



Greek cuisine has humble roots. It's a country blessed and it's a country with natural hardships. A respect for produce, meat and seafood exists. Large families had to be fed and nothing would be wasted – nothing. The Greek diet dictates that a family eat locally, in season foods and one only need a simple preparation of the dishes. Fresh ingredients are the cook's best friend.

So, when you go to Greece, you will be served whole fish with the head still on. Octopus will be drying in the sun outside of a taverna on the Greek islands and while your splurging on a large sea bass, chances are it's farmed and the table full of Greeks dining beside your table are enjoying sardines and fresh anchovies.

Now that I've crushed your notion of eating 5 Euro/kg red snapper each night, it's time to once again embrace the octopus. It used to be dirt cheap here and in Greece – it's still affordable in Greece but now the consumer has a choice between fresh and frozen, local and foreign.



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The octopus (*octopus vulgaris*) will be on the menu of every seafood tavern in Greece and practically every Greek restaurant outside of Greece. To order it is a delicacy and to eat it – a delight.

Greeks enjoy octopus in a stew, with pasta, made into a salad with olive oil and wine vinegar but the most often ordered octopus is the grilled octopus...the subject of today's dish.

Regardless of how you like your octopus cooked, it must be cleaned by removing the beak, eyes and interior organs removed. The octopus must also be tenderized. On the Greek islands, one often will see fishermen beating the octopus on concrete piers to tenderize it. Frozen octopus can also often become more tender.



On the Greek islands, they even go one further where one will often see a clothes line of octopi hanging outside of a taverna, drying out in the hot Greek sun. This is done to draw out moisture (water) from the octopus, especially important if grilling octopus.

Like any creature, the octopus is made mostly of water. If one were to throw an octopus from sea to grill, all that water in the octopus would simply steam it into a rubbery mass. So, moisture has to be drawn out (hang out to dry in the sun) and beat the living daylights of the octopus on the rocks of a Greek shore.

Most of us do not live on the Greek islands but here in the modern kitchen...one braises the octopus, which renders it down to a less than half it's size but in the end, a tender octopus is left for your cooking discretion.



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When braising an octopus, it needs no other liquid. All one has to do is throw it in a pot over high heat, cover and allow about 5-8 minutes for the liquid to release from the octopus. Once you see the octopus swimming in it's own liquid...set it and forget it!



Octopus needs to be braised slowly. For a smaller octopus of about a couple of pounds, 45 to 60 minutes may be required. For larger ones you will need anywhere from an hour to 90 minutes.



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On occasion, the liquid can totally evaporate as every octopus is different or you simply had the heat on too high. If this occurs, you may add some water or wine or both. Some aromatics like bay leaves, allspice berries or sometimes a cinnamon stick are added and all are perfectly acceptable.

Another addition into the braising liquid is the wine cork. Afficionados of octopus are divided on the the cork's tenderizing effects on octopus. It is said that an enzyme in the cork helps the process along. I've tried braising octopus with and without the cork and I believe the octopus becomes more tender with the cork add into the pot.

Cork is a natural product, untreated with any chemicals and if it's good enough to bottle your favourite wine, it shouldn't and won't do know harm for you to try it out when braising/tenderizing your octopus. My final say on the cork issue is that both Mario Batali ([http://www.mariobatali.com/ingredients\\_octopus.cfm](http://www.mariobatali.com/ingredients_octopus.cfm)) and Lidia Bastianich ([http://www.star chefs.com/chefs/LBastianich/html/octopus\\_salad\\_l\\_bastianich.shtml](http://www.star chefs.com/chefs/LBastianich/html/octopus_salad_l_bastianich.shtml)) swear by the "cork technique". I'm happy to be in good company.

I served grilled octopus to my friends last week in honour of Canada Day (<http://kalofagas.ca/2009/06/28/foodbuzz-24-24-24-a-canada-day-celebration/>) as I wanted to showcase some Greek standards...things one would eat in Greece. Octopus is standard Greek fare.

After braising the octopus and poking it to ensure it became fork-tender, I simply took it off the heat, added some wine, a little balsamic vinegar and some fresh oregano to steep with the octopus. Your octopus should be ready to grill when the liquid comes to room temperature. You can throw in the fridge overnight and you have wonderful and tender grilled octopus the following day as well.

When your octopus is ready to be grilled, one need only take it out of the liquid, toss it in olive oil, some salt and cracked black pepper and some dried Greek oregano and place on your pre-heated grill for a quick sear on all sides of the octopus.

You can grill the octopus whole or cut the eight tentacles...either way the beastly has to be divided...it's your choice when you do it. In the end, octopus is a revered morsel from the sea, Greeks adore it. Grilled octopus...seared and crisp on the outside, tender and white on the inside...briny as the sea, cut only by the fresh lemon juice just squeezed on it's hot tentacles and a final sprinkle of dried Greek oregano – anointed by the waiting lover of grilled octopus.



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### **Grilled Octopus (χταπόδι-σγάρας)**

(makes 1 appetizer serving for 4)

*1 medium to large octopus, beak and ink-sac removed (most octopi are already cleaned)*

*1/3 cup red wine*

*splash of balsamic or wine vinegar*

*cracked black pepper*

*fresh or dried Greek oregano*

*extra-virgin olive oil*

*salt to taste*

*lemon wedges*



1. Place your octopus (throwing in the cork is optional) in a pot over high heat and cover. Allow the octopus to boil for about 5-8 minutes. Take the lid off and have a look to see if the liquid has been released (the octopus should be almost covered in liquid). Place the cover back on and reduce the heat to a medium-low and simmer for about 45 minutes (checking occasionally to see if there's enough braising liquid). You may add some more water and continue to braise until the octopus is fork-tender.
2. Remove from the heat and add your wine, balsamic vinegar and some Greek oregano. Allow the octopus to steep until the liquid has cooled or even better, place in the fridge overnight.
3. When you're ready to grill your octopus, pre-heat your gas or charcoal grill to a high heat. You may cut your octopus now or after it's grilled (your choice).
4. Take your octopus out of the liquid and place in a bowl. Add some olive oil, some balsamic vinegar, dried Greek oregano, freshly ground black pepper and if needed at all, some sea salt.
5. Place the octopus on the grill and sear for about 2-3 minutes on both sides. Remove from the grill and place on a serving plate. Drizzle with extra-virgin olive oil, a squeeze of fresh lemon juice, a good sprinkle of dried Greek oregano and a little sea salt.
6. Serve as part of an array of Greek seafood appetizers (mezedes) with some Ouzo or Tsipouro.

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