

# A CULINARY ODYSSEY

## On the pepper trial in Macedonia

By Diane Kochilas

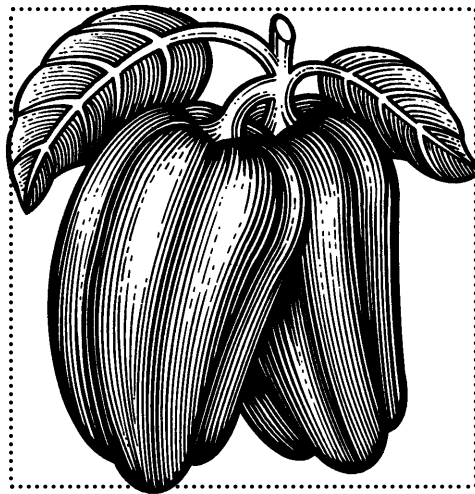
Peppers are to Macedonia what corn is to Kansas: an agricultural tradition central to every aspect of cooking; a crop that lends flavor to the local life itself. For people from all corners of northern Greece, the pepper is a leitmotif that seasons its way through this region's vast culinary legacy.

I visited Macedonia in late summer, when peppers flood both the fields and the markets. This is Greece's main pepper-producing region. (Crete wins first place for greenhouse peppers, but up here they're cultivated outdoors.)

Dozens of varieties are indigenous, and each claims its own special place in the kitchen. There is the small oblong pepper with four lobes on top, destined for stuffing; the "goat" pepper, *katsika*, a long, thin, usually green variety, meant for the frying pan; the slender, diabolically hot pepper favored among the diehard; the firm, short green peppers for pickling; the plump peppers, red and green, that are strung and dried for use in winter; the *plakites*, or Florini peppers—long, flat, sweet, and very bright red—that Greeks roast and serve as a meze with olive oil, garlic, parsley, and a touch of vinegar.

Finally, and historically the most important, are the peppers grown for spice. These are firm, medium-sized sweet and hot peppers, varieties native to the central Macedonian area called Aridea. This region is often still known as Karatzova, a name reminiscent of Ottoman rule, when it reigned second only to Hungary as the pepper center of the Balkans. *Piperi Karatzovas* was, in its heyday, akin to the best vanilla from Madagascar or saffron from

Spain, a product so identified with its place of origin that the two are nearly synonymous. Today the tale is different. I followed the Macedonian pepper trail to the epicenter of Aridea, a small village called Piperia—Pepper. There wasn't one pepper plant in sight. "Things have changed here in the last 15 years," Kostas Glaviakis, a local agronomist, told me. There used to be five thousand hectares (about 20,000 acres) of peppers grown here for spice, and five major pepper producers. Now only one farm devoted to peppers has survived, that of Stavros Karageorgiades.



I went to visit him and learned the process by which plant is turned into spice.

Once harvested—from the end of August through late September—the peppers are left outside to dry "like raisins", according to Mr. Karageorgiades. Then they are washed and dried in huge oven-like structures for about eight hours, beginning at a temperature of about 20° Celsius (68° F) and slowly rising to about 80° Celsius (176° F). If the heat rises too high, the peppers burn, destroying both their color and flavor. Once suffi-

ciently dried, the peppers are ground between two millstones, into either flakes or powder.

Mr. Karageorgiades turns to me with pride, masking as annoyance. "Look, look at my hands. They're slippery from all the oils. It doesn't even come off with soap," he says, showing me his orange-red palms. "This is the color I was talking about. No other variety is like this." He scoops up two handfuls of fresh red pepper, asking me to see the difference. The Aridea pepper was a rich, bright red, while the other pepper was noticeably darker, a kind of brick red.

It's not just color but aroma that sets the Aridea pepper apart. This small pocket of northern Greece is particularly conducive to pepper production because of its unique microclimate, explains Stelios Samaras, an agricultural scientist and pepper specialist at the Salonika School of Agriculture. The conditions make for spice peppers that are very thin-skinned, the better for drying and pulverizing. It takes four kilos (about nine pounds) of Aridea-grown peppers to make one kilo of spice; elsewhere in the region, even in towns just 20 kilometers away, the peppers are less intense, so that eight kilos are needed to get a kilo of spice. Yet, despite

the revered quality of Aridea pepper, farmers have turned away from it. Cheaper pepper, especially from Spain, makes it difficult for the Aridea spice to compete either internationally or domestically. The variety has also suffered at the hands of the farmers themselves. Peppers cross-breed very easily. Throughout most of Aridea's history, it was forbidden to grow sweet and hot peppers in the same village, let alone in the same field. This practice,

instituted by law, ensured the integrity of each variety. As the law became obsolete, however, farmers began cultivating both varieties together. Eventually, the sweet peppers began to have some bite, and the hot peppers to lose theirs. Natural crossbreeding had diluted the purity of each variety.

Another, more insidious, factor, has contributed to the loss of indigenous varieties, not only of peppers but of many vegetables and fruits throughout Greece: big agriculture. Trends in modern farming favor the cultivation of hybrids, which are more disease-resistant and yield more product per hectare of land. The result is that farmers become dependent on

companies to provide them with seed. Indigenous produce is lost to the interests of commerce.

According to Mr. Samaras, however, there is now talk of resurrecting some of the fruits and vegetables that have been the traditional “appellations” of Greece, among them the renowned Aridea pepper. But this is a long way off.

Red pepper as a spice—whether sweet, hot, or in the form of flakes known here as *boukovo*—remains an essential seasoning in the Macedonian kitchen, stirred into everything from roux-like sauces to bean soups to charcuterie.

Regarding my own pepper education, I consider myself among the lucky few to sample the real

thing at its source. As I was leaving the factory, Mr. Karageorgiades piled two bags of pepper powder, one sweet, one hot, into my arms. It was an offer I couldn’t refuse. After all, in Macedonia everywhere I went to sample local dishes I kept hearing the same refrain: At the end of each shared recipe, virtually every home cook would say, “Oh, and a little red pepper, of course.” In this vast and varied region, use of the deep-hued, aromatic spice is a given.

