

A CULINARY ODYSSEY

Mani, olive oil the foods of hardship

By Diane Kochilas

In my sojourn deep into the Peloponnese, I knew there wouldn't be much in the way of embellished tables from the Mani, a land whose hardship and poverty were, throughout most of its history, proverbial; so poor and isolated that even coffee and coffee shops were unknown in many villages until the end of the 19th century. But I wanted to breathe in the Mani, to see and feel for myself this place where the ancients believed lay the entrance to Hades—in a cave at the bottom tip near Cape Tenaron, where Hercules had brought up Cerberus. I wanted to thread my way around this bony middle finger of the Peloponnese, the southernmost tip of the Balkans.

The Mani has countless Byzantine churches, caves and mountains. I descended into its contradictory landscapes like most tourists, by driving southeast along the coast from Kalamata. It being the start of spring, my introduction was gentle. Poppy, daisies, chamomile and lavender carpeted the hillsides, giving the false impression that all of Mani's earth is plush and soft.

But the backdrop to everything--to sea and slopes and vegetation however colorful-- is unmistakably the olive tree. That is true, of course, for the rest of the Peloponnese as well. But here the trees are different. Long gone are the big, bushy trees with their Eucalyptus-sized leaves that give us Kalamata olives. The trees in Mani, host primarily to the small, slender Koroneiki variety of olive, are low and thin regardless of their age, nourished on pure rock. They

give Greece oil, some of the best in the world. And if there is anything you leave Mani with, besides the desire to return, it is the taste of that oil in your mouth.

Olive oil is rampant in the cuisine of the entire Peloponnese, but in the Mani it has been the sustainer of life. To this day it is everywhere. I had it raw, emulsified with lemon as a marinade for the tasty little olives themselves, and over toasted bread in a tourist taverna in Gytheion. I dipped into it in a typical Maniate dish of boiled horta topped with black-eyed peas at the home of Christos and Chryssa Koukoutsie in Doloi. "Go on, go on don't be afraid to pour the oil," implored my hosts. "Here, oil is more plentiful than water." I had it in the form of oil-fried---drenched, really---bread served with slices of the local brine cheese *sfela* and some of Mani's famous cured pork (also preserved in olive oil) as I whiled away the afternoon with an old-timer at the local cafeineion in Thalames. I crunched into it in the region's famed *lalangia*, the finger-thick, curled dough fritters (kneaded with olive oil, fried in olive oil) traditionally served at Christmas but now widely available, and served either hot with grated *sfela* or cold, like pretzels. I followed the trail of oil to the olive-wood-burning baker's oven in Areopolis that everyone all over the peninsula raves about, to sample the crisp bites of *paximathia* (rusks) made with the olive's thick green juice. I recorded it in the recipes for *anevata koulourakia* (floating biscuits), made with one water-glass of oil per kilo (2.2 pounds) of flour and so-called because you

test their readiness for the oven by first dropping one in a cup of water: if it floats it has been left to rise sufficiently). I had it in *kourambiedes* (shortbread cookies) and *melomakarona* (semolina and nut cookies) that melt in your mouth and in olive oil-fried *diples* (honey-dipped dough), the dessert of joy, compulsory at weddings.

Accompanying the oil are most of the supplementary foods that have always played a role in the southern Peloponnese's unique survival game. As I walked through the craggy olive groves in Saidona, my guide, Kostas Xydeas, pointed to a pinnacled flower in full bloom. "There, the grapes of Mani," he said, referring to the lupine. The little seeds have kept Maniates alive in times of severe duress. Nowadays, the lupine is used mostly as animal fodder, but it is still a standard snack during Easter season. The amber little nodules are marinated overnight in sea water, which gives them their flavor, then peeled and eaten as a snack. They are also dried and eaten like that other Greek snack of scarcity, roasted chick-peas. You can find the sea-washed version this time of year all over the markets of Kalamata.

Not everything here is tinged with the bitter seasoning of sheer survival, however. After olive oil, the most important, or at least the best-known, local product from Mani is cured pork either in the form of sausages (seasoned subtly with nutmeg and orange), or of *pasto*, also called *siglino*. Once butchered, the meat is salted for four to eight days; smoked for a few hours over thyme or sage;

boiled in water, oil and wine; and then spiced with oranges, oregano and pepper. This, finally, is stored in olive oil (as are the sausages) and savored the whole year round. *Pasto* is cooked with eggs, with rice on occasion, or served as an appetizer, sometimes with whole pieces of salty orange rind.

Game, too, figures largely in the Maniot diet. Until recent times it helped supplement an otherwise meager intake of protein. Small birds are the prize catch here—thrushes and partridges in winter and quail in August and

September. Usually, they are cooked lightly in oil then preserved in large clay vessels filled with oil. But the birds are economically as well as nutritionally vital, especially quail. In the Mani's far southeastern corner, Porto Kalio—literally, 'Port Quail'—was where the birds would rest en masse during their journey to Africa, and also where they were caught, preserved and sent to Athens and beyond.

Every few minutes on our journey out of the Mani, we were reminded of the importance of the

hunt, as the loud, flat thump of rifles in the woods echoed everywhere. It seemed a fitting end to our journey through this untamed place.

