

Spring into Summer



by Lisa Bryan
from June 2022



It may be a while before your tomato plants flower and set fruit to grow and ripen for harvest. Until then, satisfy your craving for food that tastes clean, fresh and bright with this Greek-inspired orzo pasta salad.

After making it once, make it your own by playing around with the ingredient amounts to suit your taste.

Whether served as the main course or as a side dish, this salad looks as pretty in the bowl as it tastes. Easily doubled for a potluck or party, the bowl comes home empty nearly every time.

Greek-Style Orzo Pasta Salad

- 1 cup orzo pasta
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
- 6 tablespoons lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- 1 14 oz. can chickpeas, drained and rinsed
- ¾ cup crumbled feta cheese
- ¼ cup chopped fresh dill (there is no substitute for the real thing)
- 2 tablespoons fresh mint, chopped
- ¾ cup fresh or frozen petite green peas, cooked and cooled
- ¼ cup toasted pine nuts
- 2½ cups chopped fresh tomatoes, remove seeds and drain
- Baby spinach leaves

Cook pasta, rinse and drain under cold water until cool. Transfer to a large mixing bowl and immediately stir in the extra virgin olive oil.

Mix together the garlic, salt, cayenne pepper, lemon juice and set aside for use as the dressing.

Add the chickpeas, feta cheese and fresh dill to the bowl of pasta. Toss gently with dressing and refrigerate until close to serving time or up to a day ahead.

Gently stir in the mint, cooked and cooled green peas, toasted pine nuts and tomatoes. Adjust seasonings to taste.

If serving on individual plates, make a bed of baby spinach leaves on each plate and top with salad servings. If serving at a potluck, arrange the baby spinach leaves around the edge of a serving bowl before adding the orzo salad.

Vegan Greek Dolmathes

There are a surprising number of small vineyards on the Key Peninsula, tucked away in gardens here and there. Fresh grape leaves for use in dolmathes make a special seasonal treat. Only pale, tender leaves are suitable. The leaves typically reach their prime from mid- to late-spring until summer solstice. The leaves may be harvested, blanched and bundled for freezing in bags or containers to extend the homegrown goodness for up to six months.

Preserved grape leaves from a jar are the most practical year-round choice for making these bites of vegan goodness. Once a common sight on grocery shelves, brined grape leaves have become more challenging to find. The safest bet is ordering them online, or better yet ask your local grocer to carry them.

The combined sweetness of rice cooked with onions, currants and the richness of toasted pine nuts all rolled up in an edible green package is practically irresistible. Tell the kids these tasty little snacks would be fit for herbivore dinosaurs like triceratops and stegosaurus and watch what happens.

- 6 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 cup of medium or long grain white rice
- 2 medium onions, finely chopped
- 2 cups water
- 1 teaspoon salt
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 4 tablespoons pine nuts, lightly toasted
- 4 tablespoons dried currants
- 60 grape leaves

Heat 3 tablespoons olive oil over moderate heat in a heavy 10-inch skillet or sauce pan with a tight-fitting lid. Add the onions and cook until they are transparent but not browned. Add the uncooked rice and stir constantly for about 2 minutes to ensure all the grains are coated with oil.

Stir the salt and pepper into the water and pour over the rice. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for 15 to 20 minutes until all the liquid is absorbed.

Heat one tablespoon of remaining olive oil on medium-low heat in a small skillet and cook the pine nuts until they just begin to lightly brown. Remove from heat and quickly add them to the cooked rice, then stir in the currants to distribute evenly.

If using freshly harvested grape leaves: In a large pot, bring 2 quarts of water to boil. After removing any hard stems, drop the grape leaves in and turn off the heat, allowing them to blanch for one minute. Drain the leaves into a sieve and plunge the sieve into a bowl of cold water to cool. Drain and begin gently separating the leaves and spread them dull side up onto paper or clean linen towels.

If using preserved grape leaves from a jar: Drain and rinse the leaves in cold water to remove the salty brine before spreading the leaves dull side up onto towels.

Reserve any torn or broken leaves to line a flat-bottomed steamer rack in a pan with an inch of water; leave some air below the rack.

With the stem end facing you at the bottom, place a tablespoon of stuffing on the center of the leaf. Fold the stem end upward to at least partially cover the stuffing. Then fold the left side over the mound, followed by the right side. Roll the grape leaf gently but firmly away from you into a compact cylinder.

Place the stuffed leaves seam side down on the prepared steamer rack, side by side in layers and drizzle with remaining olive oil. Bring to a boil. Cover, reduce heat and steam for about 30 minutes.

Cool the dolmathes at least another 30 minutes before serving. Refrigerate for up to three days. Makes about 50.

We'd love to feature a dish from your KP kitchen that friends and family ask for. Email the details to editor@keypennews.org with your phone number; we'll be in touch. (Don't worry, we do most of the writing.)