lamb packages, the meat so tender it

falls apart. Accompanied by a salad dressed with his own olive oil and briny, buttery Amfissa olives, we clink glasses in our still-wet swimmers. For a stitch in time we’re Greek, a part of this lazy afternoon tapestry of sweet, simple life.

Of course these islands are much more than food, they’re spiced with ancient ruins, sprinkled with beaches boasting Tahitian hues and peppered with mountain villages made of marble and marinated in myths. Case in point: Santorini, the showgirl. The vista of dramatic caldera cliffs rearing from the Aegean and sugar-cube houses dribbling seawards like gravity-defying diamonds make the island the can-can kicker of the Cyclades. But Santorini hides a softer, sweet side. As Lefteris of bespoke guiding company **Blue Shades of Greece** says, “Stay longer, dig a little deeper and discover far more than the

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famed sunset." Stumble across **Domaine Sigalas** offering wines from a volcanic vineyard more than 3,200 years old; head to **Lefkes** in tiny Foinikia and gorge on island specialites like sun-dried cherry tomatoes, fava beans, capers, and white eggplant; sail the caldera with **Renieris Sailing Centre** and don't miss **Akrotiri**, an archaeological site to rival Pompeii.

Then there's Mykonos: next-level beach clubs, chef-name restaurants and epic people watching. Kardashian favourite club **Nammos** gets our pick for the setting on Psarou Beach, or **Skorpis** for pure boho chic, before heading to a five-star sleep at the **Belvedere Mykonos**.

If you think you only want to visit Santorini and Mykonos, then you haven't heard about Milos. A volcanic island two hours' ferry ride from Santorini, it oozes charm instead of lava, and its popularity is rising. Once only known as the origin of the Louvre's Venus de Milo statue, it's now all about ethereal rock, thermal springs and more than 70 beaches. The geology has resulted in beaches like no other. The white, lunar rock landscape of **Sarakiniko Beach**, sandy **Firiplaka Beach** with aquamarine shallows and rock gouged **Papafragas** beach are all drawcards.

But as the name Cyclades suggests, all circles back to food, with friendship as the taste enhancer. As the Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus already knew, "To eat and drink without a friend is to devour like the lion and the wolf." ✂

*Flip Byrnes travelled as a guest of Discover Greece and partners Blue Star Ferries and Aegean Airlines.*  
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"THE PATIO HAS BEEN SET AS WE SIT FOR A 3PM LUNCH. ON THE HORIZON A SAILBOAT DRIFTS WITH EMPTY SAILS."

CLOCKWISE: Naxian Collection villa; cooking over coals; cruising the Cyclades; majestic Mykonos; Chora, Mykonos.



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