

A CULINARY ODYSSEY

The roots of the Cretan table

By Diane Kochilas



The traditional Cretan kitchen is a paean to the ingenuity of poor but winsome cooks. It is also a juncture where past and present meet. Perhaps more than anywhere in Greece, Crete boasts a well-defined cuisine: whole, unique, and surprisingly varied from one part of the island to the other. Also, as much as anywhere else in the country, the Cretan table is redolent of the remotest past.

Archeology has revealed that the Cretans of 1500 BC flourished on the Mediterranean triad of grains, olives and the vine. The Minoans ate barley, broad beans, peas and lentils. They enjoyed the vast array of wild herbs and greens that grow profusely in Crete. For meat, they relied on a few cows, goats, sheep and a great number of pigs. They hunted the wild ibex (goat) —*agrimi*, as it is known locally—as well as the red deer, hares and rabbit. They didn't have chickens but savored small domestic geese imported from Egypt, and probably made cheese similar to the *myzithra* still made today by mountain shepherds. They liked pepper and salt. For a sweetener, they relied on honey (sugarcane would come to the island much later) and their fruit gardens were laden with figs, apples, pears, and the quince, a Cretan native. In short, as Adam Hopkins writes in

his informed guide to the island, Crete, its Past, Present and People, “apart from potatoes, tomatoes, bananas, citrus fruit and sugar, the Minoans ate very much what Cretans eat today.”

When I set out to write about Crete and its cuisine, I thought I would be able to separate the strands of history and identify culinary influences. But the island is so complex, and its geography is ultimately more overpowering than the nations that ruled it. Nevertheless, historical traces do survive.

The culinary lexicon is often touched by antiquity. The names of many basic foods are indeed archaic, suggesting their long and continuous place on the table. For example, the Cretan words for snails, *hohlioi*, survives from the ancient word for spiral, and bulgur wheat in the local dialect, *hondros*, can be found in ancient texts. Athenaeus calls them both by the same names in the *Deipnosophists*, his first century account of an ancient symposium.

Barley, the staple grain of the Minoans as well as of the ancient Greeks, appears on the Cretan table to this day, in the form of bread and rusks. Nowhere else in Greece is barley so common. *Paximathi*, Cretan bread par excellence, really nothing more than a rock-hard, twice-baked rusk, so prepared to facilitate its long keeping, is referred to in writing as early as the sixth century. Foreign travelers to the island in

the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries frequently described the same *paximathi*, often as the mainstay of their meals, taken together with olives and cheese, a custom as old as Minos himself. Until a generation ago, breakfast was often the same as it would have been in the Golden Age—barley rusks dipped in wine. And today, at least a dozen different kinds of rusks are sold in bakeries throughout the island.

The subject of bread in Crete could arguably support a whole book. Suffice it to say, however, that ancient rites crop up in uncanny ways. For example, one of the most enduring food customs is the ornate decoration of certain festive breads. We still find some topped with dough-sculpted trees, a motif that, according to local journalist and folklorist Nikos Psillakis, may hark back to the prehistoric worship of trees.

Among Crete's conquerors, the Byzantines had the greatest influence on the cuisine simply because they shared both language and religion with the locals, making whatever foodways they brought to the island acceptable. For example, the Byzantines had a penchant for salt-curing and drying meat. In Crete's mountain reaches—as well as in other parts of Greece, especially the Peloponnese and the Cyclades—one still encounters the *apochti*, salted, sun-dried meat made almost the same was as described in Byzantine Cretan poetry, comedy and drama. The

islanders preferred to salt-cure their beloved agrimi, and until a generation or two ago still did—perhaps with too much zeal, for the animal has all but disappeared. Now apochti, along with its cousin *apaki* (which is smoked) are for the most part made with pork.

Likewise, the Byzantine penchant for honey- or raisin-sweetened meats manifests itself in some unusual dishes. Raisins are added to sauces and rice stuffings throughout Greece. In Crete, though, one finds two singular dishes combining offal (innards) and raisins. The first, *tzoulama* (a Turkish name), is a pie filled with

ground meat, lightly-salted white cheese, and raisins. The other, *omaties*, crops up in different versions all over the country. Though its forbear was a kind of blood sausage, mentioned frequently in Byzantine literature, *omaties* in Crete today are made with rice, raisins, and liver or other offal and served at Christmas. The Byzantines also used honey as a marinade, especially for huge roasts, as of pork. In Crete I have found recipes that call for marinating meat in honey for days before roasting.

Crete remained under Byzantine rule—aside from a brief Arab peri-

od in the 10th century—until the 13th century, when it was captured by Genoese pirates and sold to the Venetians. They, in turn, lost the island to the Ottoman Turks in the 17th century, and the Turks kept control until the dawn of the 20th century. Now the island has been conquered by sun-worshipping tourists who come by hundreds of thousands each year. Tourism is by far the most significant force in the waning of old food traditions. The Cretan table, however, has largely remained invincible.

