WHERE DIVERSITY BECOMES IDENTITY

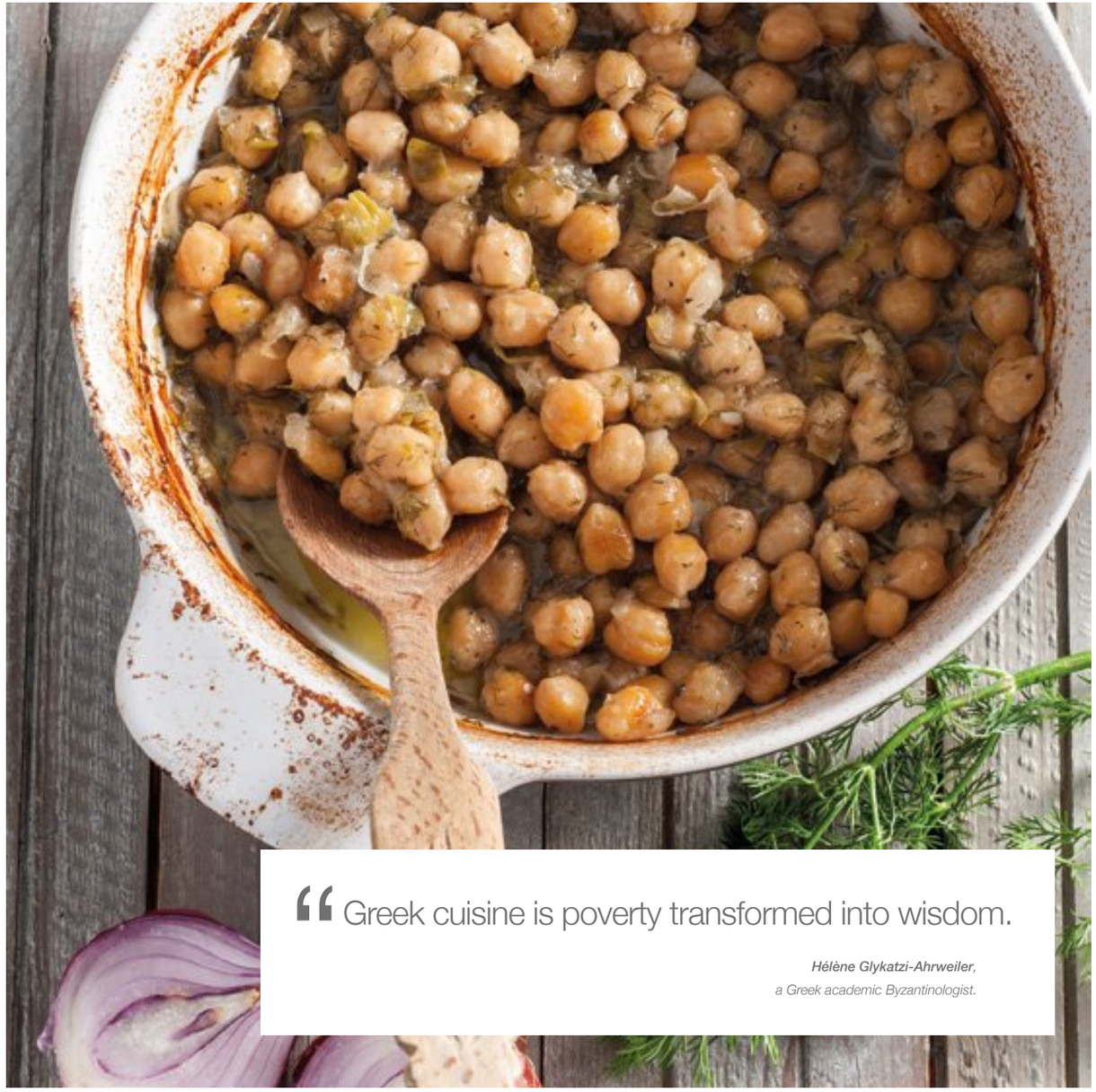
ARCHIPELAGO 50

From Ancient Pride to Future Legacy



WORLD REGION OF GASTRONOMY

SOUTH AEGEAN
CANDIDATE 2028



> “Greek cuisine is poverty transformed into wisdom.
>
> ***Hélène Glykatzi-Ahrweiler,***
> *a Greek academic Byzantinologist.*

WORLD REGION OF GASTRONOMY

SOUTH AEGEAN CANDIDATE 2028

WORLD REGION OF GASTRONOMY
SOUTH AEGEAN
CANDIDATE 2028



CONTENTS

South Aegean in numbers I 8

Ancient Roots of Gastronomy in the South Aegean I 20

From historical exchange to contemporary food networks I 32

Food, Music and Celebration I 36

The Diversity of the Archipelago I 39

South Aegean larder I 48

List of PGI & PDO Products I 60

Strategic Framework of the candidature I 65

Why the South Aegean Deserves the Title I 87



Dear friends,

Across the fifty inhabited islands and hundreds of more desert islets of the South Aegean, the story of our archipelago has always been told through the land, the sea, and the people who bring them together. It is with this deep sense of identity that we proudly pursue the title of World Region of Gastronomy 2028.

The South Aegean is a mosaic of islands, each distinct yet united by shared values: authenticity, resilience, and a profound respect for nature. From international tourism hubs such as Rhodes and Santorini to the resilient micro-communities of the Dodecanese and the Cyclades, our strength lies in our diversity. Our gastronomy reflects this richness. It is shaped by the Aegean light, the volcanic soils, our microclimate, and the salt of the sea breeze. It is "wisdom born of necessity", defined by simplicity, local ingredients, time-honored techniques and culture of hospitality that turns every meal into a meaningful connection.

Island life has always been challenging. Today, our communities stand at the forefront of the climate crisis, facing its challenges with determination and solidarity. This resilience is our heritage and our path forward. We are transforming our ancient roots into a future legacy through sustainability-driven initiatives, positioning our islands as living laboratories for regenerative tourism and environmental stewardship.

Our journey is not new. With the title of European Region of Gastronomy, we honored our past and celebrated our present. We empowered our producers and showcased the richness of our culinary heritage to the world. Today, we look ahead with greater ambition. By pursuing the World Region of Gastronomy title, we seek not only recognition, but responsibility: to innovate, to safeguard our ecosystems, and to shape a model of development that is both sustainable and inclusive.

We put forward our heritage, our knowledge, and our lived experience as a framework that can inspire island regions across the globe. We demonstrate how gastronomy can become a driver for cultural continuity, environmental balance, and a more sustainable future for our planet.
Because in the South Aegean, food is never just food. It is a way of life. It is a way of belonging. And through this journey, we invite the world to belong with us.

George Hatzimarkos
Governor of the South Aegean Region

SIGNATORY STAKEHOLDERS

aegean islands cyclades · dodecanese
Region of South Aegean

South Aegean Regional Development Fund

K2 DEVELOPMENT | SOUTH AEGEAN ORGANIZATION | REGION

Cyclades Chamber of Commerce
ESTABLISHED 1836

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND INDUSTRY OF DODECANESE

UNIVERSITY OF THE AEGEAN

Rhodes Hotel Association

HOTELIERS ASSOCIATION OF KOS
ΕΝΩΣΗ ΞΕΝΟΔΟΧΩΝ ΚΩ

ΕΝΩΣΗ ΞΕΝΟΔΟΧΩΝ ΣΑΝΤΟΡΙΝΗΣ
SANTORINI
Hoteliers Association

THE RHODES CO-LAB
SUSTAINABLE DESTINATION
SOUTH AEGEAN REGION & TUI GROUP

Regional
PLANT NURSERY
South Aegean

SOUTH AEGEAN IN NUMBERS

South Aegean the biggest island region in Greece and Europe. First Region in Greece concerning all tourism figures:

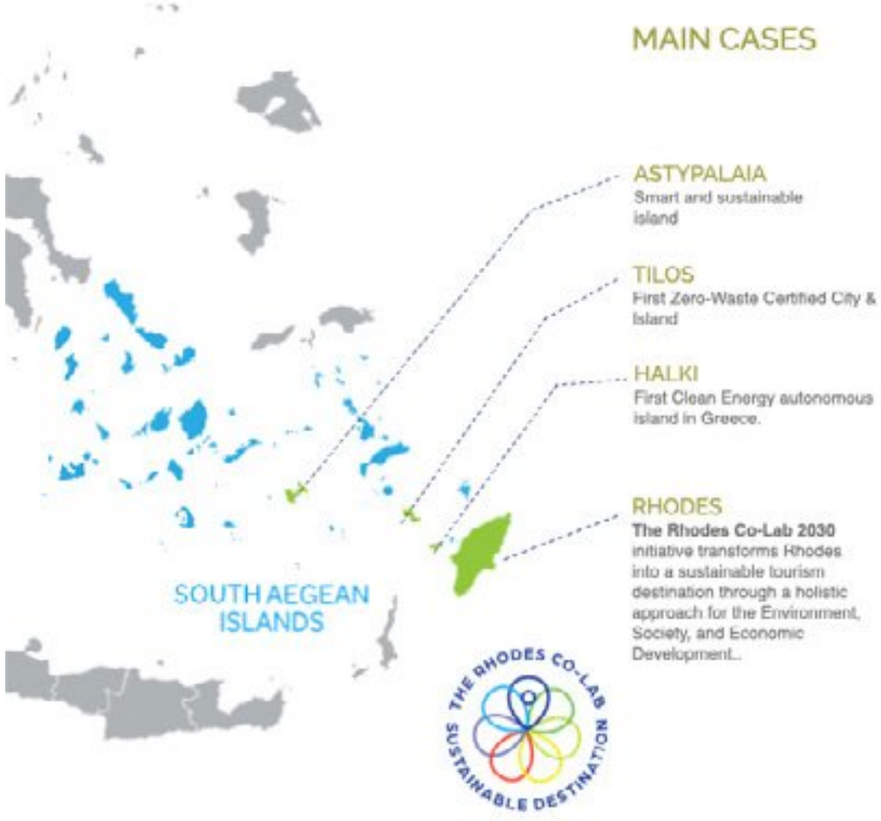
- 669 islands & islets
- 50 inhabited islands split in two groups: 18 in Dodecanese and 32 in Cyclades.
- 5 international airports
- 119 ports
- More than 6 million tourists per year



Click here or scan the Qr code to watch the video.

SUSTAINABILITY STRATEGY 2030

The South Aegean government's core strategic choice is the sustainable development of all islands, based on the specific characteristics & needs of each island.



INTRODUCTION

FROM ANCIENT PRIDE TO FUTURE LEGACY

Across the islands of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese, gastronomy is far more than the act of consuming food. It is the result of thousands of years of accumulated knowledge, shaped by insularity, maritime exchange, limited natural resources, cultural encounters and resilient community structures. Over centuries, island societies have developed sophisticated systems for cultivating, preserving and sharing food in environments where survival depended on ingenuity, cooperation and a deep understanding of nature. Today, this heritage continues to define the South Aegean as a living gastronomic ecosystem in which tradition and innovation coexist.
From archaeological traces of ancient food practices to contemporary chefs and farmers who reinterpret traditional techniques, the region demonstrates an extraordinary continuity of knowledge. Food here embodies a cultural system, a way of managing landscapes, organising communities and maintaining connections between islands and the wider Mediterranean. The candidature of the South Aegean as a World Region of Gastronomy therefore pursues two complementary goals: to position the region internationally as a model of sustainable island gastronomy, and to reawaken among local communities a renewed sense of pride in their culinary heritage and knowledge systems.

A MOSAIC OF ISLANDS

The South Aegean is not a homogeneous territory but rather a complex mosaic of islands, each with its own relationship to agriculture, gastronomy, tourism and identity. This diversity is not perceived as a weakness but as the defining strength of the archipelago. Different islands illustrate different models of coexistence between tradition and modernity, between local production and global visibility.

Rhodes, for instance, today functions as one of the major international tourism hubs of the Eastern Mediterranean. The prosperity generated by tourism has, in some cases, overshadowed traditional agricultural practices, and the island's economic rhythm is largely seasonal, concentrated between April and October. Yet Rhodes also remains historically the main maritime gateway of the archipelago, a strategic cultural connector that has long linked the islands of the Aegean to the wider Mediterranean world.

In contrast, the smaller islands of the Dodecanese preserve a different dynamic. Each of them maintains a distinctive gastronomic identity shaped by microclimates, geography and centuries of local adaptation. The presence of permanent resident communities throughout the year has helped maintain strong social cohesion





and protect these islands from the more extreme effects of tourism-driven gentrification.
In these environments, gastronomy continues to function as a daily cultural practice embedded in family life, seasonal cycles and local ecological knowledge.

The Cyclades represent perhaps the most internationally recognisable symbol of Greek island tourism. Yet even here two parallel realities coexist. Some islands have maintained strong agricultural traditions and local food systems, while others, particularly high-profile destinations such as Mykonos and Santorini, face the challenge of balancing global tourism with cultural authenticity. Encouragingly, these islands also demonstrate strong civic awareness and growing initiatives aimed at preserving traditional gastronomy, local products and agricultural landscapes.

Across this archipelago, the mosaic of islands is mirrored by a mosaic of products: each territory yields its own distinct ingredients, and even shared culinary traditions are reinterpreted from island to island, giving rise to a living, ever-evolving diversity of recipes.

The Bid Book therefore adopts an integrative perspective that presents the South Aegean not as a fragmented territory but as a dynamic ecosystem where different islands contribute distinct elements to a shared gastronomic identity.



ARCHAEOLOGY, MEMORY AND FOOD

One of the key strategies for strengthening local pride in this identity is the rediscovery of the deep historical roots of Aegean gastronomy. Archaeology, historical sources and ancient literature reveal that food has long been a central element of social and cultural life in the region. Archaeological findings across the islands document early food systems based on preservation, maritime trade and adaptation to insular environments. Ingredients such as figs, honey, vine leaves, sesame and barley, still central to local cuisine today, appear repeatedly in archaeological remains and ancient texts.
Ancient Greek literature itself offers glimpses into this gastronomic culture. In the comedies of Aristophanes, for example, food appears as a powerful social symbol, illustrating the importance of conviviality and shared meals in Greek society. Such sources remind us that gastronomy has always been inseparable from cultural identity, storytelling and collective memory.

PRESERVATION AS KNOWLEDGE

Equally significant are the food preservation techniques developed by island communities in response to limited resources and seasonal constraints. Practices such as the drying of fish and the production of fermented fish sauces, known in antiquity as garos, were widespread across the Aegean and allowed coastal populations to conserve valuable marine resources while supporting maritime trade networks. These techniques demonstrate a remarkable empirical knowledge of food preservation that anticipated many principles of modern food science.

In some cases, these traditions are being creatively reinterpreted today. On the island of Tinos, for example, contemporary culinary experimentation has revived traditional fish-drying methods, transforming them into refined gastronomic practices that combine scientific research with inherited knowledge. Such initiatives illustrate how innovation can emerge not from abandoning tradition but from rediscovering and adapting it.



THE SEA AS CONNECTIVE TISSUE

The maritime dimension of this gastronomic system is equally fundamental. For millennia, the sea functioned as the connective tissue linking the islands of the South Aegean. The port of Rhodes historically served as the principal gateway to the archipelago, connecting the islands with trading routes that extended throughout the Mediterranean. From these ports departed ships carrying wine, olive oil, honey, dried fish and ceramics, while returning vessels brought spices, grains and new agricultural knowledge.

Even shipbuilding formed part of this system. The forests of Rhodes supplied pine wood used for constructing vessels that sustained these maritime networks. Historical sources also indicate moments in which larger livestock animals were introduced to certain islands in order to diversify agricultural production and strengthen local food systems.





RISING STARS OF SOUTH AEGEAN

Stamatios Misomikes
won the first edition of Young Chef Award in 2016. He was awarded the first prize in the competition thanks to his dish Salas, coming from the Greek words thalassa (sea) and hálas (salt). Using the techniques of fermentation and smoking, he mixed 19 different local fresh ingredients coming from different South Aegean islands in order to create a unique composition narrating local culinary traditions.

MATERIAL CULTURE AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Gastronomy in the South Aegean is also deeply intertwined with craftsmanship and material culture. Ceramic production, for example, played a crucial role in the preparation, preservation and presentation of food. In many cases the container itself became synonymous with the dish prepared within it. One example is the traditional preparation known as mouri in Kalimnos or Lakhane in Rhodes, where the name of the vessel and the food it contains are inseparable.
These vessels were not neutral tools but active components of the culinary process. Over time they absorbed aromas and flavours that enhanced subsequent preparations. Different shapes and materials were used for different foods, reflecting a sophisticated empirical understanding of cooking techniques and food preservation, an early form of food safety management developed long before modern regulatory systems.

RITUALS, EDUCATION AND FUTURE

Finally, gastronomy in the South Aegean cannot be separated from music, dance and communal rituals. Seasonal cycles such as harvests, fishing periods and religious celebrations have historically been accompanied by songs and dances that celebrate food, wine and community life. These cultural expressions continue to animate village festivals and local gatherings throughout the islands.

Today, several initiatives seek to safeguard and transmit this heritage to younger generations. Educational programmes such as the Skills School or Lyceum of Greek Women work to preserve traditional knowledge related to gastronomy, agriculture and craftsmanship, ensuring that these practices remain part of the region's living cultural fabric.

Through this integrated narrative, the Bid Book presents the South Aegean not merely as a candidate region but as a living cultural system in which gastronomy connects landscapes, communities, history and innovation. By reconnecting local populations with the deep historical roots of their food culture, the candidature seeks to strengthen a shared sense of responsibility for safeguarding and celebrating this extraordinary gastronomic heritage for generations to come.

AEGEAN SKILLS

During the period 2014–2025, the “G. Gennimatas” Regional Vocational Training Center, funded by the Region of South Aegean, implemented an extensive and cohesive framework of information, education, and vocational training actions, with a particular focus on gastronomy and traditional arts.

1. Gastronomy Sector
In the field of gastronomy, 166 specialized seminars were conducted, totaling 1,729 hours. These covered a wide range of topics, including:
• Aegean cuisine and the utilization of local products in catering.
• Traditional bakery and pastry making.
• Modern catering techniques based on traditional recipes and flavors.

With an average of 22 beneficiaries per seminar, these actions created a robust network of trained professionals.

2. Traditional Arts & Cultural Heritage
In the sector of traditional arts, more than 340 seminars were implemented, exceeding 9,000 total hours. The curriculum included:
• Hagiography, weaving, ceramics, and woodcarving.
• Basketry, traditional embroidery, and tailoring.
• The construction of traditional costumes and handmade jewelry.

Impact: With an average of 18 beneficiaries per seminar, these programs contributed substantially to the preservation and promotion of the region’s intangible cultural heritage.

Data 2014–2025	Gastronomy	Traditional Arts
Number of Seminars	166	> 340
Total Training Hours	1,729	> 9,000
Average Participants (per seminar)	22	18
Total Estimated Beneficiaries	~ 3,652	~ 6,120

AEGEAN SKILLS

Since January 2026, the Region of South Aegean has continued this momentum through the “Aegean Skills” program, in collaboration with the University of the Aegean. This initiative further strengthens systematic education in tradition-linked sectors and creative arts.
• Current and Upcoming Courses:
• Mosaic art and ceramics.
• Traditional crochet and the embroidery of traditional costumes.
• The Rhodian art of pebble-pavements (votsalota).

Strategic Financial Planning
The Region’s commitment to sustainable tourism and local identity is reflected in the strategic budget allocation for these actions:

Year	Estimated Budget	Growth Projection
2026	€ 28,000	Base Year
2027	€ 32,200	+15% increase
2028	€ 40,250	+25% increase

The evolution of these actions demonstrates the high administrative and organizational capacity of the Region to design integrated interventions. By connecting traditional knowledge with the modern needs of the local economy, the program serves as a comprehensive model for skill development with a clear cultural and developmental orientation.





ANCIENT ROOTS OF GASTRONOMY IN THE SOUTH AEGEAN

GASTRONOMY BEFORE CUISINE

In the South Aegean, gastronomy existed long before the idea of “cuisine” as we understand it today. Long before recipes were codified or culinary traditions formalized, food practices emerged from the fundamental needs of island communities: survival, ritual, preservation, and exchange.



Clay kitchen Roman Times, Delos Museum

The islands of the South Aegean have always been environments of both abundance and limitation. Surrounded by the sea yet often lacking abundant fresh water and fertile land, early inhabitants developed remarkably adaptive food systems.
These systems were shaped by the rhythms of nature, the seasonal availability of resources, and the necessity to store and transport food across maritime routes.

Archaeological discoveries show that already in prehistoric and classical periods, island societies had developed sophisticated strategies to manage food production and preservation.

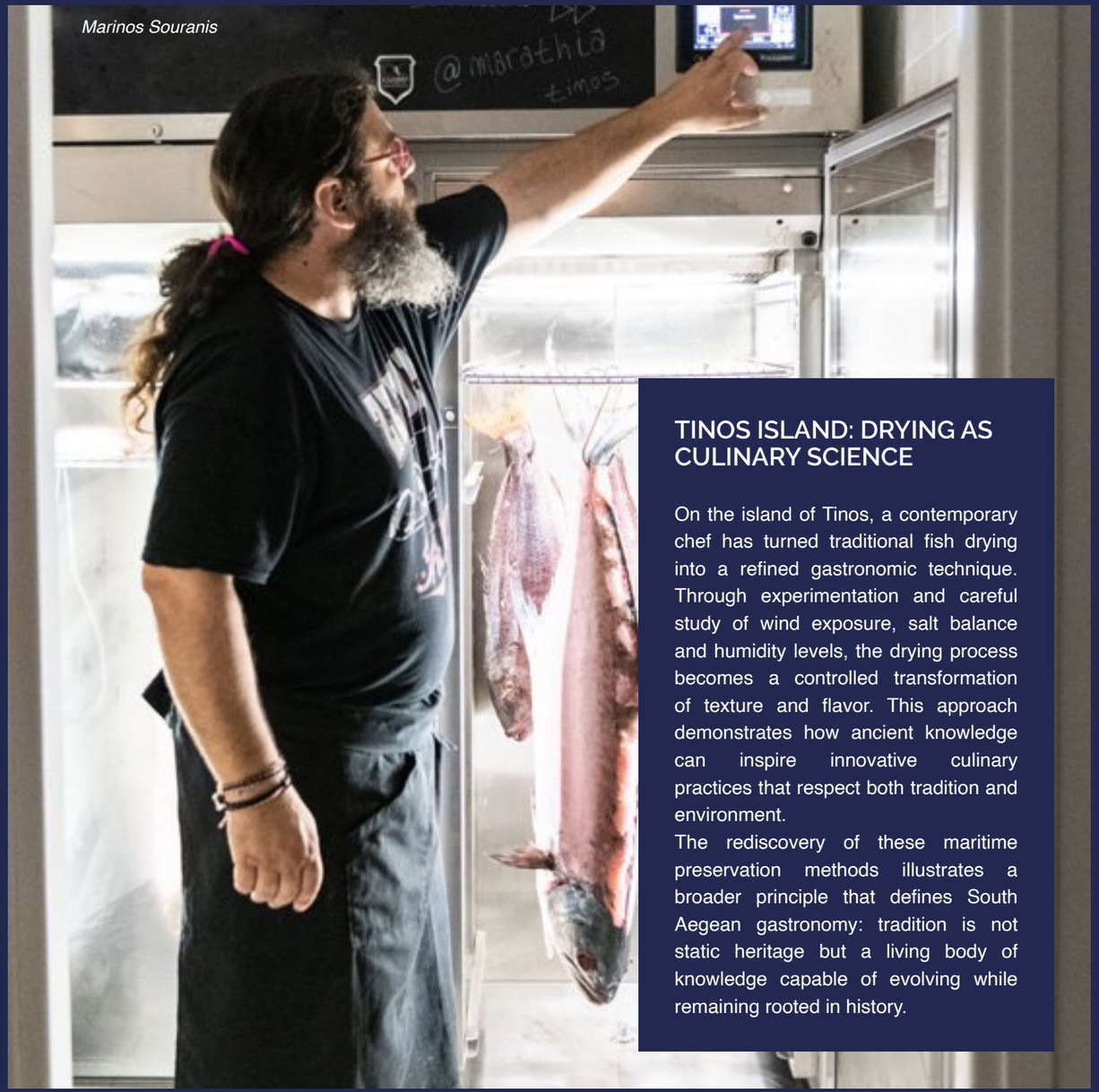
These practices were not simply practical solutions; they were cultural technologies that structured daily life, social organization, and trade.

DRYING AND PRESERVING FISH TO ENSURE YEAR-ROUND ACCESS TO PROTEIN

Fishing has always been one of the fundamental pillars of Aegean island life. However, fresh fish could not always be consumed immediately or stored for long periods in warm Mediterranean climates. For this reason, communities developed techniques to preserve their catch through drying, salting, and exposure to the sun and sea breeze.



Fish such as anchovies, small tuna, and other coastal species were carefully cleaned, salted, and hung to dry on wooden frames or stone terraces. These preserved products could be stored for months and transported between islands, ensuring a stable source of protein even during periods when fishing was limited by weather or seasonal conditions. In addition to guaranteeing food security, these techniques also became part of the gastronomic identity of coastal communities, shaping flavors that are still present in many island dishes today.



Marinos Souranis

TINOS ISLAND: DRYING AS CULINARY SCIENCE

On the island of Tinos, a contemporary chef has turned traditional fish drying into a refined gastronomic technique. Through experimentation and careful study of wind exposure, salt balance and humidity levels, the drying process becomes a controlled transformation of texture and flavor. This approach demonstrates how ancient knowledge can inspire innovative culinary practices that respect both tradition and environment.

The rediscovery of these maritime preservation methods illustrates a broader principle that defines South Aegean gastronomy: tradition is not static heritage but a living body of knowledge capable of evolving while remaining rooted in history.

FERMENTING PRODUCTS, INCLUDING EARLY FORMS OF PRESERVED FISH AND BEVERAGES

Fermentation represented another essential technique in the island food system. Long before modern refrigeration, fermentation allowed communities to extend the life of food while enhancing its nutritional value and flavor complexity. Fish-based condiments, preserved vegetables, and early fermented beverages were produced through natural processes involving salt, temperature, and time. These practices were not only practical but also culturally embedded, forming part of culinary traditions transmitted across generations. Fermentation also reflects the maritime character of the region, as many techniques were influenced by contacts with other Mediterranean cultures through trade routes that connected the Aegean with Asia Minor, the Levant, and North Africa.

STORING FOOD IN CERAMIC CONTAINERS DESIGNED TO PROTECT AGAINST HUMIDITY AND PESTS

Ceramic technology played a crucial role in the preservation of food across the islands. Large jars, amphorae, and sealed containers were carefully crafted to protect grains, legumes, oils, and other valuable resources from humidity, insects, and rodents. These vessels were often partially buried in the ground or stored in cool interior spaces to maintain stable temperatures. Amphorae were particularly important for storing and transporting liquids such as olive oil and wine, which were key products in Mediterranean trade networks. The design and craftsmanship of these containers demonstrate the close relationship between gastronomy and artisanal knowledge. Pottery workshops across the Aegean produced specialized vessels adapted to specific foods, allowing communities to maintain long-term storage systems that ensured resilience in periods of scarcity.

CULTIVATING DROUGHT-RESISTANT CROPS ADAPTED TO MEDITERRANEAN ISLAND CONDITIONS

The environmental conditions of the South Aegean, characterized by limited rainfall, rocky soils, and strong winds, required agricultural practices specifically adapted to dry landscapes. Farmers cultivated crops capable of thriving in these challenging conditions, including barley, legumes, olives, grapes, figs, and aromatic plants. Terraced fields were often constructed on hillsides to retain soil and capture scarce water resources, while traditional farming techniques minimized erosion and maximized productivity in small plots of land. These drought-resistant crops formed the foundation of the island diet and contributed to a resilient agricultural system that balanced cultivation with the natural limits of the environment.



COLLECTING AND USING WILD PLANTS, HERBS, AND AROMATIC SPECIES BOTH FOR FLAVOR AND MEDICINAL PURPOSES

In addition to cultivated crops, island communities relied heavily on the collection of wild plants and herbs that grow naturally across Mediterranean landscapes. Wild greens, aromatic herbs, and medicinal plants were gathered from hillsides, coastal areas, and mountain slopes, enriching local diets with diverse flavors and nutrients. Plants such as oregano, thyme, sage, capers, fennel, and wild chicory were widely used in cooking, while others served therapeutic purposes in traditional remedies. This practice reflects a deep knowledge of local ecosystems and seasonal cycles, demonstrating how gastronomy in the Aegean developed through a close relationship between people and their natural environment.

The modest, humble lifestyle of the islanders of the previous generations is a response to the climate crisis and the sustainability of the planet. In the end, those ‘illiterate’ grandparents were at least 65 years ahead of their time. Every household was self-sufficient until the early 1970s and did not need money at all: islanders until early 1970s wasted nothing (No Food Waste), used everything (Nose to Tail), recycled leftover food in creative ways by improvising delicious recipes (Recycling), never cooked in a rush (Slow Food), enhanced the variety and flavor of their meals through gathering wild greens, wild mushrooms, snails, etc. (Foraging). Their diet was characterized by the extensive use of legumes and grains (Alternative Plant-Based Diet). Their lives were based on moderation, harmonious coexistence with nature, and ecological balance (Eco-Friendly Lifestyle). They practiced mindful eating (Mindful Eating), and whatever they did not produce themselves, they obtained through exchanging goods with one another (Exchange Economy).



AROMATIC HERITAGE OF KALYMNOS ISLAND

The island of Kalymnos hosts a rich assemblage of Mediterranean xerophytic flora, shaped by limestone geology, low soil fertility, high solar radiation, and persistent marine winds. These environmental conditions favor the development of aromatic plants with elevated concentrations of essential oils and bioactive compounds.

Key species include Origanum vulgare subsp. hirtum (Greek oregano), Thymbra capitata (conehead thyme), Salvia fruticosa (Greek sage), Rosmarinus officinalis (rosemary), Laurus nobilis (bay laurel), Foeniculum vulgare (wild fennel), Satureja thymbra (savory), and Origanum dictamnus (dittany). Many of these taxa belong to the Lamiaceae family, known for their high content of phenolic compounds such as carvacrol, thymol, and rosmarinic acid, which confer antimicrobial, antioxidant, and anti-inflammatory properties.

Traditionally, these herbs have been used in multiple domains:

- Gastronomy: as flavoring agents in fish, legumes, and preserved foods
- Phytotherapy: for digestive, respiratory, and antiseptic purposes (infusions, decoctions, essential oils)
- Ethnobotany: in folk medicine and ritual practices linked to seasonal cycles
- Apiculture: contributing to the production of highly aromatic, monofloral or polyfloral honeys
- Cosmetics and wellness: as ingredients in natural balms, oils, and skin treatments

Recent interest has focused on their role in sustainable agriculture, biodiversity conservation, and value-added local production chains, as well as their potential integration into experiential tourism models (herb trails, sensory workshops, and agro-ecological education).



> “For all people, food is medicine.
>
> ***Hippocrates**. This expresses a genuinely Hippocratic idea: nutrition is part of treatment. The general principle is that diet (diaita = way of life) is the foundation of health.*

HIPPOCRATES OF KOS ISLAND – THE FATHER OF MEDICINE

Born on the island of Kos around 460 BC, Hippocrates is one of the most influential figures in the history of humanity and is universally recognised as the “Father of Medicine.”Raised in a family of physicians linked to the cult of Asclepius, he was introduced to medical knowledge from an early age and trained within the Asclepieion of Kos, one of the most important healing centres of the ancient world.Hippocrates revolutionised medical practice by shifting it from superstition and divine explanations to careful observation, diagnosis, and rational understanding of disease. His approach—based on clinical observation, lifestyle, diet, and environment—laid the foundations of modern scientific medicine. A great traveller, he explored different regions of the Mediterranean, studying how climate, geography, and way of life influenced human health. His legacy endures not only in medical science but also in ethics: the Hippocratic Oath remains a timeless symbol of professional responsibility, placing the well-being of the patient at the centre of care. Today, Hippocrates stands as a powerful cultural icon of the South Aegean, embodying the region’s deep connection between knowledge, nature, and human well-being.

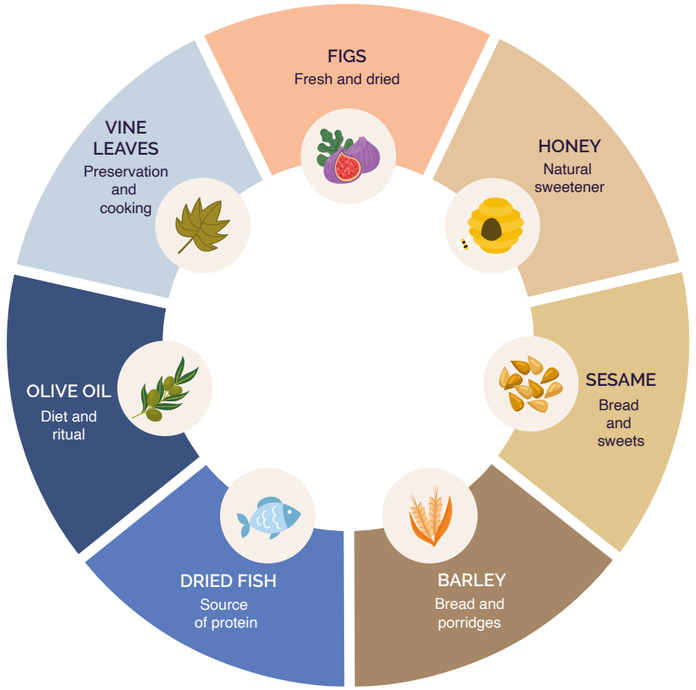


Archaeological Museum of Rhodes

MEMORY AND FOOD

In these islands societies, gastronomy was therefore not yet a refined culinary art but rather a complex system of knowledge that combined ecological adaptation, technological ingenuity, and cultural meaning. Food production, preparation, and consumption were embedded in religious rituals, seasonal celebrations, and social gatherings, reflecting a deep relationship between humans, landscape, and the sea. Archaeological evidence from the islands of the South Aegean reveals the central role of food in ancient life, highlighting sophisticated systems of production, storage, and consumption. Excavations have uncovered amphorae for transporting wine and olive oil, specialized ceramic vessels for cooking, installations for fish preservation near harbors, and integrated storage systems for grains and legumes within domestic spaces. These findings show that food was not only locally consumed but also embedded in extensive trade networks, with the Aegean Sea acting as a vital corridor for the circulation of products, techniques, and culinary knowledge across islands and mainland regions.

Many ingredients that remain characteristic of Mediterranean cuisine today were already widely used in antiquity. Archaeological evidence, including seeds, residues in pottery, and written sources, documents the presence of:



Together, these elements reveal a food culture that was both resilient and diverse, built upon a careful balance between cultivated agriculture and the resources of the surrounding sea.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF ANCIENT GASTRONOMY

Archaeological sites across Rhodes, Delos, Kos, and other islands demonstrate that food preservation and maritime trade were essential components of local economies. Facilities for processing fish, amphora workshops for transporting wine and oil, and large storage complexes indicate that these islands were not isolated communities but active participants in Mediterranean trade networks.



Traditional olive mill, Naxos Island

FOOD IN ANCIENT LITERATURE

The importance of food in the Aegean world is not only confirmed by archaeology but also vividly reflected in ancient literature. Greek writers often used food as a lens through which to describe society, culture, and human behavior. In the comedies of Aristophanes, for example, references to food appear frequently and play an important narrative role. Ingredients such as honey, wine, barley bread, olives, and fish are mentioned not merely as everyday nourishment but as symbols of prosperity, social identity, and celebration.

There are several publications celebrating Homeric Cuisine and translating the food practices described in Homer’s epics into a concrete understanding of ancient Greek diet, revealing how cuisine, ritual, and social life were deeply interconnected in the Homeric world. It also provides a unique bridge between literature and archaeology, showing that feasting, food preparation, and shared meals were central to identity, community, and cultural exchange in the ancient Aegean.

Banquets, feasts, and shared meals often serve as settings for political satire, social commentary, and humor. Through these literary depictions, we gain insight into the values and customs of ancient communities, where food was closely linked to hospitality, civic life, and religious ritual.

RECIPE OF GAROS

Garos (known in Latin as *garum*) was one of the most important condiments in the ancient Mediterranean world, widely used by the Greeks and later by the Romans. In the Aegean islands and coastal regions, it was produced through the fermentation of fish and salt, creating a powerful, savory sauce rich in umami that was used to flavor many dishes.

Archaeological evidence from sites across the Mediterranean, including the Aegean islands, shows that garos production was often carried out near ports and fishing communities, where fresh fish could be processed immediately after the catch.

Ingredients:
- small oily fish (anchovies, sardines, or mackerel)
- coarse sea salt
- aromatic herbs (optional: oregano, thyme, fennel seeds)
- sometimes wine or vinegar (optional, depending on the recipe)

Garos was used much like modern soy sauce or fish sauce:
- to season vegetables
- in sauces for fish and meat
- mixed with wine, oil, vinegar, or honey to create complex dressings
- added to stews and grain dishes



Traditional dovecote on the island of Tinos Island

These literary references reinforce what archaeology already suggests: the culture of food in the Aegean was sophisticated, deeply rooted, and intimately connected to the rhythms of society. Far from being a simple matter of sustenance, gastronomy formed part of a broader cultural system that integrated agriculture, trade, religion, and social life across the islands of the South Aegean.

VENETIAN ECHOES IN THE GASTRONOMY OF TINOS ISLAND AND THE CYCLADES

The gastronomy of Tinos preserves a remarkable Venetian legacy rooted in more than five centuries of Latin presence in the Aegean. Following the aftermath of the Fourth Crusade in 1204, many Cycladic islands came under Venetian influence, while Tinos itself remained under the control of the Republic of Venice from 1390 until 1715, becoming one of Venice's most strategic outposts in the Eastern Mediterranean. This long coexistence left enduring traces in local food culture: the tradition of cured meats such as Louza, the use of spices linked to Venetian trade routes with the Levant, almond-based pastries, and sophisticated techniques for preserving capers, fish and cheeses. The cuisine of Tinos therefore reflects not only Greek island traditions, but also centuries of exchange between the Aegean, Venice and the wider Mediterranean world, creating a culinary identity shaped by navigation, commerce and cultural coexistence.



FROM HISTORICAL EXCHANGE TO CONTEMPORARY FOOD NETWORKS

In the past, maritime routes carried wine, olive oil, grains, dried fish, and spices, alongside agricultural knowledge and culinary practices. This circulation created hybrid food cultures that still define Aegean gastronomy.
Today, the goal is to reinterpret these dynamics. Ports can once again act as connectors, linking local producers, markets, hospitality actors, and visitors, supporting shorter supply chains, improving traceability, and strengthening the identity of local food systems.

PORTS AS GATEWAYS TO FOOD MARKETS

Ports are uniquely positioned to become entry points into island food culture. Their proximity to transport hubs and tourism flows makes them ideal for revitalising local markets as living food spaces, where producers access new markets, products are narrated, and visitors engage with authentic experiences from the moment of arrival. In this model, markets become spaces of commerce, education, and cultural exchange.

THE ROLE OF PARTNERS

A key challenge is fragmentation across the food value chain. This initiative activates a coordinated network of municipalities, producers, hospitality actors, and institutions to address it.

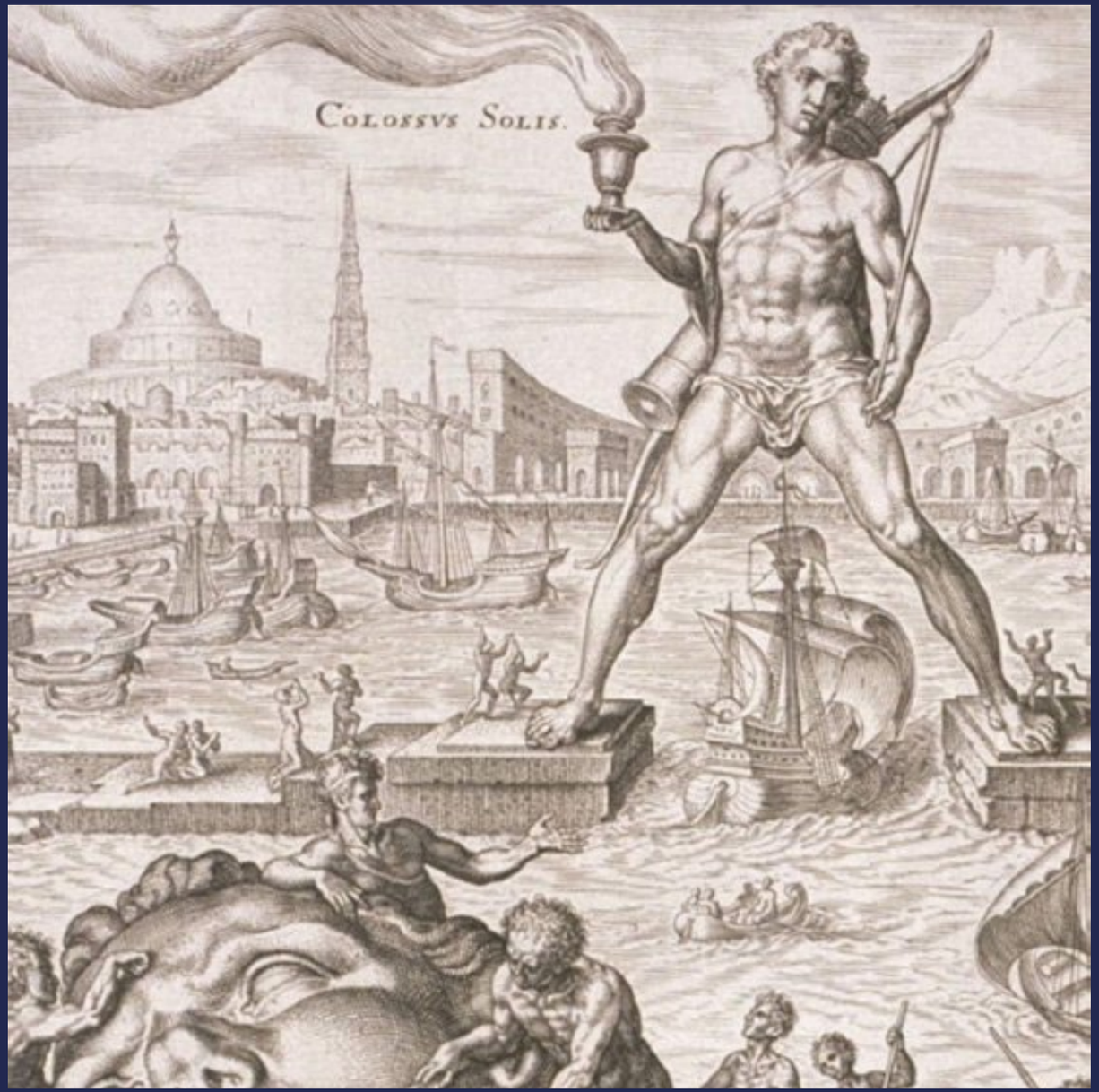
- Producers and cooperatives gain access to port-based markets and improved visibility.
- Restaurants strengthen local sourcing and direct links with producers
- Public authorities redesign market spaces with quality and sustainability standards
- Educational institutions support training, heritage transmission, and innovation
- Tourism organisations integrate markets into destination strategies

This coordinated approach ensures that revitalisation goes beyond infrastructure, strengthening relationships, practices, and narratives.

In this perspective, ports return to their historical role as places of exchange, but with a renewed purpose: becoming laboratories where tradition meets innovation, local economies are reinforced, and food culture is actively produced and shared.

The South Aegean has always functioned as a connected maritime system rather than a fragmented group of islands. Historically, its ports enabled the circulation of goods, people, and knowledge across the Eastern Mediterranean, shaping a gastronomic identity rooted in exchange. Today, this structure provides a foundation for rethinking food systems, local economies, and sustainable tourism.

Among these ports, Rhodes remains emblematic. Once a strategic gateway linking Europe, Asia Minor, the Levant, and North Africa, it continues to operate as a central node within regional and international networks. However, ports are no longer only logistical hubs: they are emerging as platforms for territorial regeneration, capable of reconnecting production, distribution, and consumption in more sustainable ways.



THE COLOSSUS OF RHODES – A SYMBOL OF PHILOXENIA*, IDENTITY AND MEDITERRANEAN ABUNDANCE

Built on the island of Rhodes in the 3rd century BC, the Colossus of Rhodes was not only one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but also a powerful expression of openness, prosperity and cultural exchange—values that resonate strongly with the South Aegean today. Erected in honour of Helios, the sun god, the statue stood at the entrance of the harbour, symbolically welcoming merchants, travellers and cultures from across the Mediterranean. This role as a gateway reflects the region's long-standing tradition of philoxenia, a cornerstone of local identity and a key principle within the IGCAT vision.

Rhodes, like many islands of the South Aegean, was historically a vibrant hub of trade, where goods, flavours and culinary practices circulated freely. The same maritime networks that once passed beneath the gaze of the Colossus contributed to shaping a rich gastronomic heritage, based on local products, seasonality and intercultural influences. At the entrance of the port of Rhodes there are now deer statues. Deer have existed on the island from antiquity to the present day and are a protected species. They are also connected to gastronomy as a symbol of the ancient goddess Artemis, protector of hunting.

Although the Colossus no longer stands, its legacy lives on in the region's capacity to transform heritage into living experience: from local food traditions to contemporary gastronomy, from community-based hospitality to sustainable tourism practices.

Today, the Colossus can be reinterpreted as a symbol of balance between heritage and innovation—illuminating a path where culture, food, and landscape come together to create meaningful and sustainable visitor experiences, fully aligned with the values of the IGCAT network.

***Philoxenia (from the Greek phílos = friend, xénos = stranger)** literally means "love for the stranger." It is one of the deepest and most defining values of Greek culture. More than simple hospitality, it represents a true ethical and cultural code, based on generosity, respect, and openness toward others. In this perspective, the stranger is not perceived as an outsider, but as a guest to be welcomed and honoured. In ancient Greece, philoxenia was protected by Zeus Xenios, the divine guardian of hospitality, making the act of welcoming others both a moral and sacred duty. Today, especially across the islands of the South Aegean, this value is still deeply alive and expressed through everyday gesture.*



FOOD, MUSIC AND CELEBRATION

Beyond craftsmanship and technology, gastronomy in the South Aegean is inseparable from the cultural rhythms of music, dance, and communal celebration. Food has always been at the center of social life, marking seasonal cycles, religious rituals, and moments of collective identity. Agricultural harvests, fishing seasons, and village festivals traditionally brought communities together around shared meals. These gatherings were rarely silent or purely practical occasions. Instead, they were animated by songs, traditional dances, and communal feasts that transformed food into an experience of social cohesion and cultural expression.

Music and gastronomy often evolved together. Certain songs were associated with particular harvest periods or celebrations, while specific dishes became emblematic of local festivities. Wine, bread, olive oil, and fish, the pillars of Mediterranean food culture, were consumed not only for nourishment but as part of ritualized moments of hospitality and joy. These celebrations reinforced a sense of belonging and continuity within island communities.

THE LYCEUM OF GREEK WOMEN

The Lykeion ton Ellinidon is a historic non-profit cultural organization founded in 1911 with the mission of safeguarding and promoting Greek cultural heritage, with a strong focus on women's role in society and community life. Particularly active in the South Aegean, the Lykeion branch in Kalymnos stands out as a vibrant hub of living heritage, where traditions are not only preserved but actively re-enacted and transmitted. Through a wide range of courses, workshops, and public events, the association brings to life local practices spanning music, dance, gastronomy, and traditional crafts such as sewing and embroidery. A dedicated museum further enhances this work, offering a tangible and immersive experience of local identity and memory. This integrated approach—combining education, participation, and cultural production—positions the Lykeion ton Ellinidon as a key actor in sustaining intangible heritage and strengthening community cohesion across generations.

Local educational initiatives today aim to preserve traditional skills and knowledge related to food preparation, agriculture and craftsmanship.





THE DIVERSITY OF THE ARCHIPELAGO

THE DODECANESE

The Dodecanese islands offer a striking example of how diversity within an archipelago can shape different trajectories of development, identity, and gastronomy. Although geographically connected and historically intertwined, each island presents its own social, economic, and cultural realities. This diversity is particularly visible when comparing the large and internationally known island of Rhodes with the smaller, less frequented islands of the archipelago.

Rhodes, due to its strategic position and its rich historical heritage, has evolved into one of the major tourism hubs of the Eastern Mediterranean. The island receives millions of visitors each year, and its economy is strongly influenced by seasonal tourism flows. Large hotels, cruise ship arrivals, and international travel networks have transformed Rhodes into a cosmopolitan destination where global influences intersect with local traditions. This dynamism has undoubtedly brought economic prosperity and international visibility, but it also creates the challenge of maintaining the authenticity of local cultural and gastronomic heritage in the face of mass tourism.

South Aegean is also investing in forward-looking governance models such as the Rhodes Co-Lab, a flagship initiative developed through a strategic partnership between TUI Group and the Region of South Aegean. Launched on the island of Rhodes, the Co-Lab functions as a real-world testing environment for designing, implementing and scaling solutions that address some of the most pressing challenges facing Mediterranean destinations: climate change, resource management, seasonality, and tourism pressure. The initiative adopts a multi-stakeholder, place-based approach, bringing together local authorities, tourism businesses, researchers, civil society and international partners. Through pilot actions and collaborative processes, the Co-Lab explores key thematic areas including:

- climate adaptation and crisis preparedness
- circular economy and waste reduction
- water and energy efficiency
- sustainable mobility
- community engagement and inclusive governance

A distinctive feature of the Rhodes Co-Lab is its ambition to act not only locally, but as a replicable model for

other island and coastal destinations across Europe. The knowledge generated is designed to be transferable, contributing to broader EU strategies on sustainable tourism and regional resilience.

This strategic approach is further reinforced by international cooperation frameworks such as the Joint Declaration on Sustainable Tourism and Climate Action, promoted in collaboration with HOTREC, and by high-level events like the first EU Tourism Forum for Climate Crisis hosted in Rhodes. Together, these initiatives demonstrate how the South Aegean combines heritage preservation with innovation, transforming its islands into both custodians of tradition and testbeds for the future of sustainable and resilient tourism

Yet beyond Rhodes lies another equally important dimension of the Dodecanese: a constellation of smaller islands where traditional ways of life remain deeply rooted in everyday practice. Islands such as Symi, Kalymnos, Nisyros, or Astypalea preserve strong connections with agriculture, fishing, and small-scale artisanal production. In these communities, local gastronomy is not merely a tourist attraction but an integral part of daily life.
Fishing traditions continue to supply local markets with fresh seafood, small family farms cultivate olives, herbs, and vegetables adapted to the dry Mediterranean climate, and traditional recipes are passed down through generations. The persistence of year-round populations plays a crucial role in preserving these traditions. Unlike destinations that become almost empty outside the tourist season, many Dodecanese islands remain inhabited throughout the year, sustaining schools, local markets, and community life.

This permanent presence ensures cultural continuity and protects the islands from the complete erosion of their identity. It allows traditional knowledge, from fishing techniques to methods of food preservation, to remain alive rather than becoming purely folkloric elements performed for visitors. In this sense, the smaller islands of the Dodecanese act as custodians of a living gastronomic heritage that continues to evolve while maintaining deep roots in the land and the sea.

Micro-islands of the South Aegean represent some of the most fragile yet valuable cultural and gastronomic ecosystems in Europe. With populations often below 50 residents, these territories embody a form of micro-scale resilience, where food production, hospitality and daily life are deeply interconnected. Their isolation has preserved hyper-local food systems based on seasonality, low-impact agriculture, fishing practices and knowledge transmitted within families.

These islands offer a powerful laboratory for sustainable gastronomy, where short supply chains, zero-waste traditions and biodiversity are not trends but necessities. At the same time, they highlight one of the region's key challenges: depopulation. Limited services, accessibility constraints and economic fragility continue to drive younger generations away.

Strategically, investing in these micro-communities through gastronomy-driven tourism, digital connectivity, support to small producers and experiential travel models can help reverse this trend. By positioning micro-islands as destinations of authenticity, learning and slow tourism, the South Aegean can transform marginality into value—ensuring that these living laboratories of philoxenia, heritage and sustainability remain inhabited, productive and culturally vibrant.

Island Complex	Island	Estimated Population
Cyclades	Schinoussa	~200
Cyclades	Donoussa	~150
Cyclades	Iraklia	~100
Cyclades	Anafi	~250
Cyclades	Keros	0
Cyclades	Antikeros	<10 (seasonal)
Cyclades	Gyaros	0

Island Complex	Island	Estimated Population
Dodecanese	Arki	~40
Dodecanese	Agathonisi	~200
Dodecanese	Kastellorizo	~500
Dodecanese	Ro	0-1
Dodecanese	Levitha	<10
Dodecanese	Farmakonisi	<10
Dodecanese	Marathi	1-4

THE CYCLADES

The Cyclades represent another fascinating dimension of the South Aegean archipelago, combining iconic landscapes with a complex social and gastronomic reality. Whitewashed villages, windmills, and blue-domed churches have made these islands some of the most recognizable images of Greece worldwide. Destinations such as Santorini and Mykonos attract international visitors in enormous numbers, positioning the Cyclades as global symbols of Mediterranean tourism.

This result highlights the extraordinary global recognisability of the Aegean landscape, where architecture, light and spirituality combine into a powerful and immediate visual identity.

More than just an image, this symbol reflects:
• simplicity and harmony with the environment
• continuity of cultural traditions
• a strong and universally understood sense of place

For the South Aegean, it demonstrates how cultural imagery can become a strategic asset, shaping global perception and reinforcing the region's position as one of the most iconic destinations worldwide.

However, beneath this powerful global image lies a more nuanced and layered reality. The Cyclades today reveal two parallel worlds that coexist within the same archipelago.

On one hand, many islands continue to maintain strong connections with traditional food cultures rooted in agriculture, pastoralism, and maritime life. Islands such as Naxos, Paros, Sifnos, and Tinos preserve vibrant local food systems based on seasonal products, small-scale farming, and artisanal production. Naxos, for example, is known for its fertile land and dairy traditions, while Sifnos has developed a renowned culinary culture that blends local ingredients with centuries-old cooking techniques.

In these contexts, gastronomy is deeply linked to landscape and community. Local cheeses, wines, herbs, legumes, and traditional breads form the basis of a culinary heritage that reflects centuries of adaptation to island environments. Food festivals, village celebrations, and religious feasts continue to reinforce these traditions and keep them relevant in contemporary life.

On the other hand, the extraordinary success of tourism in certain Cycladic destinations has created intense pressure on local resources and cultural identity. Islands such as Mykonos and Santorini have become



aegean islands
cyclades • dodecanese
Region of South Aegean

The iconic logo of the Aegean Islands—often depicted as a small white church with colourful accents—originates from a simple yet revealing international survey.

When people outside Greece were asked what first comes to mind when thinking of the Greek islands, the overwhelming majority gave the same answer: a small white church overlooking the sea.



global luxury destinations where the scale of tourism development sometimes risks overshadowing local traditions. International restaurants, imported ingredients, and globalized hospitality models can dilute the visibility of traditional food practices.Yet this situation has also sparked a growing awareness among local communities. Across the Cyclades, producers, chefs, cultural organizations, and local authorities are increasingly recognizing the importance of protecting and promoting authentic gastronomic heritage. Initiatives aimed at preserving local varieties of crops, supporting traditional farming methods, and highlighting regional culinary identity are gaining momentum.

Many chefs are reinterpreting traditional recipes using local ingredients, while farmers are rediscovering ancient agricultural practices adapted to the island environment. Farmers' markets, gastronomic festivals, and educational initiatives are helping reconnect residents and visitors with the authentic flavors of the islands. In this evolving landscape, gastronomy is becoming a powerful tool for cultural resilience. Rather than being overwhelmed by tourism, many Cycladic communities are seeking to transform their culinary heritage into a source of identity, sustainability, and pride. By emphasizing local products, traditional knowledge, and the relationship between food and landscape, they are building a model in which tourism and heritage can coexist in a more balanced and sustainable way.

The diversity of the South Aegean archipelago, from the cosmopolitan port of Rhodes to the agricultural landscapes of Naxos or the fishing villages of the smaller Dodecanese islands, demonstrates how gastronomy can serve as a living thread connecting communities, landscapes, and histories across the islands.



SERIFOS ISLAND: MINING LANDSCAPES AND THE ROOTS OF LOCAL GASTRONOMY

The island of Serifos offers a striking example of how industrial heritage and gastronomy are deeply interconnected within the South Aegean cultural landscape. For centuries, the island's economy was shaped by its rich iron ore deposits, with mining activity documented from antiquity and reaching its peak between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The development of mining infrastructure transformed not only the economy but also the social and spatial organization of the island, leading to the creation of worker settlements such as Megalo Livadi, where daily life revolved around both extraction activities and subsistence agriculture.

This dual system—industrial labor combined with small-scale food production—has left a lasting imprint on local gastronomy. The need for nutritious, simple, and durable foods suitable for harsh working conditions contributed to the preservation of traditional recipes based on legumes, cereals, wild herbs, and preserved products. At the same time, the circulation of workers from other Aegean islands fostered a culinary exchange, enriching local food culture with diverse influences.

Today, the abandoned mining landscape coexists with seaside tavernas and agricultural revival, creating a powerful narrative where memory, labor, and food intersect. Serifos thus embodies a broader South Aegean paradigm: territories shaped by hardship and resource extraction that have transformed these constraints into distinctive gastronomic identities rooted in resilience, seasonality, and cultural continuity.

MARBLE LANDSCAPES AND MEDITERRANEAN HERITAGE IN TINOS ISLAND

The marble heritage of Tinos reflects centuries of artistic, economic and cultural exchange across the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean. Since antiquity, the island has been renowned for its rich marble deposits and exceptional craftsmanship, while during the Venetian period, particularly between 1390 and 1715 under the control of the Republic of Venice, Tinos became an important center for marble extraction and artistic production connected to wider Mediterranean trade networks. The island's villages, especially Pyrgos, developed a unique tradition of marble artisanship visible in churches, fountains, houses, cemeteries and everyday decorative elements. This long continuity transformed marble not only into an economic resource, but into a defining cultural language of the island. The marble landscapes of Tinos therefore embody a layered identity shaped by ancient quarrying traditions, Venetian influence, Orthodox and Catholic coexistence, and the movement of artists and craftsmen throughout the Mediterranean world.



> Μέτρον ἄριστον
> Everything in moderation

***Cleobulus of Lindos**, one of the Seven Wisemen of Ancient Greece (Rhodes, 6 th B.C.)*
This principle of moderation is the cornerstone of Greek island gastronomy, where the emphasis lies on the balanced consumption of pure, seasonal ingredients that define the Mediterranean diet.

SOUTH AEGEAN LARDER

THE SEA AS PANTRY: FISH, PRESERVATION AND MARITIME GASTRONOMY

The South Aegean archipelago has always maintained an intimate relationship with the sea, not only as a route of communication but as the foundation of its food culture and daily survival. For centuries, island communities developed a deep knowledge of local marine ecosystems, learning to identify seasonal fish species, migratory patterns and sustainable fishing practices adapted to the rhythms of the Aegean. Traditional island cuisine reflects this close connection through dishes based on grilled octopus, sun-dried fish, marinated anchovies, sea urchins, cuttlefish with wild herbs, red mullet, sardines, groupers and small-scale catches prepared with olive oil, capers, fennel and aromatic plants growing naturally in the dry island landscapes. Cooking methods evolved in harmony with insular conditions: fish was often grilled over charcoal, slowly baked with vegetables, preserved in salt, or dried using the combined action of wind and sun, transforming simple ingredients into highly distinctive culinary expressions.

Today, this maritime gastronomic heritage is entering a new phase shaped by sustainability and culinary innovation. Across several Aegean islands, chefs and fishing communities are increasingly working with invasive species that have spread through the Eastern Mediterranean as a consequence of climate change and the warming of the sea. Among the most emblematic examples is the Lionfish, originally from the Indo-Pacific and now present in many Greek waters.

Rather than viewing it solely as an environmental threat, contemporary gastronomy is transforming the lionfish into a culinary resource, promoting its consumption through creative recipes, filleting workshops and sustainable seafood initiatives. In this way, the cuisine of the South Aegean continues its long tradition of adaptation and resilience, turning ecological challenges into opportunities for innovation while preserving the islands' deep cultural dialogue with the sea.



AMORGORAMA: COMMUNITY-LED MARINE STEWARDSHIP AND GASTRONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY

Amorgorama is a pioneering, fisher-led initiative on the island of Amorgos that demonstrates how local communities can reshape the relationship between environmental protection, primary production, and gastronomy. Developed by the Professional Fishing Association of Amorgos, it addresses two critical challenges in the Aegean: overfishing and marine pollution.

The project is based on coordinated actions that redefine fishing practices into a regenerative model, including seasonal bans during spawning periods, no-take zones in key marine areas, and the adoption of selective fishing gear. Fishermen are also actively involved in coastal and seabed clean-up operations, contributing to the restoration of marine ecosystems.

A key strength of Amorgorama lies in its bottom-up governance. Initiated by fishermen and later supported by scientific institutions and public authorities, it has led to the recognition of protected marine areas, transforming fishermen into custodians of marine biodiversity.

From a gastronomic perspective, the initiative reinforces the link between healthy ecosystems and food quality. By enabling marine regeneration, it supports local culinary traditions and offers a replicable model in which environmental responsibility, economic sustainability, and cultural identity are aligned.

AMORG**ORAMA**



Click here or scan the Qr code to watch the video.



THE USE OF MEAT OR THE WISDOM OF MOTHERS IN MULTIPLYING FOOD AT THE TABLE

In the South Aegean, the consumption of meat has traditionally reflected the economic realities and social structures of island life. In communities where resources were limited and families were often large, meat was rarely consumed in abundance. Instead, it was used carefully and creatively to feed many people at once. Lamb and goat, the most common livestock in the arid landscapes of the archipelago, played a central role in this culinary system. Because these animals were precious assets for milk, reproduction and agricultural survival, their meat was typically reserved for special occasions or prepared in ways that could extend its nutritional value across an entire household.

To ensure that everyone at the table could benefit from this valuable source of protein, island cooks developed dishes that combined small quantities of meat with legumes and cereals. Lentils, chickpeas, fava beans and barley were frequently cooked together with lamb or goat, creating meals that were both nourishing and balanced. These combinations allowed families to multiply the nutritional impact of a limited amount of meat while preserving precious livestock resources. Such dishes were not simply a response to scarcity but a sophisticated culinary adaptation to island conditions, where agriculture, pastoralism and seasonal rhythms shaped everyday life.

These meals were often prepared through long, slow cooking methods that allowed the flavors to deepen while making tougher cuts of meat tender. They were also designed to last: a large pot prepared on Saturday could continue to feed the family on Sunday, embodying a culinary culture built around patience, preservation and

careful management of precious ingredients.
This approach also reflects a broader Mediterranean understanding of food as a shared resource within the community. Meat was rarely the dominant element of the dish; instead, it became one component within a wider composition of grains, pulses, vegetables and herbs. The result was a cuisine that balanced flavor, nutrition and sustainability long before these concepts became part of contemporary food discourse. Today, many of these traditional preparations continue to be appreciated not only for their taste but also as examples of a food culture rooted in moderation, resilience and collective wellbeing.

PRODUCTS THAT TELL THE STORY OF THE ISLANDS

The gastronomy of the South Aegean is built upon a set of ingredients that have accompanied island communities for millennia. These products are not simply agricultural outputs; they are cultural markers that reveal how people have adapted to insular landscapes, climatic constraints and maritime connections. As we saw many of these ingredients appear consistently across archaeological findings, ancient literature and contemporary culinary traditions.

Figs
The fig tree is one of the most resilient plants of the Mediterranean landscape and a defining presence in the agricultural ecosystems of the South Aegean. Its remarkable ability to thrive in poor soils, rocky terrains and dry climates made it a fundamental resource for island populations throughout history. In landscapes where water is scarce and agricultural conditions are often challenging, the fig tree has long represented a reliable and generous source of nourishment.

Honey
Honey occupies a special place in Aegean gastronomy and represents one of the most distinctive products of island landscapes. The aromatic diversity of island vegetation, including thyme, sage, oregano, wild herbs and coastal flora, produces honeys of exceptional quality and character. Thyme honey in particular is considered one of the finest expressions of Mediterranean beekeeping. In antiquity, honey was far more than a sweetener: it functioned as a preservative, a medicinal ingredient and an essential component in ritual foods and offerings. Today, beekeeping continues to play an important role in many islands, contributing both to local economies and to the preservation of biodiversity through pollination.

Sesame
Sesame seeds have been used for centuries in breads, sweets and ceremonial foods across the Aegean world. Their presence in traditional pastries and festive dishes reflects ancient culinary exchanges between the Aegean and the Eastern Mediterranean, regions historically connected through maritime trade routes. Sesame was



MELEKOUNI: THE ENERGY OF TRADITION AND SOCIAL COHESION

Melekouni, the traditional sweet of the island of Rhodes, is a powerful example of how gastronomy embodies both nutritional wisdom and cultural identity. Made from simple yet highly nutritious ingredients—honey, sesame seeds, almonds, spices, and citrus—it reflects the core principles of the Mediterranean diet and the intelligent use of local resources. Its origins trace back to antiquity, with similar honey–sesame preparations already mentioned in ancient Greek sources, highlighting its role as a sustaining food capable of providing energy in demanding conditions. Beyond its nutritional value, Melekouni is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the South Aegean. Traditionally prepared collectively by women and offered during weddings, baptisms, and communal celebrations, it symbolizes prosperity, unity, and continuity. A customary wish associated with its offering—"May you live as many years as the sesame seeds in each piece"—captures its role as a ritual food linking gastronomy to life-cycle events and collective identity. Recognized today as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) product, Melekouni stands at the intersection of heritage and innovation: a traditional preparation that resonates with contemporary trends for natural, healthy, and energy-rich foods, effectively bridging ancient practices with modern dietary awareness.



valued not only for its rich flavour but also for its nutritional qualities, providing oils and proteins in environments where resources could be limited. It continues to appear in numerous island preparations, particularly in breads and sweets associated with religious celebrations and communal feasts.

Barley

Before wheat became dominant in many parts of the Mediterranean, barley was one of the most important cereal crops in the islands. Its resistance to drought, wind and poor soils made it particularly well suited to the environmental conditions of the South Aegean. Barley-based breads and rusks represent some of the earliest forms of staple food adapted to the dry and windy climate of the archipelago.

Fava

Fava, most commonly prepared from yellow split peas in the Cyclades, represents one of the most iconic dishes of island gastronomy. Simple in its ingredients yet rich in flavour, fava reflects the agricultural traditions of dry Mediterranean environments where legumes played a central role in the diet. The famous fava of Santorini, grown in volcanic soil and protected by designation of origin, exemplifies how local terroir shapes both agricultural products and culinary identity.

Lentils

Lentils have long been an essential part of Mediterranean diets due to their resilience, nutritional value and adaptability to dry farming conditions. In the islands of the South Aegean, lentils were cultivated in small terraced fields where they helped enrich soil fertility and provided an important source of plant-based protein.

Olive Oil

Olive oil is a cornerstone of Aegean gastronomy. Olive trees have shaped the landscapes of many islands for millennia, their silvery leaves and twisted trunks symbolizing continuity, resilience and prosperity. In ancient Greece, olive oil was not only a food product but also a sacred substance used in religious rituals, athletic competitions and medicinal practices. In daily life it served as the primary cooking fat, enhancing the flavor of vegetables, legumes, fish and breads. The oil produced in the islands reflects the diversity of local microclimates and soils, contributing distinctive aromas and textures that enrich the regional culinary tradition.

Vine Leaves

The vine occupies a central symbolic and agricultural role across the islands of the South Aegean. Beyond wine production, vine leaves themselves are widely used in cooking, particularly in traditional dishes where they serve as natural wrapping elements for grains, herbs and meats. The use of vine leaves illustrates how every part of the plant contributes to the gastronomic culture of the region.

Wine

Wine has been one of the defining elements of Aegean culture since antiquity. Archaeological evidence from amphorae, presses and storage vessels demonstrates that the islands of the Aegean were deeply involved in the production and trade of wine for thousands of years. Viticulture developed here in close relationship with the maritime world: wine travelled across the sea as both a commodity and a cultural symbol, linking island societies with wider Mediterranean networks that connected Greece, Asia Minor, the Levant and later the Italian and Western Mediterranean worlds. The islands played a particularly significant role in the history of Mediterranean viticulture thanks to their capacity to adapt grape cultivation to difficult environments characterized by strong winds, volcanic soils and limited water resources.

Distillates

South Aegean have long developed a tradition of grape-based distillates closely connected to the rhythm of the harvest. Spirits such as souma, tsipouro and rakí are produced by distilling the fermented grape pomace left after winemaking, demonstrating an ancient island philosophy in which every part of the harvest is carefully used. At the centre of this tradition is the kazane, the traditional copper still used for distillation. The word refers both to the apparatus itself and to the communal event that accompanies the process. After the grape harvest, the pomace is left to ferment and later distilled during the winter months. Families and neighbours gather around the kazane, sharing food, wine and conversation while the spirit slowly emerges from the still. In many islands of the South Aegean, particularly Rhodes and Kos, the resulting distillate is known as souma. This traditional spirit is deeply embedded in local culture and is often produced in small quantities for family use or local celebrations. Distillation traditions are also present in the Cyclades. On the island of Syros, for example, the production of local grape distillates has historically been linked to small family vineyards and to the reuse of grape pomace after the wine harvest.

Cheeses

In the Odyssey, Homer describes the Cyclops Polyphemus as a skilled cheesemaker who used woven baskets to drain cheese—a technique that still survives today in the Cyclades. In the Cyclades, the traditional woven baskets used for draining cheese are called tyrovolia (or tyrvolia). They are usually made from natural materials such as willow, reed, or rush, and they give the cheese its characteristic textured shape. Transhumant livestock farming in the Aegean is a distinctive form of traditional animal husbandry, which has been inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity list. This system functions as a natural ecosystem management mechanism: it helps prevent wildfires through grazing and maintains biodiversity in island pastures. In the Cyclades and the Dodecanese, transhumance routes are based on local seasonal movements between coastal and mountainous areas, as well as between islands ("sea routes"). These routes contribute to seed dispersal and soil fertilization, while protecting the fragile island ecosystem from overgrazing. This practice is closely linked to traditional cheesemaking and local customs, forming an integral part of the identity of local





FAVA SANTORINIS PDO: A LIVING EXPRESSION OF VOLCANIC TERROIR AND CULTURAL CONTINUITY

Fava Santorinis PDO represents one of the most emblematic agricultural products of the South Aegean, embodying the deep interconnection between environment, history, and local knowledge systems. Produced exclusively from the seeds of Lathyrus clymenum L., this legume is cultivated across a small cluster of Cycladic islands, where extreme climatic conditions—intense sunlight, strong Aegean winds, and arid volcanic soils—have shaped a unique and highly resilient agricultural system.

The product's distinctiveness lies in its terroir: the volcanic substrate, poor in organic matter yet rich in minerals, combined with the plant's ability to absorb moisture from sea humidity, contributes to its characteristic slightly sweet taste and velvety texture. Fava Santorinis is not only a product, but a cultural continuum. Archaeological findings from the prehistoric settlement of Akrotiri confirm its cultivation over 3,500 years ago, demonstrating remarkable resilience through major environmental disruptions, including the catastrophic volcanic eruption of Santorini Island.



FYLLA MAKING KALYMNOS ISLAND

Across Greece these preparations are generally known as dolmades, a term derived from the Ottoman culinary vocabulary that spread across the Eastern Mediterranean. However, local traditions often preserve distinctive names that reflect the linguistic diversity of the islands.

On the island of Kalymnos, for example, stuffed vine leaves are traditionally called fila . The dish typically consists of vine leaves filled with rice, aromatic herbs and olive oil, sometimes enriched with small amounts of minced meat depending on the occasion. The use of fresh vine leaves gives the dish a delicate aroma that reflects the intimate connection between viticulture and everyday cooking.

These variations in terminology illustrate how shared Mediterranean recipes evolve differently within each island community. While the preparation itself is part of a broader Eastern Mediterranean culinary tradition, the local name fila preserves a unique element of Kalymnian cultural identity.



Click here or scan the Qr code to watch the video.



THE RITUALITY OF BREAD

The islands of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese preserve a remarkable diversity of traditional breads, shaped by isolation, limited resources and strong ritual traditions. In the Cyclades, barley rusks such as those of Amorgos and Naxos (paximadia) were essential for long preservation and maritime life, while in Santorini traditional preparations include kouloura Santorinis, a ring-shaped bread adapted to arid conditions, and kritharokouloura, made with barley flour. In the Dodecanese, Karpathos is renowned for its ceremonial breads such as psomi tis lambrias (Easter bread) and kouloures prepared for weddings and religious feasts, often richly decorated with symbolic motifs. On Kalymnos and Rhodes, wood-fired village loaves and herb-infused breads reflect pastoral traditions and local biodiversity. Among these, eptasimo stands out as one of the most symbolically rich preparations: a ceremonial Easter bread, typically round and adorned with eggs and decorative elements, representing renewal, protection and the cycle of life. Its preparation is a collective ritual, reinforcing family and community bonds. Across the South Aegean, these breads are not merely sustenance, but powerful expressions of identity, resilience and intangible heritage, fully aligned with the principles of sustainable gastronomy.



LIST OF PGI & PDO PRODUCTS

PDO
“Designation of origin” refers to the name identifying a product:

a. originating from a specific place, region or, in exceptional cases, country;
b. whose quality or characteristic are mainly or exclusively due to the particular geographical environment, including inherent natural and human factors;
c. for which all production stages are carried out within the defined geographical area.

PGI
“Geographical indication” refers to the name identifying a product:

a. originating from a specific place, region or country;
b. with certain quality characteristics, reputation or other attributes mainly attributable to its geographical origin;
c. for which at least one production stage is carried out within the defined geographical area.

List of Approved PGI & PDO Products

Product type	Name	Combined nomenclature code	Type
Food	Kopanisti	04 - Dairy produce	PDO
Food	Arseniko Naxou	04 - Dairy produce	PDO
Wine	Santorini	22 - Beverages	PDO
Wine	Cyclades	22 - Beverages	PGI
Food	San Michali	04 - Dairy produce	PDO
Food	Fava Santorinis	07 - Edible dried leguminous vegetables	PDO
Food	Tomataki small tomato Santorinis	07 - Editable vegetables	PDO
Food	Graviera Naxou	04 - Dairy produce	PDO
Food	Amorgos Fava	07 - Edible dried leguminous vegetables	PGI
Wine	Malvasia Paros	22 - Beverages	PDO
Food	Naxos Potato	07 - Editable vegetables	PGI
Wine	Aegean Sea	22 - Beverages	PGI
Wine	Paros	22 - Beverages	PDO

Product type	Name	Combined nomenclature code	Type
Wine	Kos	22 - Beverages	PGI
Wine	Rhodes	22 - Beverages	PDO
Wine	Moschato Rhodes	22 - Beverages	PDO
Wine	Dodecanese	22 - Beverages	PGI
Food	Rhodes olive oil	15 - Animal	PGI
Food	Melekouni	19 - Preparations of cereals	PGI
Food	Kos Wine Cheese (Krasotiri or Possias cheese)	04 - Dairy produce	
Food	Kattavia Rhodes Beans (Lopia)	07 - Edible dried leguminous vegetables	PGI

List of PGI & PDO Products Pending Approval

The following products are currently in the approval process:

- “Aegean Capers” as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) Product
- “Sitaka of Kasos” as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) Product
- “Kalymnos Honey” as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) Product

The actions for the above certifications are fully funded by the own resources of the Region of South Aegean.

List of Products Scheduled to Be Promoted for Certification

Application dossiers are being prepared for the following products in order to be submitted to the competent authorities for approval:

- Rhodes Honey
- Karpathos Kouloures



- Archangelos Koulouria
- Kalymnos Spinialo
- Leros Mackerel
- Astypalaia Sweet Potato
- Kalavarda Garlic (Rhodes)
- Symi Shrimp
- Andros Lemon
- Cyclades Honey
- Sun-dried Tomato of the Cyclades
- Kos Tomato
- Kea Acorn
- Kos Olive Oil
- Afantou Apricots
- Milos Koufeto
- Naxos Goat
- Naxos Lamb
- Amorgos Goat
- Amorgos Lamb

The approval process for the above products is fully funded by the Region of South Aegean.



STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK OF THE CANDIDATURE

ONGOING BEST PRACTICES AND DEMONSTRATION CASES

Lindos Hotels: Gastronomy, Identity and Sustainability in the Hospitality Sector

The hospitality sector in the South Aegean increasingly adopts structured approaches that combine authentic gastronomic experiences, support for local producers, preservation of Greek culinary heritage and sustainable use of ingredients.

Lindos Hotels offers a significant example of this direction. Its practices include:

- cooking classes introducing visitors to traditional Greek recipes and techniques
- certified Greek breakfast featuring products from small local producers
- daily presence of regional dishes in hotel restaurants
- fine dining concepts reinterpreting local heritage through contemporary cuisine
- strong attention to seasonal and local sourcing
- application of waste reduction principles, including nose-to-tail and root-to-leaf approaches
- integration of waste separation and recycling into kitchen operations

Through these practices, hospitality becomes a platform for connecting visitors with the agricultural landscape, culinary identity and sustainable values of Rhodes.



Aegean Cusine

Launched by the Chambers of Commerce of the Cyclades and the Dodecanese , the “Aegean Cuisine” initiative represents one of the most successful examples of gastronomic destination branding in the Eastern Mediterranean. Conceived as a certified network of restaurants, producers and hospitality businesses, the project promotes the authentic culinary heritage of the Aegean through quality standards, local sourcing and strong cooperation between tourism and agri-food sectors. More than a simple gastronomic label, Aegean Cuisine functions as a cultural and economic ecosystem linking local identity, traditional products, storytelling and sustainable tourism development. Since its launch in 2010, the initiative has helped transform gastronomy into a strategic tool for territorial promotion, supporting hundreds of producers and restaurants while reinforcing the image of the Aegean islands as a destination where landscape, culture and taste are deeply interconnected.

Strengthening Local Supply Chains: Field to Fork and Dine-Out Models

One of the most significant collaborations in support of sustainable tourism is the partnership with the TUI Field to Fork programme. This initiative links hotels, tourism operators and local producers in order to strengthen local supply chains and reduce the environmental footprint of tourism.

By encouraging sourcing from nearby farms, fisheries and artisanal producers, the programme ensures that the economic benefits of tourism remain within local communities while reinforcing regional food systems. At the same time, it introduces visitors to authentic local products such as cheeses, wines, olive oil, honey and seasonal vegetables.

Particularly important is the programme’s support for regenerative agriculture, promoting soil health, biodiversity and long-term environmental resilience.

This model is complemented by dine-out experiences, through which hospitality operators encourage guests to eat in local tavernas and family-run establishments. These experiences help distribute economic value more widely across the destination while enhancing the authenticity of the visitor experience.

Gastro 0: Gastronomy with Zero Waste
Another key initiative supporting sustainability in the South Aegean is the Gastro 0 project, which addresses food waste in tourism and hospitality.

Food waste is a major challenge in regions characterized by strong seasonal tourism peaks. Gastro 0 promotes practical solutions that encourage responsible consumption, circular resource use and efficient food management within hotels, restaurants and food businesses.

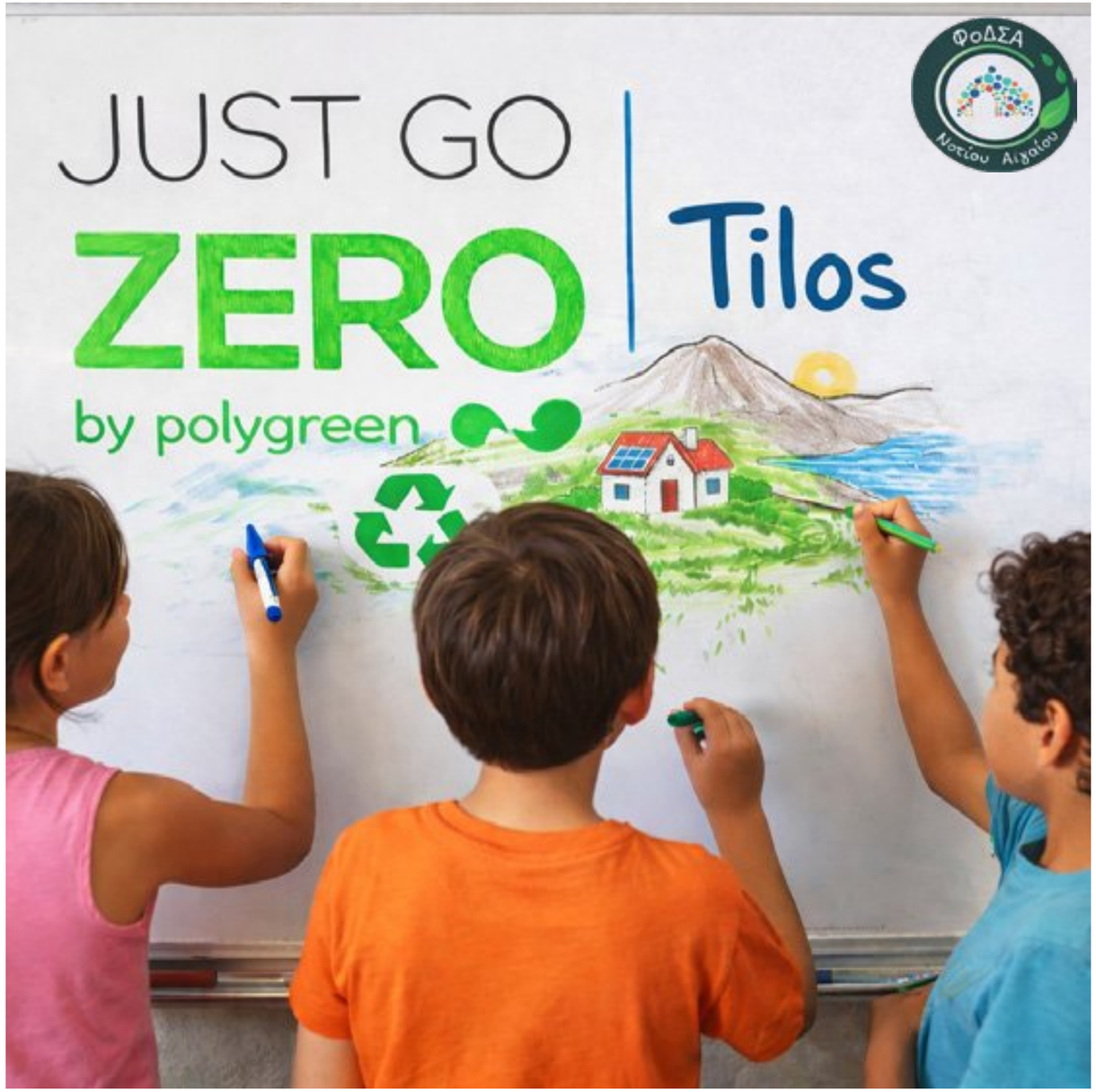
A particularly innovative component is the use of on-site food waste processing systems that transform organic residues into compost. These compact technologies allow hospitality businesses to reduce waste volumes while generating useful outputs for agriculture, landscaping or community projects.
Key actions include:

• promoting zero-waste cooking practices
• reusing by-products in food preparation
• supporting on-site composting solutions
• raising awareness among visitors about responsible food consumption
• encouraging hospitality businesses to adopt circular economy practices

In island contexts, where transport and waste management are often complex and costly, such systems are especially relevant.

Aegean Gardeners initiative
The Aegean Gardeners initiative represents a flagship best practice in linking gastronomy, education, and sustainability through a scalable and community-driven model. By engaging elementary school children in hands-on agricultural activities—both in school gardens and through visits to regional plant nurseries—the program reconnects younger generations with food origins, biodiversity, and traditional cultivation practices.

Operating across approximately 30 islands and involving around 250 schools and 1,500 pupils annually, the initiative demonstrates how gastronomic heritage can be effectively transmitted through experiential learning and institutional support. Beyond education, the project addresses key territorial challenges such as insularity and limited resources by combining local engagement with logistical solutions, including the distribution of materials





to remote islands and partnerships with transport networks. Its integration into the national education framework further confirms its replicability and long-term impact. As such, Aegean Gardeners exemplifies how gastronomy can serve as a tool for cultural continuity, environmental awareness, and social cohesion, transforming food education into a strategic pillar for sustainable regional development.

THE FUTURE OF IDENTITY

The South Aegean enters this candidature at a decisive moment. The region faces growing pressures linked to tourism intensity, climate change and demographic transformation. In the most recent census, it was the only Greek region to record population growth, largely driven by the economic success of tourism. Yet this positive trend exists within a national context marked by broader demographic decline and increasing territorial imbalance. In this context, gastronomy is not simply a sector of hospitality or consumption. It is a strategic resource through which the South Aegean can reconnect communities with their cultural roots while creating new forms of sustainable development. By valuing local ingredients, traditional knowledge and contemporary creativity, the region can transform food culture into a bridge between past and future. For the South Aegean, gastronomy is therefore both memory and strategy: a living expression of history, landscape and identity, but also a practical tool for strengthening resilience, generating opportunities and shaping a more balanced future for island communities.

VISION

The South Aegean aims to position gastronomy as a central driver of sustainable regional development, cultural continuity and community wellbeing.

Rooted in millennia of agricultural, maritime and culinary traditions, the region proposes a model in which gastronomy functions simultaneously as:

- a form of cultural heritage
- a driver of economic development
- an environmental strategy
- an instrument of social cohesion

Through this candidature, the South Aegean seeks to demonstrate how island gastronomy can support territorial balance, revitalize local food systems, strengthen identity, encourage innovation and contribute to more responsible forms of tourism.

STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES

At local and regional level, the candidature is built around five main strategic objectives:

1. Strengthening territorial balance across the archipelago
2. Revitalising agriculture and local food systems
3. Safeguarding cultural and gastronomic heritage
4. Promoting sustainable tourism development
5. Engaging youth and supporting innovation in the food sector

STRATEGIC PILLARS

A South Aegean aligned with IGCAT principles
The South Aegean strategy is fully aligned with the IGCAT vision of protecting, promoting and connecting unique food cultures to empower communities, drive innovation, improve well-being, and support environmental resilience.

1. Territorial Balance and Sustainable Tourism
Fostering sustainable tourism experiences.
The South Aegean is characterised by strong contrasts between internationally renowned destinations and smaller islands facing economic fragility. Gastronomy offers a powerful tool to rebalance this system.

By promoting culinary routes, food festivals and local product networks, the region encourages visitors to move beyond iconic destinations such as Rhodes and Santorini and explore lesser-known islands.
Concrete examples:

• Development of inter-island gastronomic routes linking Cyclades and Dodecanese through thematic experiences (wine, olive oil, cheese, traditional recipes).
• Expansion of local festivals in smaller islands (e.g. food and harvest festivals) to attract off-season visitors.
• Integration of port-based food markets as first points of contact for visitors arriving by ferry or cruise.

This approach reduces pressure on major destinations while fostering slower, more meaningful tourism.

2. Revitalising Agriculture and Local Food Systems
Strengthening local economies and supporting small producers.





Traditional agriculture in the South Aegean reflects centuries of adaptation to island conditions but is increasingly under pressure. The strategy focuses on reconnecting production and consumption through:

• local sourcing in hospitality
• short supply chains
• food markets and product networks

Concrete examples:

• Introduction of “field-to-fork” sourcing models in collaboration with hotels and restaurants (building on experiences such as TUI Field to Fork).
• Creation of port and village food markets where farmers and fishermen sell directly.
• Promotion of local product certifications and networks (e.g. Greek breakfast initiatives using regional ingredients).

This strengthens local economies while preserving agricultural knowledge and biodiversity.

3. Safeguarding and Showcasing Culinary Heritage
Showcasing culinary heritage and stimulating local innovation.
Culinary traditions reflect centuries of interaction between sea, land and trade routes. Safeguarding them means activating them in contemporary contexts.
Concrete examples:

• Reinterpretation of traditional dishes by chefs in destinations such as Rhodes and Kos.
• Development of food storytelling platforms and digital tools linking products to history, landscapes and traditions.
• Creation of living heritage experiences (e.g. bread-making, cheese-making, wine and preservation workshops).

This approach ensures that heritage remains dynamic, fostering innovation rooted in tradition.

4. Food, Community and Education
Empowering communities through food education and cultural exchange.
Food is central to social cohesion and intergenerational exchange in the islands.
Concrete examples:

• Organisation of educational programmes in schools and communities on local food heritage and sustainability.
• Creation of training workshops for young chefs and producers to encourage entrepreneurship.

• Development of cross-island exchange programmes connecting communities across the archipelago.
These actions strengthen identity, inclusion and community empowerment, while creating new opportunities for younger generations.

5. Environment, Climate and Well-being
Promoting healthier lifestyles and environmental stewardship.
Traditional food systems embody ecological knowledge that is highly relevant today.
Concrete examples:

• Promotion of drought-resistant crops and traditional agricultural practices adapted to water scarcity.
• Support for sustainable fishing and seasonal consumption.
• Integration of circular economy models in gastronomy, inspired by initiatives such as Tilos Just Go Zero and Halki GR-eco Island.

These practices contribute to biodiversity protection, responsible resource use, and the promotion of healthy, local diets.

6. Resilience and Regeneration
Supporting recovery and long-term resilience.
Island regions face climate, economic and demographic challenges. Gastronomy can strengthen resilience by diversifying economies and reinforcing community networks.
Concrete examples:

• Development of food-based entrepreneurship programmes for young people in smaller islands.
• Support for local supply chains to reduce dependency on imports.
• Use of gastronomy as a tool for post-crisis recovery and destination repositioning, particularly in areas affected by environmental or economic shocks.

Smaller islands act as laboratories of innovation, where sustainable models can be tested and transferred across the region.

A CONNECTED VISION

Across all pillars, gastronomy acts as a connecting force, linking territories, communities, economies and ecosystems. By aligning heritage with innovation, and local identity with global challenges, the South Aegean builds a development model that is culturally grounded, economically viable and environmentally responsible.



KEY COMMITMENTS

These commitments define the operational priorities of the strategy and are monitored through the KPI framework below.

Territorial Balance & Sustainable Tourism

• Activate a network of inter-island gastronomic routes.
• Establish food markets in key port areas.
• Structure off-season programming through gastronomy.

Local Economies & Food Systems

• Facilitate direct market access for producers.
• Integrate local sourcing into hospitality systems.
• Strengthen regional product networks and traceability.

Culinary Heritage & Innovation

• Systematically document food heritage.
• Translate traditions into contemporary experiences.
• Enable collaboration between chefs, artisans and producers.

Community Empowerment & Education

• Implement structured food education programmes.
• Support training and professional development.
• Facilitate exchanges across islands and communities.

Environment, Health & Well-being

• Promote seasonal, local and healthy food consumption.
• Support sustainable agriculture and fisheries.
• Introduce circular practices in food systems.

Resilience & Regeneration

• Support food-based entrepreneurship.
• Reinforce short supply chains.
• Use gastronomy as a tool for local regeneration.

CROSS-CUTTING VALUES

The South Aegean strategy reflects six core values aligned with the Region of Gastronomy philosophy:



KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS (KPIS)

1. Territorial Balance & Sustainable Tourism

KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2028)	Measurement Method
Number of inter-island gastronomic routes	1–2 fragmented initiatives	≥ 5 structured routes	Project mapping & partner reporting
Visitor flows to smaller islands (food-related)	Low / untracked	+15% increase	Tourism data, surveys, booking platforms
Port-based food markets activated	0–1 pilot	≥ 6 operational markets	Municipal & port authority reports
Extension of tourism season (food events)	Peak season only	+2 months active programming	Event calendar & visitor data

2. Local Economies & Food Systems

KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2028)	Measurement Method
Number of producers involved	Fragmented / local only	≥ 200 producers engaged	Producer registry & participation records
% of local sourcing in hospitality	Estimated <15%	≥ 30% average	Surveys with hotels/ restaurants
Number of food markets (permanent/seasonal)	Limited	≥ 10 active markets	Municipal data & project monitoring
Product networks / certifications activated	Limited visibility	≥ 3 structured networks	Certification bodies & partner reports

3. Culinary Heritage & Innovation

KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2028)	Measurement Method
Traditional recipes and practices documented	Scattered	≥ 100 documented	Research outputs & digital platform
Living heritage experiences activated	Limited	≥ 20 experiences	Event tracking & operator reporting
Digital storytelling platform	Not integrated	1 regional platform active	Platform analytics & content upload
Chef–artisan collaborations	Occasional	≥ 15 structured collaborations	Programme records

4. Community Empowerment & Education

KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2028)	Measurement Method
Educational programmes delivered	Sporadic	≥ 50 programmes	School & community reports
Young professionals trained	Limited	≥ 150 participants	Training records & certifications
Cross-island exchanges	Rare	≥ 10 islands involved	Programme tracking
Community participation in events	Variable	≥ 70% events with local involvement	Event evaluation reports

5. Environment, Health & Well-being

KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2028)	Measurement Method
Adoption of local/ seasonal menus	Limited	≥ 50% participating businesses	Surveys & menu audits
Sustainable agriculture/ fishing initiatives	Fragmented	≥ 20 initiatives supported	Project monitoring
Circular economy pilots (food systems)	Few isolated cases	≥ 5 islands implementing models	Local authority & partner reporting
Food waste reduction in participating businesses	Not measured	≥ 20% reduction	Waste audits & business reporting

6. Resilience & Regeneration

KPI	Baseline (2025)	Target (2028)	Measurement Method
Youth entrepreneurship programmes	Limited	≥ 100 participants	Programme tracking
Short supply chains activated	Weak	≥ 15 structured supply chains	Producer–buyer agreements
Recovery initiatives in vulnerable areas	Not systematised	≥ 5 pilot actions	Regional reporting
Innovation labs in small islands	Isolated pilots	≥ 5 islands scaling models	Project evaluation

BEST PRACTICES FOR FUTURE

Education, Research and Knowledge Networks
Education and research are fundamental to the long-term sustainability of the South Aegean gastronomic ecosystem. The preservation of culinary traditions and agricultural knowledge cannot rely only on informal transmission; it also requires structured educational programmes, scientific documentation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

For this reason, the South Aegean strategy promotes the creation of a dynamic knowledge network connecting:
• universities and research centres
• culinary schools and training institutions
• cultural organisations and museums
• local communities, producers and practitioners

This network will support research and education in areas such as biodiversity, island agriculture, archaeology of food, climate adaptation, sustainable tourism and local food systems.

Youth Gastronomy Lab
A flagship instrument in this field is the Youth Gastronomy Lab, designed to encourage younger generations to engage actively with the region's food ecosystem.
The programme will offer:

• training and practical learning opportunities
• internships and mentorship schemes
• workshops with farmers, fishermen, chefs, food artisans and researchers
• support for projects combining traditional knowledge with contemporary entrepreneurship

The Youth Gastronomy Lab aims to foster a new generation of professionals able to revitalize island food culture while building sustainable economic opportunities rooted in local resources.

University and Research Partnerships
Partnerships with universities and research institutions will support interdisciplinary research on topics such as:

• sustainable agriculture in island environments
• biodiversity and preservation of traditional crop varieties

• archaeology of food and historical food systems
• climate adaptation in Mediterranean agriculture
• sustainable tourism linked to local food systems
• the social and economic impact of gastronomy on island communities

Activities may include field research, conferences, exchange programmes and collaborative publications.

Food Heritage Documentation Programme
A central component of the strategy is the Food Heritage Documentation Programme, dedicated to recording and safeguarding the intangible heritage of island gastronomy.
The programme will document:

• traditional recipes
• agricultural and fishing practices
• food preservation methods
• seasonal rituals and culinary celebrations
• oral histories from farmers, fishermen, cooks and artisans

The resulting materials will form a digital archive accessible to researchers, schools, cultural institutions and the wider public.

Schools and Community Education
Educational actions developed with local schools and communities will raise awareness among younger generations about food heritage, sustainable agriculture and responsible consumption.
These may include:

• school gardens
• cooking workshops
• visits to farms and fisheries
• intergenerational knowledge-sharing activities
• public events linking food, landscape and culture

South Aegean Open Farms Project
The South Aegean Open Farms project aims to reconnect visitors with the agricultural and gastronomic heritage of the South Aegean islands by opening farms, vineyards, apiaries, dairies and traditional food producers to experiential tourism activities.



Through guided visits, tastings, workshops and direct encounters with local communities, the initiative promotes a deeper understanding of island food cultures, sustainable production methods and rural landscapes shaped over centuries by wind, drought and maritime exchanges. More than a tourism project, South Aegean Open Farms seeks to strengthen the relationship between agriculture, cultural identity and local economies, encouraging authentic experiences that valorise biodiversity, traditional knowledge and the everyday life of the islands.

House Composting Project

The South Aegean Region is increasingly positioning itself as a Mediterranean laboratory for circular economy and sustainable island living. One of the most ambitious recent initiatives is the large-scale home composting programme launched by the South Aegean Waste Management Agency (Fo.D.S.A.), which foresees the free distribution of 35,000 composters to households across the islands. Co-funded through the EU ERDF and the ESPA 2021–2027 programme, the project aims to reduce organic waste at its source, promote household composting and strengthen the transition toward a “Zero Waste” island model.

The initiative includes both electric composters for apartments and traditional garden composters for rural homes, encouraging residents to transform everyday food waste into natural fertilizer for gardens and local agriculture. The programme represents an important step in addressing the environmental challenges faced by island territories, where waste management is often particularly complex due to seasonality, tourism pressure and limited land resources. It also builds upon pioneering experiences such as the zero-waste model developed on Tilos, reinforcing the South Aegean’s emerging role as a hub for environmental innovation and sustainable tourism in the Mediterranean.



> “ The world is heavy to bear,
> yet for a touch of pride, it is worth living
>
> ***Odysseus Elytis**, the poet of the Aegean*

GOVERNANCE AND STAKEHOLDER COLLABORATION

The success of the South Aegean strategy depends on a strong governance model capable of connecting public authorities, producers, tourism operators, researchers, educational institutions and cultural organisations.

The Regional Government of the South Aegean acts as the main coordinating body, ensuring alignment between gastronomy initiatives and broader regional policies concerning tourism, agriculture, environment and cultural heritage. The governance structure is based on three interconnected levels:

01 STRATEGIC STEERING COMMITTEE

This body includes representatives of:

- the South Aegean Regional Authority
- municipalities across the archipelago
- tourism organisations
- agricultural cooperatives
- cultural institutions

Its role is to define priorities, coordinate the programme and monitor implementation.

02 SCIENTIFIC AND CULTURAL ADVISORY BOARD

Composed of academics, researchers, chefs and cultural experts, this board provides guidance on:

- food heritage preservation
- sustainable agriculture
- gastronomy and tourism development
- innovation in island food systems

03 STAKEHOLDER NETWORK

A broad operational network involving:

- farmers and fishermen
- wineries and food producers
- restaurants and hospitality businesses
- schools, universities and research institutions
- cultural organisations, museums and associations

This network reflects the collaborative nature of gastronomy as a system that connects landscapes, communities and economic activity.

INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION AND GLOBAL LEGACY

The South Aegean strategy includes a strong international communication dimension aimed at positioning the archipelago as a global reference point for sustainable island food systems.
Communication is understood not simply as promotion, but as a strategic instrument for:

- building awareness
- sharing knowledge
- strengthening international cooperation
- communicating the uniqueness of island gastronomy

A central element of this strategy will be the development of a dedicated digital platform presenting:

- local products and producers
- gastronomic landscapes and routes
- culinary traditions and food heritage
- sustainability initiatives across the islands

The communication framework will also include:

- collaboration with international journalists, media and documentary producers
- participation in major gastronomy and tourism events
- visual storytelling projects documenting food cultures and landscapes
- multimedia content, including films, interviews and digital narratives
- promotion of chefs, farmers, fishermen and artisans as ambassadors of Aegean cuisine

In this way, the South Aegean seeks to communicate not only the beauty of its gastronomic traditions, but also their broader relevance to global debates on climate adaptation, tourism, cultural heritage and island resilience.

INTERNATIONAL PARTNERSHIPS AND GLOBAL DIALOGUE

The South Aegean will strengthen collaboration with other gastronomy regions within the IGCAT network and beyond, encouraging exchanges of knowledge, joint events, shared research and cross-border cooperation.
Particular emphasis will be placed on cooperation among island territories facing common challenges, such as:

- limited agricultural land
- water scarcity
- seasonal tourism pressure
- fragile ecosystems
- the need to preserve culinary and agricultural heritage

The South Aegean is especially well positioned to lead this effort. With more than fifty inhabited islands, it represents one of the most complex and dynamic archipelagos in the world. Its food culture has evolved through maritime exchanges, limited resources, community resilience and the constant interaction between land and sea.
For this reason, the region proposes to contribute to the development of a shared international framework for island gastronomy, strengthening the visibility and collaboration of island territories within the global gastronomy community.



WHY THE SOUTH AEGEAN DESERVES THE TITLE

FROM 2019 TO A GLOBAL ISLAND MODEL

When the South Aegean received the title of European Region of Gastronomy in 2019, the recognition highlighted the extraordinary richness of its food culture and its deep roots in maritime exchanges, agricultural traditions and community life.

The region did not treat that title as an endpoint, but as the beginning of a longer strategic process. Since 2019, gastronomy has increasingly been integrated into broader policies related to tourism, agriculture, education, sustainability and cultural heritage. This evolution has led to:

- stronger collaboration among islands and stakeholders
- renewed visibility for local products and traditional recipes
- deeper integration of gastronomy into tourism experiences
- stronger links between producers, restaurants and hospitality operators
- the adoption of sustainability and circular economy practices
- new opportunities for youth engagement and entrepreneurship

The candidature for World Region of Gastronomy is therefore not a new departure, but the next step in a coherent and evolving journey.

SOUTH AEGEAN AS A GLOBAL MODEL FOR ISLAND GASTRONOMY

What distinguishes the South Aegean is not only the richness of its own culinary heritage, but its capacity to generate a broader vision for island food systems globally.
The region proposes to place island gastronomy more firmly within the international debate, highlighting issues such as:

- maritime ecosystems and coastal food cultures
- limited land and water resources
- adaptive farming and fishing practices

• traditions of preservation and resilience
• strong integration between food, seasonality and community life
In doing so, the South Aegean aims to contribute not only to its own development, but also to the creation of a stronger international platform for island gastronomies worldwide linked with IGCAT platform.

FLAGSHIP PROJECTS

To translate its vision into concrete action, the South Aegean proposes a series of flagship initiatives combining gastronomy, sustainability, cultural heritage and international cooperation.

1st World Islands of Gastronomy Forum
Hosted in Rhodes, this forum will bring together island regions from the Mediterranean and beyond—including territories such as Crete, Sicily, Menorca, Gozo, Vanuatu and others—to address common challenges related to water management, climate resilience, seasonality and food heritage.
The forum will serve as a platform for:

• exchange of best practices
• scientific and policy dialogue
• cooperation between island territories
• development of a shared strategic vision for island gastronomy

The Island Gastronomy Charter
The South Aegean proposes the creation of a shared ethical framework for island food systems, based on principles such as:

• biodiversity protection
• responsible water and resource management
• support for small-scale producers
• seasonal and local sourcing
• preservation of culinary heritage
• sustainable tourism
• education and intergenerational transmission
• international cooperation between island territories

This Charter will provide the basis for the Rhodes Manifesto on Island Gastronomy and Sustainable Food Systems.





Youth Gastronomy Lab
A programme dedicated to training, mentoring and supporting young professionals and entrepreneurs in agriculture, food production, gastronomy tourism and culinary innovation.

ACTION PLAN 2026–2028

2026 – Connecting the South Aegean to the Global Gastronomy Network
Key actions:
• participation in major IGCAT initiatives
• launch of the Island Food Heritage Documentation Programme

• strengthening local supply chains through models such as Field to Fork
• launch of the Open Farms project
• development of partnerships with other gastronomy regions
• initial creation of an Island Gastronomy Network within the IGCAT framework

2027 – Regional Activation and Preparation for Global Cooperation
Key actions:
• expansion of Aegean gastronomic routes
• launch of the Youth Gastronomy Lab
• implementation of the Gastro Zero network
• regional editions of selected gastronomy initiatives and competitions
• deeper cooperation between producers, chefs and tourism operators
• preparation of the World Islands of Gastronomy Forum

2028 – International Leadership and Knowledge Dissemination
Key actions:
• first edition of the World Islands of Gastronomy Forum in Rhodes
• organization of World Food Gift Challenge in May
• presentation of the Rhodes Manifesto
• expansion of research programmes on island food systems
• consolidation of local supply chains
• launch of new cross-border cooperation projects
• dissemination of South Aegean best practices to other island regions

By implementing this strategy, the South Aegean aims to demonstrate that gastronomy can function as a catalyst for:
• balanced regional development
• revitalisation of agriculture and fisheries
• preservation and transmission of cultural heritage
• sustainable and regenerative tourism
• youth participation and entrepreneurship
• environmental stewardship and climate resilience
• stronger social cohesion and community wellbeing

South Aegean seeks to position itself as a Mediterranean model in which gastronomy connects landscapes, communities and cultures while contributing to a more resilient and sustainable future.

ACTIONS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF BIODIVERSITY

The Region of South Aegean implements an integrated strategy to safeguard and enhance local biodiversity, centered on the operation of a Seed Bank of traditional varieties through the Regional Nursery. Currently preserving 23 local cultivars, the Bank is continuously expanding, reinforcing the protection of agrobiodiversity. In parallel, large-scale plant production and distribution strengthen ecosystem resilience. In 2025 alone, 200,000 locally adapted plants (forest, aromatic, livestock, and bee-friendly species) were produced, supporting pasture enrichment and environmental restoration. Targeted interventions further amplify impact, including:

- Distribution of 12,500 saplings to over 110 public and community bodies.
- Reforestation support in Rhodes following the 2023 wildfires (20,000 trees produced).
- Localized planting and biodiversity support actions across islands, including Serifos, Karpathos and Kastellorizo.

ACTIONS / PROGRAMS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE BEE POPULATION

Recognizing pollinators as critical to both biodiversity and gastronomy, the Region implements a structured support framework for beekeeping. This includes:

- Annual financial incentives for hive ownership linked to productivity.
- Support for equipment renewal and modernization.
- Subsidization of transportation costs, enabling nomadic beekeeping practices.

All measures are implemented through EU-aligned programmes (CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027 and Small Aegean Islands Programme), leveraging European and national co-funding to ensure long-term sector resilience.

ACTIONS FOR THE STRENGTHENING AND SUPPORT OF PROCESSING

The Region systematically invests in upgrading local processing capacity, enhancing product quality, value creation, and market competitiveness. Key achievements in 2025 include:

- Completion of honey extraction laboratories across the Dodecanese and Cyclades
- Launch of fava processing infrastructure in Schinoussa.
- Expansion and modernization of wineries (PGI/PDO), dairies (PDO), olive mills, meat processing, and honey packaging units.
- Targeted investment support to wineries and licensing of new olive oil standardization facilities in Rhodes



These actions are delivered through coordinated funding tools (RDP 2014–2020 and CAP Strategic Plan 2023–2027), maximizing the impact of European (EAFRD) and national resources.



ACTIONS FOR THE PRESERVATION OF PRODUCTS, TRADITIONS, AND RECIPES

Gastronomic Events / Festivals 2028

The Region of South Aegean co-organized and funded (through its own resources) the following events:

MARCH

Istrios Winter Camp – Istrios, Rhodes
Olive Festival – Laerma, Rhodes
Afantou Pancake Festival – Afantou, Rhodes
Orange Festival – Massari, Rhodes
Cooking Competition – Massari, Rhodes

APRIL

Easter Festival "Lazarakia" – Menetes, Karpathos

MAY

Strawberry Festival – Paradisi, Rhodes
Fisherman's Festival – Koufonisi

JUNE

Gastronomy Festival "Fillema 2025" Antiparos
Astypalinos 2025 – Astypalaia
Fisherman's Festival – Amorgos
Garlic Festival – Kalavarda, Rhodes
Makoukki Festival – Koskinou, Rhodes
Fava Festival – Schinoussa
Castle Festival – Kritinia, Rhodes

All events were co-organized by the Region of South Aegean and funded entirely through its own resources.

JULY

Shepherd's Festival – Antimachia, Kos
Farmer & Livestock Breeder Festival Monolithos
Andros Traditional Products Festival – Korthi
Koulouria Festival – Archangelos, Rhodes
Takkaki Festival – Pastida, Rhodes
Rhodes Street Food Festival – Mandraki
Watermelon Festival – Apolakkia, Rhodes
Fairy tale…the broad bean and the chickpea Naxos
Sitaka Festival – Kasos

AUGUST

Two-day Agricultural Festival – Paros
Honey & Souma Festival – Sianna, Rhodes
Fish Festival – Kefalos, Kos
Traditional Cuisine of Komiaki – Naxos
Honey Festival – Kalymnos
"Melo… Poems" – Andros
Local Flavors and Their Stories – Sagri, Naxos
Melekouni Festival – Koskinou, Rhodes
Honey Festival – Kefalos, Kos
Yarenia Festival – Apollona, Rhodes
Wine Festival – Embonas, Rhodes
Traditional Kakavia Festival – Syros
Honey Festival – Antimachia, Kos
Lopio Festival – Kattavia, Rhodes
Alikarnasseia – Kos Town
Yaprakia Festival – Salakos, Rhodes
Loukoumas & Pancake Festival – Archipoli
Gennadomageiremata – Gennadi, Rhodes
Wine Festival – Asfendiou, Kos

SEPTEMBER

Paros Wine Routes – Paros
Grape Festival – Fanes, Rhodes
Rhodes Street Food Festival – Mandraki
Cycladic Gastronomy Festival "N. Tselementes" – Sifnos
Trahanas Festival – Kremasti, Rhodes

OCTOBER

Choerosfagia – Pyli, Kos
Walnut Festival – Dimylia, Rhodes
Hybrid Gastronomy Festival "Mikra Anglia" Andros

NOVEMBER

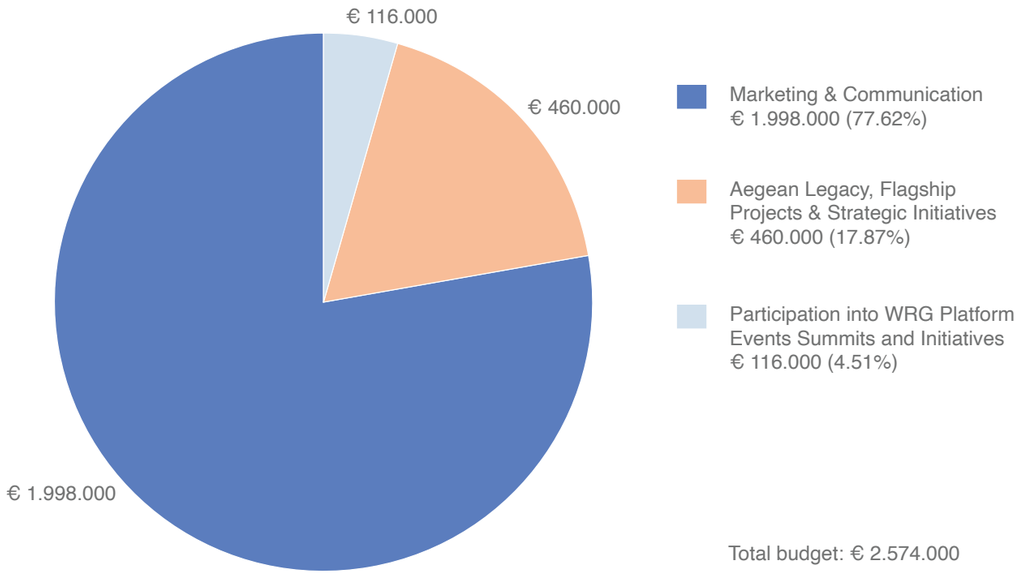
Rakintzo in Moni – Naxos

DECEMBER

Melomakarono Festival – Kremasti, Rhodes

2026: CONNECTING THE SOUTH AEGEAN TO THE GLOBAL GASTRONOMY NETWORK

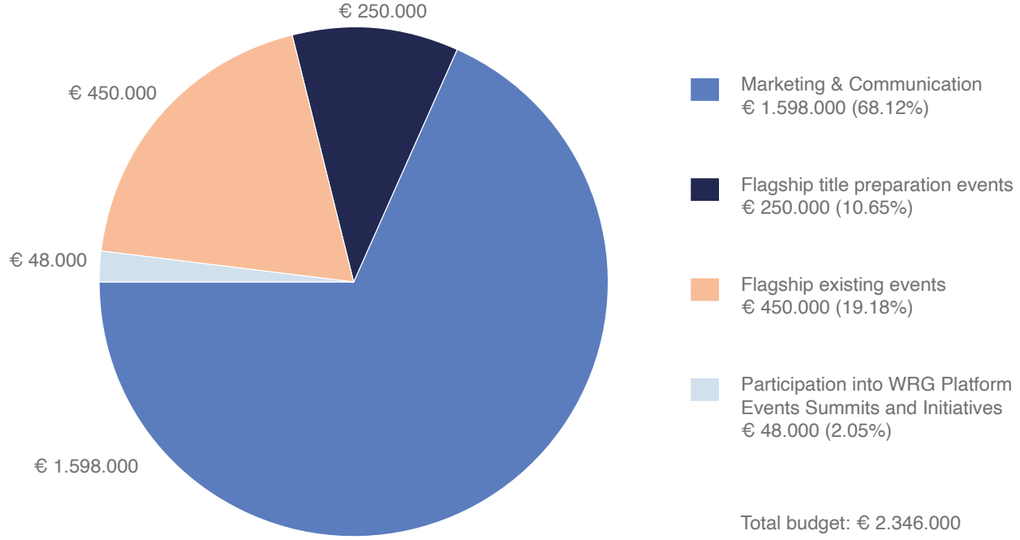
Total Budget: € 2.574.000



Total budget: € 2.574.000

2027: REGIONAL ACTIVATION AND PREPARATION FOR GLOBAL COOPERATION

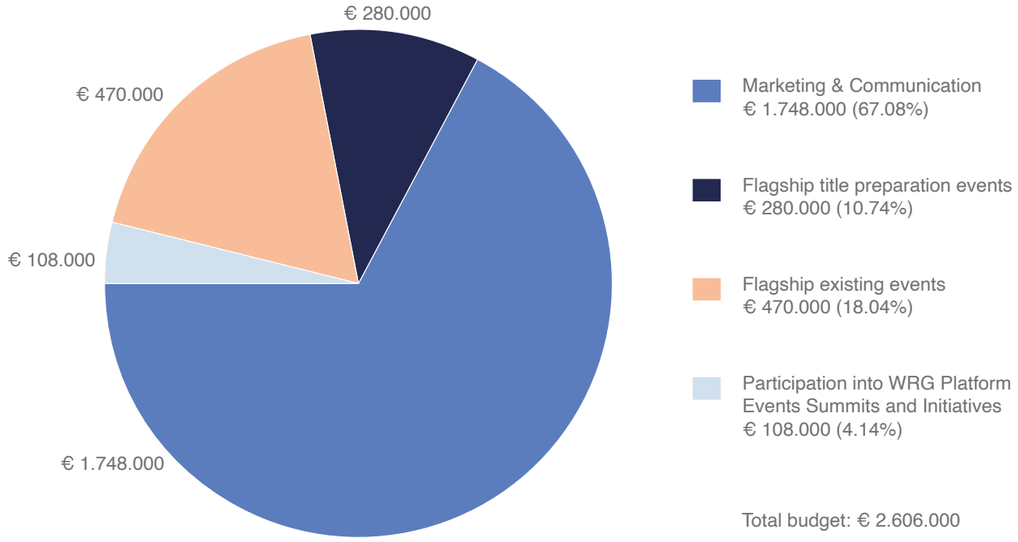
Total Budget: € 2.346.000



Total budget: € 2.346.000

2028: INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND KNOWLEDGE DISSEMINATION

Total Budget: € 2.606.000



Marketing & Communication
€ 1.748.000 (67.08%)

Flagship title preparation events
€ 280.000 (10.74%)

Flagship existing events
€ 470.000 (18.04%)

Participation into WRG Platform
Events Summits and Initiatives
€ 108.000 (4.14%)

Total budget: € 2.606.000



This Bid Book was made possible through the sharing of knowledge, experience, and generosity of our island communities. We would especially like to thank:

- **Kalliopi Amorginou**, Women's Cooperative / Kalymnos Sea Food, Kalymnos
- **Nomiki Amorginou**, Women's Cooperative / Kalymnos Sea Food, Kalymnos
- **Dora Anastastiadi**, Rhodes Hoteliers Association, Rhodes
- **Giannis Apostolidis**, Ceramics Sifnos
- **Mattheos Argyros**, Estate Argyros Winery
- **Penelope Bebeli**, Agricultural University of Athens
- **Despoina Chatzidiakou**, Aegean Skills Program, Rhodes
- **Michael Croessmann**, President of the Professional Fishing Association of Amorgos
- **Artemios Denaxas**, Liostasi Hotel, Ios
- **Dimosthenis Diamantis**, Agricultural Beekeeping Cooperative of Serifos / Beehives Diamantis
- **George Diamantopoulos**, Santorini, Cyclades Chamber of Commerce
- **Mattheos Dimopoulos**, Union of Santorini Cooperatives (Santo Wines)
- **Nikolas Ergas**, Restaurants Association, Kalymnos
- **Stella Fyrogeni**, Paros, Cyclades Chamber of Commerce
- **Christos Gamvroudis**, South Aegean Waste Management, Rhodes
- **Eren Gavala**, Restaurants Association, Kalymnos
- **Giannis Gavala**, Beekeepers Association "Thymaritis", Kalymnos
- **Vaggelis Georgiou**, The Rhodes Co-Lab: Sustainable Destination, Rhodes
- **Costas Hatzidakis**, Aegean Skills Program, Rhodes
- **Nektarios Kalogirou**, Gia ti Fisi / Common Nature, Rhodes
- **Popi Kassara**, Lyceum of Greek Women, Kalymnos
- **Katerina Kathopouli**, Lyceum of Greek Women, Kalymnos
- **Manolis Kovaios**, Fava Schoinoussas
- **Maria Magripli**, Louloudia, Lyceum of Greek Women, Kalymnos
- **Nikos Makryonitis**, Makryonitis Syros Distillery, Syros
- **Christos Markozanes**, Skala Restaurant, Santorini, Cyclades Chamber of Commerce
- **Michalis Marthas**, Chef, Kalymnos
- **Nikos Nomikos**, Santorini, Cyclades Chamber of Commerce
- **Katerina Palazi**, Apolloniatiasses Women Cooperative, Rhodes
- **Ioannis Papavasiliou**, Rhodes Hoteliers Association, Rhodes
- **Ioannis Pappou**, Chambers of Commerce of Dodecanese
- **Popi Patelli**, Natural Products Store, Kalymnos
- **Nikolaos Pittaras**, Nikolaos Pittaras Creamery, Naxos Island
- **Nikos Retsas**, Bee Museum / Melissokomiki Dodecanese, Rhodes
- **Ioannis Roussos**, Chambers of Commerce of Cyclades
- **Christina Sarri**, Cycladic Development Association
- **Gerasimos Skordilis**, Melisyros
- **Mikes Soulounias**, Bakers Association, Kalymnos
- **Marinos Souranis**, Anthos Tinos / Marathia Restaurant, Tinos
- **Sevasti Stalla**, Lyceum of Greek Women, Kalymnos
- **Manolis Stefanakis**, Aegean University, Rhodes
- **Spyros Syropoulos**, Aegean University, Rhodes
- **Panagiotis Theodorakis**, Cycladic Development Association (KETAN) / Cyclades Chamber of Commerce
- **Jason Triantafyllou**, Estate Anastasia Triantafyllou, Rhodes
- **Nikolas Tsagkaris**, Hoteliers Association, Kalymnos
- **Paraskevi Tsampounari**, Lyceum of Greek Women, Kalymnos



- **Nomiki Tsoulfa**, Lyceum of Greek Women, Kalymnos
- **Giannis Tyrakis**, Restaurants Association, Kalymnos
- **Ioanna Tzavara**, Directorate of Modern Cultural Heritage, Ministry of Culture
- **Iakovos Valeris**, Union of Agricultural Cooperatives of Naxos (E.A.S. Naxos)
- **Eleni Valla**, Blood Donors Association, Kalymnos
- **Kostas Zifos**, Dodecanese Development Agency (AN. DO.), Rhode

Footage credits

Source: @spiros.margar (social media channels)
Camera Operator & Video Editing: George Karavas

Amorgorama footage credits

Production: Revive Our Ocean
Supported by: Municipality of Amorgos, Cyclades Preservation Fund, Amorgos Professional Fisherme's Association, Agricultural University of Athens, Blue Marine Foundation

