

A CULINARY ODYSSEY

Limnos: Secrets Of The Land And Sea

The following excerpt is from Diane Kochilas's *The Glorious Foods of Greece, Region by Region* to be published by William Morrow, 2001.

The Land

The ride over the pebbles to the end of a beach near *Kaminia* in *Petros Honas' Skoda* was bumpy, to say the least. But this was a recipe reconnaissance mission, and Limnos' very able young winemaker had taken it upon himself to find the one thing that had so far eluded me on Vulcan's Island: the last stage in the making of *melipasto*, Limnos' sea-washed cheese.

I had been intrigued since first hearing of the cheese several years ago. Once on the island, I had chased after the process, running from cheesemaker to cheesemaker. I observed the beginning, when the curds are set, in Thanos, at the home of Kyria Foteini, who spends an intense month each summer making up to six kilos of cheese a day so that her large family will have enough to last the winter. Thanks to her, I got to taste *housmeri*, one of the island's oldest cheese dishes. Foteini took slightly fermented, day-old, unsalted cheese, crumbled it, mixed it with half a plate of crumbled bread and stirred it all in a pot for 20 minutes. The result was a delicious, if heavy, dish of melted cheese that was once a common winter snack. It tasted surprisingly like good-quality mozzarella.

Back to the elusive *melipasto*: I witnessed stage two at a home-grown facility in Karyolakas, near Kaspako. There the little rounds of *melipasto*—or *melichloro*, as it is also called—were sitting in *kafasia* (wooden makeshift cupboards hung on an outdoor post), where they would stay under sun but covered for about two weeks to mature. The washing is the last stage before *melipasto* is ready to eat.

We stopped short on the rocks. "Take your camera," Petro said. There she was, Kyria Astera, kerchiefed against the sun and wet from the knees down, bending into the sea. Brush in one hand, cheese in the other, one by one she scrubbed the disks of *melipasto* that were afloat in an orange crate wedged between some rocks. Others, already brushed with seawater, were drying on a towel. Watching her I realized I was seeing something which probably hadn't changed in thousands of years.

Indeed, much in the way of food on Limnos has remained surprisingly intact over the ages. Wine, for example, for which Limnos is well-known, is still fermented in huge *amphorae*. You can see them buried in the ground outside nearly every house. The local grape varieties are the Limnia, which Aristotle mentions and which is now also called by its Turkish name, *Kalabaka*, and the Muscat of Alexandria, which first came to the island in 1910, probably via the many Limniots who then lived in Egypt, and which now accounts for the majority of vineyards. Limnos' dessert wines, produced exclusively by the island's cooperative, are as famous and revered as those of not-too-distant Samos.

The island also produces excellent fava, black-eyed peas, and sesame seeds and oil in ever-dwindling supplies. Olives do not flourish here. But more than anything else on Limnos, what catches the eye and the palate is grain. The island is an endless, undulating, gentle slope of honey-blond wheat and barley that stretches to the horizon in every direction. "Oregano is the tallest tree here," says Honas with characteristic humor.

Limnos has always been the granary of the Aegean. From pre-historic times, cereal crops have

been seminal to the island's life. A huge grain storage area was unearthed at Poliochni, a settlement dating to 3000 BC, on the island's south-eastern coast, just across the sea from where Troy stood. Today, Limnos still contributes prominently to Greece's breadbasket, cultivating about 5,000 tons of wheat and barley annually. The wheat is an indigenous hard variety that produces some of the best, and most fragrant, flour in the country.

It stands to reason then that the island should have a formidable pasta tradition. The height of summer is the right time to watch the making of many traditional products, for even today home cooks still make their *flomaria*, the short and thin-as-string or flat-like-linguine local egg noodles. They are cooked the way egg noodles are cooked throughout Greece, with rooster and tomato sauce, or plain with butter and cheese. I did find one interesting recipe called *pseftopetino*, which calls for eggplants and their stems (said to resemble a rooster's chin, hence the name) cooked in tomato sauce together with the noodles.

Trahana is also a local tradition. According to local journalist Ilias Kotsalis, the quality of the wheat made Limnos' *trahana* famous since Byzantine times. Apparently it was a favorite with the sultans during the Turkish occupation, and mentioned by at least one 16th-century traveler to the island, Frenchman Pierre Belon. There are two local varieties. The first is made with a mixture of *kourkouta*, which is raw cracked wheat in island lingo (and not to be confused with bulgur, which is cracked, boiled wheat), semolina and milk. The second is a Lenten version, made with a combination of boiled chick peas, tomatoes, onions and flour. Both are used in soups and

pilafs. Unfortunately, I didn't get to sample halva made with *trahana*, a legacy of local Gypsies, and commonly called *Katsiveliko* (Gypsy in the local dialect.)

Fresh pasta is still made regularly, too. There are several different shapes: *aftoudia*, little squares that are pinched together to look like ears; *makarounes* or *valanes*, which look like little curls; and *moustokoulika*, which resemble miniature pretzels and are usually boiled in grape must. I learned to make the former from Eleftheria Konstantou, in Kaminia. "The dough has to be tight," she kept reminding me during a morning of cooking in her kitchen. As we rolled out thin logs and shaped them into curls along the tines of a fork, she imparted one memorable piece of advice. "These have to be just like sisters-in-law. They should never stick!"

As for other dishes made with grains, bulgur appears in several pilafs, most interestingly with octopus. Flour, of course, is used to make fillo, too, but here the *pitta* (savory pie) tradition is limited. What there is, though, is unique. For one, pies are almost always made either into individual small coils or coiled figure-eight shapes. Rarely, if ever, are they made to fit

a large pan, as they are in most of the rest of the country. Greens pies with wild fennel, mint, chervil, and chard abound, as do pies with the local cheese, scallions, and mint.

The Sea

Limnos is also known for some of the best fishing ground in the Aegean; its myriad coves and inlets provide ample seafood for the locals. Efrosini Ralli, a poet and all-around connoisseur of all things pertaining to Limnos, but especially all things marine (her husband was a sailor and sponge-diver) informed me of the long list of shelled and unshelled creatures that Limniots love. Among them: octopus (which adore the scent of local sea-washed cheese, *melipasto*, and reputedly comes a-calling when cheese is being washed); *ahivades* and *krasahivades* (golden carp-shelled clams, small and large respectively); pines (fan mussels), mussels, *Kalognomes* (Noah's Arks), *streidia* (oysters); *htenia* (scallops); *fouskes*; *kavouria* (crabs); *bebetsia* (tiny limpet-like shellfish); and *tsaganoi* (tiny lake crabs with a soft shell). Some are eaten raw with lemon, some are steamed, some served in pilafs. I was intrigued, too, by the prospect of finding a sun-dried lobster tail to grill, an old fisherman's specialty on Limnos, but no such luck. I did,

however, find what may be the most cherished sea creature of all (which turns out not to be a creature, but a plant), despite its being out of season—the rock-sucking anemone, called *kolifathes*.

With this my cook's tour of Limnos came to an end. In Eleftheria's kitchen I watched the process of blanching, mashing, and mixing the *kolifathes* with onions, cumin, mint, allspice, flour, and more to be readied for the skillet. It was close to noon, and here before us was a great wine meze. Petros came along with a bottle. I spent the rest of my stay enjoying the wine, the beaches, and those soothing, ubiquitous vistas of golden wheat swaying in every direction.

