

Heartbreaking Refugee Stories Inspire Syrian Charity Dinner At Avec



By Ariel Cheung | October 9, 2017 5:57am | Updated on October 9, 2017 8:23am
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Avec Dinner Benefit Brings Best Of Greek Islands To West Loop

WEST LOOP — Over and over again, Eduard Seitan heard it on the news: Children and other refugees drowning after their boats capsized near Greece in a perilous flight for their lives.

The grief he felt for them was "overwhelming," said Seitan, a partner at One Off Hospitality Group and wine director at avec. After watching, "4.1 Miles," the [Oscar-nominated short documentary](#) that chronicles a Greek coast guard captain's rescue missions, Seitan decided he had to find a way to channel his feelings into action.

Avec, 615 W. Randolph St., will host two six-course dinners Oct. 22 and 23 on its [newly opened second floor](#) to help both refugees and the Greek islands where thousands of them seek brief respite before continuing to flee from their war-ridden countries.

Each dinner will feature Syrian food and carefully selected handmade wines from three Greek islands. [Tickets are \\$125](#), including tax and tip, and 20 percent of sales will benefit [RefugeeOne](#), a Chicago-based organization that supports refugees in the city. Seitan said he hopes to raise \$5,000.



Refugees fleeing through Turkey make a perilous four-mile journey to the Greek islands, where islanders frequently must rescue passengers from capsized boats. [Provided/Aris Soultanos]

"It's not magic; we're not changing the world" with the dinner, Seitan said. "But if that \$5,000 or \$10,000 we can raise reaches a few people, I'll be happy."

The family-style meal will start off with cured fluke kibbeh, a popular Middle Eastern dish made with cracked wheat and finely ground meat, typically lamb or goat, and topped with tahini yogurt and Turkish urfa chili pepper.

The second course will be hummus with winter squash, then grilled chicken thigh schawarma with an apple fattoush salad. The main course will be slow-roasted lamb with pomegranate and beets, followed by fresh dates with halloumi cheese and fermented honey. For dessert, Avec will serve an orange flower cream with poached dried apricots.

503 Service Temporarily Unavailable

Paired with each course will be a wine from Lipsi, Lemnos or Lesbos. Seitan, who struggled to find high-quality wines from some of the tiny islands, worked with Aris Soultanos, whose company [Eklektikon](#) imports rare Greek wines.

Soultanos didn't have wines from the islands Seitan wanted to feature, but he agreed to make a trip over the summer to track down the perfect pairings for Seitan's special dinner.

"To hear the story of how these wines got to Chicago is such an experience," Seitan said. "These wineries are [run by] people like an old man and his wife making a few cases of wine in their backyard."



Avec's six-course wine dinner will feature rare wine pairings from the small Greek islands where many refugees land as they flee wars in Syria and other troubles. [Provided/Aris Soultanos]

Between 2015 and 2016, 600,000 migrants crossed the four miles of water between Turkey and Lesbos, according to "4.1 Miles."

It can be hard for the islanders to manage the waves of refugees coming to their shores, particularly on islands with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants, Seitan said.

"That's why we're trying to marry the two cultures over food and wine," Seitan said. "It's kind of silly and simplistic, and I know it's such a miniscule effort, but I didn't know how to do it better."



Refugees fleeing through Turkey make a perilous four-mile journey to the Greek islands, where islanders frequently must rescue passengers from capsized boats. [Provided/Aris Soultanos]

Seitan said he understands that some might find his support of immigrants controversial, but he has little sympathy for their opinion.

"If you see what these refugees go through and how much they endure, it's easier to see that they're people fleeing years of war," he said. "And if someone gets offended by us supporting this cause, then they shouldn't come to avec."

If the dinners go well, Seitan said he hopes to continue the charity series.

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