

(GREEK) FOOD AS METAPHOR

Warming the Heart and Hearth

by Gus Theodoro

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As the proprietor of two New York City restaurants serving Greek food—Gus’s Place and Figs—I get to meet many people who, like me, come from Greece and who love to talk about our homeland and heritage. Recently a new patron, speaking in Greek, said to me, “Gus, is your wife one of us or is she a stranger?”

“A stranger?” I said of my American-born wife. “I’ve known her now for 22 years!” We all had a laugh, but I knew that the lady who asked the question had not really meant it as a joke. We’d been talking about the region in Greece we had both grown up in, an area in the north called Epirus, close to the Albanian border. This part of the country, like all of Greece, has been a well-travelled crossroads for four thousand years. Soldiers and tradesmen from

ancient Byzantium passed over our mountains on their way to Sicily and beyond. And for four hundred years, until very recent times, the people of Greece lived under Turkish rule. We’ve always been aware of the “strangers” in our midst. Perhaps in part because of that, we’ve always kept our Greek traditions and customs.

No matter where in the world we Greeks wind up living, it is important for us to maintain that sense of Greek identity—to recognize it in each other and to share it with others. One way we do that, of course, is through sharing our love of Greek food. For many of us Greek-Americans, our traditional foods have become the strongest metaphor we have for what it means to be Greek.

For me the *pitta*—those wonderful Greek pies I was raised on—is a metaphor for so many things: family, togetherness, warmth, a welcome to friends and neighbors and, yes, a welcome to strangers too. The *pitta* symbolizes not only the “oneness” of the Greek experience, but also our individual and regional differences: I’ve never eaten a *pitta* that was exactly like any other *pitta*.

In the isolated and still mystical villages of Greece’s northern border regions, there are women, like my own mother, who define themselves through the specific foods they cook. After 40 years of living in the U.S., my parents have returned to our village, Dernati, high in the

mountains between the cities of Yannina and Metsovo. My mother still makes a *pitta* the way she did when I was a child, and her *pitta* is still different from those made by neighbors and nearby relatives. She starts by lining a pan with a layer of fresh dough, adding oil, pepper, garlic and then layers of onions, maybe some sliced leeks, and a little feta cheese. Sometimes she would shred lamb into the layers to make a *kresopitta*. Or the main ingredient could be a fresh vegetable like spinach or a fruit like figs.

In a small and isolated village like Dernati, what you ate depended on what you could raise yourself. We had garlic, onions, chicory, leeks, arugula, lettuce, cucumbers, beans, potatoes, corn and wheat. My ancestors had planted an abundance of fruit trees, and we supplemented those with seasonal plantings of watermelon and cantaloupes. There must be 60 to 75 walnut trees on my family’s land. Then there are the fig trees. Until my wife and I had children starting school right after Labor Day, we would make our visits to Greece in late September or early October so as not to miss the annual ritual of eating those plump, delicious, ripe figs.

The ideal way to enjoy figs is to pick them off the tree when very ripe and just eat the whole thing. If not yet mushy-ripe, the green skin peels right off, and you can sprinkle on them a little dessert wine, such as Muscat, or

try them with ouzo, or even *tipouro*—the grappa my 89-year-old father still makes from the pulp left over from making wine.

Like many Greek children, I started drinking wine when I was very young, maybe five or six years old. To me, wine is another metaphor for what it means to be Greek. It reflects our innate optimism, for when we lift a glass of wine in a toast with our family and friends we are saying, “everything is okay, all will be fine with us”. Wine is good for the body, the mind and the soul—at least, that’s what I was told when my brothers and sisters and I learned to sip wine as a child. One reason we were given wine was that milk was so scarce. What milk we got from our goats usually went to make cheese, because it was more substantial and you could make a meal out of a piece of bread and cheese.

And you could make a meal out of my mother’s *avgolemono* soup—a concoction of egg, lemon, chicken and rice. The chef at Gus’s Place still uses my mother’s recipe

for this native Greek soup that is a popular mainstay of our menu. The steam rising out of the pot along with the tart smell of lemon and the mellow scent of cooking chicken—that can warm me up in any weather.

Another way to warm the stomach—and soul—is with a stew, like *yiovetsi*, which my mother made with a lamb shank, and *kakavia*, a fish stew. In the country, the cooking smells were so vivid, not absorbed by city things. On my way home from school I could smell the spices from 300 years away; in the wintertime, I already felt warm before I got into the house. Since orzo was less accessible then, my mother often served *ylovetsi* with *hilopitas* a pasta made from whole wheat and semolina flours, eggs and milk. It was a winter family favorite when we could afford to kill an animal.

The taste and smell of these dishes never fails to let me re-experience the comforts of my childhood home—that is, the comfort of our home as it was

before the Nazis came and we had to leave our village and hide out with relatives nearby. On our return months later the house had been burned to the ground, and though we managed to put together a temporary shelter, my parents’ home wasn’t completely rebuilt until the early 1950s. But there’s a point I want to make about that time we were forced to flee the advancing German army: Before we left my mother very carefully buried in the garden the potatoes and dried beans we had harvested that year but could not carry with us. They were still there and still edible when we returned after two months. Like any Greek mother, her first concern was feeding her family!

Does anyone wonder why, when we Greeks get together, the first thing we do—sometimes the only thing we do—is eat and drink? It’s the way we share our identity, our Greekness.

