

Food of the gods

From Punchbowl to Greece, take your taste buds on a culinary safari, says Johanna Leggatt.

Maeve O'Meara thought it was a crazy idea. It had to be. A culinary excursion with a group of strangers through some of Sydney's best undiscovered restaurants? And after the concept pitches on we'll take a group to . . . the Greek Islands? Surely no-one could go for it.

But no matter how hard O'Meara dismissed the idea as one of her more eccentric brainwaves, she couldn't shake the thought that maybe this time she was on to something. The author and journalist tugged the idea into her computer and filed it under "mad idea".

That was two years ago. Now few people think her idea is so mad.

O'Meara, an avid lover of all things digestible, took her sketchy musings and with the help of her impeccable knowledge of cuisine, transformed it to a successful business.

Her idea now has a name – Gourmet Safaris – and ever since she formed the business she has been inundated with customers. Foodies, it seems, love their food. And O'Meara, with her extensive knowledge, is the perfect tour guide.



Feeding on demand: Maeve O'Meara is now taking her safaris overseas.

How's this for a resume: for the past 18 years she has travelled the world sampling food and for the past nine she has written about it. O'Meara is the co-author of the SBS *Eating Guides* to Sydney and Melbourne and has produced and presented her own television series on SBS: *The Food Lover's Guide to Australia*. She's food editor for *Family Circle* magazine and is a regular on ABC radio's food program, *Relish*.

Although O'Meara has always enjoyed food, her real awakening came when she joined SBS as a reporter in 1990. "Everybody there talked about food and they really knew their food well," she said. "So my fascination really fed off that and

that was when I started to write the good food guide."

O'Meara runs Gourmet Safaris from her Mosman home and uses her knowledge of food and contacts within the industry to bring the taste of exotic and remote cuisines to Sydney. She takes groups to niche restaurants where they enjoy exotic food and a talk by a "wine educator" and the chef preparing the meal.

"It's great that the chefs become involved because they never really get a chance to talk about how they prepare a meal," she said. "They love being asked questions and having their food celebrated, which doesn't happen a lot in Australia in that way."

O'Meara also conducts walking tours of parts of Sydney, focusing on a specific cuisine. For instance, O'Meara is about to conduct a tour through Punchbowl, focusing on Lebanese food. There's also an upcoming taste test of authentic Italian food through Haberfield.

"The great thing about Sydney is that people are really keen to explore where they live," she said.

"As long as I can remember I have always loved [different] foods. When I finished university I went travelling and I remember how much I enjoyed the foods across Europe."

O'Meara has more recently extended Gourmet Safaris to overseas destinations. In May, she took a group to Santa Fe in New Mexico where they ate with

American Indians and watched them cook corn in their adobe-style houses. During the day the group visited the Santa Fe fresh produce markets and bought fresh chillies and goat cheese to prepare for a four-course meal.

In September, O'Meara is planning to tour the Greek Islands. She's hoping to get to the Island of Chios – the only place in the world where the Mediterranean spice mastic is found. "I will be going to three Greek Islands and one of them will definitely be Chios," she said emphatically. "This mastic spice is actually the germ of a tree which grows solely on this island and the islanders make liquors out of it."

As luxurious as these excursions sound, O'Meara insists her willing followers get their hands dirty. "I didn't want nice boutique hotels and comfortable luxury," she said. "I want to go to the villages and see the simple peasant food being made."

Are there any foods she doesn't like? "Umm . . . no."

Any favourite foods? "My favourite food is always my last one."

The repeat of series two of The Food Lover's Guide to Australia is on every Friday at 8pm. For Gourmet Safari inquiries, e-mail maeveomeara@ozemail.com.au. If you would like to join Maeve O'Meara on a tour of Sydney's Little Italy for just \$58, turn the page for our Subs Club offer.