

# A CULINARY ODYSSEY

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## CORFU: A CUISINE APART

by Diane Kochilas

Corfu—one of seven Ionian Islands—is truly a world apart from the rest of Greece (which Corfiots nonchalantly refer to as the “other” Greece).

Sifting through Corfu’s cuisine means sorting through its illustrious history to determine who brought what to the island. Like many parts of Greece that fell under the Venetian yoke, such as Santorini, Corfu has seen a huge disparity between the landed gentry and the poor. As a result, there are two distinct cuisines: that of the rich, or Nobili, and that of their feudal subjects. The cuisine of the Nobili is filled with meat, fish, lavish pasta dishes, and exotic spices. They could afford to season their food with expensive black pepper and other imported aromatics. By contrast, the poor grew, dried, and pulverized their own chile peppers to flavor their simpler meals.

The four best-known dishes of the Corfiot upper classes show their Venetian influence: The *sofrito* (from “fritto,” for fry), made by lightly frying sliced veal and cooking it with vinegar, garlic and parsley; the *bourtheto*, traditionally a paprika-based sauce that now denotes a peppery fish stew; *bianco*, a white, garlicky fish stew; and *pastitsatha*, a hearty pasta and meat dish that was the Sunday meal for the well-to-do. *Pastitsatha* has become decidedly more mundane, and today usually refers to spaghetti and beef in red sauce.

Among the litany of recipes left by the Venetians, one stands out:

aptly called *pastitsio venetsianiko*, it bears little resemblance to the *pastitsio* familiar throughout the rest of Greece as pasta baked with spicy meat sauce and topped with a thick bechamel—standard fare on every tourist menu. Corfu’s *pastitsio venetsianiko* was typically baked in special forms so that the finished dish was as high as a top hat. Now usually made in a standard cake tin, the dish still has thick pasta layered with pieces of game or chicken, hard-boiled eggs, smoked ham, salami or *mortadella*, and cheese—whatever might grace the larder of an agrarian estate. The whole thing is cloaked in the classic pastry crust, *pate brise*.

Corfu also has a sweet version called *pastitsio dolce*, with the same filling enveloped in a classic *pasta frolla* or *pate sucre*.

Sometime after the 16th century, turkey arrived on Corfu. There is some disagreement as to who first brought it, but if the name is any indication it came with the French since the Greek word, *galopoula*, translates literally as “French bird.” Regardless of provenance, turkey remains the Christmas meal in Corfu among the affluent. In fact, islanders distinguish between the male and female birds. The female turkey is turned into *avgolemono* (egg-lemon) soup, while the male is stuffed (with bread or pasta) and roasted with potatoes. No turkey would be complete, though, without the *mostarda dolce* (sweet mustard), which almost certainly came with the Venetians. It is made with mustard seeds or powder and a variety of candied fruits (like

quince) and, sometimes, nuts. People still prepare it at home or buy from the only shop that continues to sell it, Papayiogi’s Zacharoplasteion (Pastry Shop), just off the Esplanade in CorfuTown.

Many of the island’s sweets also derive from its Venetian past. *Pasta frolla* (called *pasta flora* elsewhere in Greece) is the most popular dessert, filled alternately with apricot or peach jam, or figs.

Along with the other Ionian Islands, Corfu lays claim to several bread-and-fruit puddings. According to local historians, puddings came not with the Venetians but with the English in the 19th century. Corfu’s puddings are made with either lady’s fingers or crumbled rusks layered with candied fruits, raisins and pine nuts and moistened with egg and milk. They are often served with the local version of Italy’s *zabaglione* custard, made here with Mavrodaphne wine or Cognac rather than the classic Marsala.

The Venetians left Corfu in 1797 and on their heels came the Russians, the French, and in 1815 and for 50 years hence, the British. While the island’s culinary inheritance from Venice is unrivaled to this day, the Russians and British both managed to leave a few dishes behind. Little culinary trace remains of the French, who were hated among the island’s ruling class because they brought with them the seeds of democratic revolution.

Corfu’s poor, however, had a very different diet. While the upper classes were busy carving the Christmas turkey, others, if they were lucky, were eating salt cod, a

signature dish of Corfu's peasants. At Christmas it was cod baked with tomatoes and potatoes. During the pre-Lent Carnival time they made a pie with cod, potatoes, rice, goat cheese, eggs, and milk. Even for those employed in houses of the wealthy, the Sunday meal was salt cod stewed with leeks and paprika.

Until late-20th century tourism brought affluence to Corfu's locals, ordinary folk lived on a paltry but healthful diet of wild greens cooked with onions and olive oil and *barbarella*, or cornbread. (The word may come from the Italian *barbari*, as in Barbary Coast, since corn was believed to have originated in Africa.)

Corfu is lush with wild greens, most called by local names. Among them are: watercress, wild celery, mustard greens, sorrel, dandelion, poppy, nettles, white radish, and mache. In spring, tender greens, both bitter and sweet, are picked for *tsigarelli*, a dish of blanched greens sauteed with onions, herbs, and olive oil and reddened with paprika or chile pepper. The dish has been modified and now is likely to get its color from tomatoes. *Tsigarelli* is not exclusive to Corfu, but what's unique to the island is that all greens are served hot.

Also prominent in the Corfu diet are sweet potatoes (bake with syrup, fried and dusted with

cinnamon and sugar, or grilled or boiled and dressed with olive oil and salt); *tzitzifes* (a reddish-brown acorn-size fruit known in English as the Trebizon date, the Russian olive, or as oleaster); and *sikomaiitha*, an ethereally-flavored fig paste (dried figs chopped and kneaded with ouzo and pepper or sometimes fennel seeds and grape must). These are made into pies wrapped either in grape or chestnut leaves and left for a few weeks to set. Sold by the poor in the CorfuTown farmer's market for all to enjoy, it is a recipe that truly crosses social and economic lines.

