

# Greek happiness secrets that'll work for you!

Folks in the picturesque Greek islands are known for their upbeat attitudes, warmth and ability to celebrate . . . well, anything! So it's not surprising that they have an all-purpose word—"Opa!"—to signify everything joyful from happiness to love, celebration to thanks—and everything in between, says Alex Pattakos, Ph.D., cofounder of The OPA! Way (TheOPAWay.com). And by adopting a few traditions from the islands, it's possible to get that same feeling of lasting joy yourself, he declares. Just try . . .

## Celebrating you — not your age!

Instead of celebrating birthdays, Greek islanders celebrate their name days, says Pattakos. "When you celebrate someone's name day, you're focusing on their life—and, because community is so important, on all the other people who have the same name." Result: Instead of counting the candles on your cake, you count your accomplishments and blessings!

❖ **Opa! happiness secret:** Have a name day party—and invite everyone you know who shares your name. And next time you're at a birthday party, do as they do in Greece: Instead of saying "Happy birthday," say "*Chronia polla*," or "Many years to come," which keeps you looking forward!

## Eating "happy"!

Most Greek islanders stick to a healthy, traditional diet—lots of greens and beans, light on meat and accompanied by a splash of olive oil and a glass of wine. And since your digestive system doesn't have to process a lot of fat-laden food, more energizing oxygen is sent to your brain and muscles—and more energy is linked to more happiness, says Dan Buettner, author of *Thrive: Finding Happiness the Blue Zones Way*.

❖ **Opa! happiness secret:** Load your plate with more fruits and vegetables and less fatty foods, and relish the taste of your meal!

## Taking an evening walk!

In Greece, it's called the "volta," which, interestingly, has the same root as the word we use to measure energy, or voltage. Residents of the islands use after-dinner strolls to recharge and reconnect. "You see all generations, from the littlest kids to couples to yia-yias (grandmas) of 100-plus, out walking arm in arm," says Pattakos, who notes that the tradition is as happiness-promoting as it is heart-healthy.

❖ **Opa! happiness secret:** Grab the folks nearest you for a brisk after-dinner walk around the neighborhood or, if the weather's bad, your local mall. You'll burn stress hormones as well as calories!

## Embracing life — the good and the bad!

You bet life has its ups and downs; just ask any Greek weathering the current economic crisis. But when bad times came for Zorba—of the classic novel *Zorba the Greek* and Greece's most famous modern hero—he picked himself up and danced. Greeks dance anytime, anywhere—at festivals, weddings, even funerals. "You can't *not* feel happier," says Pattakos, "when your body says 'celebrate!'"

❖ **Opa! happiness secret:** Upset because you burned dinner or blew a job interview? Just say "Opa!"—and turn on some music and dance. Reminding yourself that, imperfect as life is, it's better than the alternative helps you put your troubles in perspective!

## Cutting small talk!

Greeks have always valued lively discussion. They expect folks to express themselves on issues that matter—even if it sounds like arguing, says Pattakos. "In Greece, it's called 'conversation'"—and it pays big joy dividends, experts say. In one recent study, people who rated themselves happiest engaged in twice as many serious discussions and far less small talk than other folks. Why? Talking about things you feel deeply about helps you build deeper, more meaningful relationships.

❖ **Opa! happiness secret:** Practice discussing "sensitive" issues—for instance, politics, money or religion—with your closest friends. And with practice, you'll find it easier to speak up without giving offense!

## Picking a seat next to a stranger!

In Greek villages, tavernas rarely have individual seating. Even in larger towns, people are often seated at long tables next to complete strangers, something they love for the opportunity it provides to make new friends. "Greeks enjoy mixing it up and recognize that we all feel more alive when we're connecting, and that to do it, you sometimes have to let your guard down and take risks," says Pattakos.

❖ **Opa! happiness secret:** No communal tables at your favorite coffee shop? Try the counter! Alternately, just strike up a conversation with that person next to you on the bus or post office line. The more you extend yourself, the easier it will get, the more friends you'll make—and the happier you'll be!

—Barbara Hustedt Crook