

## **THE IDENTITY OF GREEK FOOD AND GREECE AS A CULINARY DESTINATION**

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In the first European Congress of Tourism and Gastronomy that took place in Madrid last year, Ferran Adria, the legendary chef of el Bulli, exclaimed that, in trying to promote a country as a culinary destination, "*it is very easy to do nothing*". This was of course an understatement of what he and other Spanish chefs have done to put Spain on the map. In the last 20 odd years, Adria and other chefs such as Arzak, Berasategui, Aduriz and Subijana reinvented and rejuvenated Spanish cuisine. The nueva cocina of the Spaniards was not however just a mere application of French nouvelle cuisine to Spanish food, but a revolutionary movement, with new principles, ideas and techniques, that introduced to the puzzled world molecular gastronomy and, more importantly, the local gastronomic idiom of Spain. Through the application of a new, and at times surrealist aesthetic, as well as a series of radically novel cooking techniques, the Spanish chefs showed to the throngs of culinary pilgrims flocking Costa Brava and San Sebastian the secret charms of Catalan or Basque cuisine, albeit in an unrecognized and totally deconstructed manner. Through nueva cocina the world transcended the national clichés of paella

and gazpacho and tasted culinary Spain in its most essential form, regional cuisine.

As a consequence, not only Spain outpaced France in culinary prowess at the highest level but became the number one culinary destination in Europe. The Spanish government, ex post facto of course, as is always the case with governments, expropriated this success and, through the director of the Spanish Board of Tourism, proclaimed triumphantly Spain's gastronomic glory, while recognizing that in addition to sun, sea and sex, tourists are attracted by good food. As he said: "Gastronomy is now one of the main reasons people travel. It is the thing people like best".

Before we Greeks rush to jump the bandwagon and make our contribution to the world of food and tourism, by adding a fourth S to the three Ss of tourism, namely souvlaki, there are a few lessons to be learned from Spain's success and I intend to discuss them, discursively of course, in this presentation.

The first issue relates to Greek identity and Greek food. To the Spaniards of course, there is no Spanish food except as it manifests itself in its regional form: Basque, Catalan, Galician, Aragonese, Andalucian, Asturian, and so on and so forth, covering all the so called patrias chicas, the small nations of Spain. To us Greeks, however, Greek food is quite recognizable, and in our day and age, it is definitely not regional, it is national. But what exactly is it?

The collective global conscience immediately and automatically responds by pointing to the ubiquitous moussaka, to the souvlaki full of juicy Greekness and, of course, to the tourist staple par excellence, Greek salad. Certain other things are added to the table, such as taramasalata, houmous, tzatziki, mezes in general, and for desert, baklava. If the collective global conscience were shown a dish of mixed vegetables, aubergine, zucchini, peppers, onions, garlic, olive oil and tomatoes, it immediately and automatically would exclaim that it is a ratatouille, as this dish from the Provence was glorified in the movie. To a Greek however it would be turlou or briam, a dish that epitomizes Greek cuisine. To a Spaniard of course it would be escalivada, to an Italian caponata and virtually every southern Mediterranean area would consider this dish, or a variation thereof, as part of its own culinary identity.

So how do we know Greek cuisine when we taste it? How can we distinguish it from other similar cuisines? To most Greeks, Greek cuisine is evocative of their homes, especially the cooking of their grandmothers who laboured day and night over stoves flooding the homes with odours familiar and much loved that comprise the collective gastronomic conscience of Greece: smells of mageiritsa, the egg lemon soup made of sheep entrails which is eaten during Easter, freshly baked melomakarona and kourabiedes, the traditional Christmas sweets, a variety of expertly made pies filled with aromatic herbs and goat cheese and covered with home made fyllo, perhaps strapatsada with syggliino, scrambled eggs with tomato and preserved pork, steaming fassolada or bean soup, and many other dishes that define Greek home food.

But where can the average tourist experience the sense of Greekness that defines Greek food in the mind of the average Greek? The average Greek, by the way, does not consider houmous a Greek dish. It is because Cypriots often run Greek restaurants abroad, that this Middle Eastern delicacy is identified with Greek food. So, the ubiquitous tourist traps, either in Plaka or in the islands, serve houmous as the quintessential Greek food. They also serve an array of dishes they think would appeal to tourist expectations, which are usually related to the Levante, such as sish kebab, and of course the dish that is considered the national emblem of Greek cuisine, moussaka.

Before I turn to moussaka, its provenance and its role in defining Greek culinary identity, I must say that there is nothing wrong with offering to the tourists all the clichè dishes they are expecting. In equal measure, tourists in Spain occasionally expect and are served gazpacho and paella, in Italy pizza and pasta, and in France onion soup and snails Bourguignon. The difference is that in Greece, unlike Spain or France, it is very rare for a tourist to have Greek salad or moussaka worthy of their reputation. Also, by contrast to Spain and France, it is very rare, nay almost impossible, for anyone, including the Greeks, to taste regional cuisine.

Tourists in Greece mostly consume the image of Greek cuisine rather than its true taste. The food of the average tourist in Greece is the poor quality platonic shadow of an ideal, cooked with the shoddiest and stalest materials. The feta cheese crowning the

Greek salad, as white and Greek as the Parthenon, resembles in taste and texture more the plaster with which the ancient temple was built than this quintessential Balkan white cheese made with sheep's milk. The wine they drink, notably retsina, renders the senses of the gullible tourists senseless with the vapours of turpentine. The acidic A.A. Gill, restaurant critic of the London Times, justifiably vilifies Greek cuisine: "*Greek cuisine is unremittingly ghastly*", says Gill, "*Greek food is best eaten drunk, but even that they don't make easy*". Gill's words must be taken of course with a grain of salt, yet there is a whiff of truth in what he says and its resonance must be felt in all quarters of the tourist industry in Greece: that it is not enough for Greek cuisine to look the part, it is essential that it tastes good. And its taste is not a function of its image but primarily of the quality of the ingredients and the expertise of the chef. Not all yogurts smelling garlic make a good tzatziki, and not all yellow liquids smelling resin are good retsinas. And I may hasten to add that not anymore all Greek wine is retsina.

The same of course applies to moussaka. In the case of moussaka however, there is something more. First of all, it is not Greek, at least as far as its provenance is concerned. And, second, its predominance and ubiquity in all tavernas and restaurants serving Greek food masks the variety and gastronomic interest of Greek cuisine, which is best expressed in its regional or local format.

As far as provenance is concerned, Alan Davidson in his Oxford Companion to Food claims that moussaka is found

amongst the Turks and the Arabs whilst it is popular throughout the Balkans. The word comes from *"the arabic mussaqua which means 'moistened', referring to the tomato juices... The dish"* Davidson continues *"is not however of Arab origin and it seems certain that the name was coined in Turkey"*. The food historian Clifford A. Wright in his celebrated book "A Mediterranean Feast", on the other hand, claims that: *"No one knows what the origin of Moussaka is... It seems likely that the Greek moussaka has Arab origins and may be related to the Palestinian musakhkhan. Greeks believe that mousaka was introduced when the Arabs brought the eggplant, although Arabs, especially in Lebanon, think of it as a Greek dish"*.

And that is exactly what matters: what people think, not the historical or etymological roots of the dish. And despite the fact that almost nothing in the Greek moussaka is Greek (the burnt béchamel topping is, according to some, introduced by the Francophile chef Tselementes in the beginning of the 20th century, and according to others, by the Bavarian court of Otto, the king of Greece, in the beginning of the 19th century) it is widely considered as a Greek dish, the food that epitomizes the essence of Greek cuisine. And this is what counts in the final analysis, what people think. And most people, including and especially the Greeks, think that it stems from the depths of Greek Hellenistic and Byzantine antiquity. Yet, the same people who think moussaka is Greek also think that Greek moussaka is awful, greasy and heavy. The way moussaka is served in most tourist traps defines not only our national cuisine in the eyes of tourists but also its quality: greasy Greek... If they had tasted the

moussaka I have tasted in a taverna in Santorini, made with the indigenous white eggplants, with fresh tomatoes and topped with a light and tremblingly delicate cream, they would have a completely different idea about Greek cuisine. And if they had drunk the superb and bottled assyrtiko of Santorini they would have forgotten the traumatic hangovers of unbottled retsina. A.A. Gill would have a different idea of what Greek food is and, given the recent wine revolution in Greece, he would have found it very easy to get drunk...

There is something else in moussaka that presents a paradox. Whilst every tourist comes to Greece with the expectation of tasting moussaka, a dish that does not epitomize healthy eating (red meat, cream and vegetables swimming in fried oil) the Greek authorities, always trying to sell Greece as the center of the healthy Mediterranean diet, promote the ideal of a cuisine free of meat, full of the natural juices of the Greek summer fruits, the goodness of sun drenched vegetables, the fish packed with Omega-3 and the good-for-you pulses.

This they call the Cretan diet, after Ancel Keys in the 40s and 50s made the cucina povera of Crete famous as the panacea for a long life, and they promote it as quintessentially Greek. Nowadays of course Crete suffers from obesity and heart disease as much as the rest of Greece. But this is another story. The story that is interesting to us is that this distorted image of Cretan food masks the true nature of the cuisine of this perhaps the most gourmet island of Greece, and it obliterates the most interesting part of Greek food, which is its regional variety. It is worth noting

that most of Cretan cuisine revolves around aromatic herbs, pork and goat meat, olive oil but also around a host of fatty dairy products, while there is very little fish appearing in the traditional recipes of the island. It also masks the fact that these traditional recipes stem from a very complex history of conquests, migratory movements, population changes, and more importantly, they are a function of an equally complex terroir that defines regional variety. They cook one way in Chania and another in Rethymnon or Herakleion. The people in the latter are surprised by the chaniotiki tourta, which is a medieval, probably Venetian, timpalo filled with cooked goat's meat, full fat dairy products and aromatic herbs. The people in the former do not understand why the other Cretans do not know how to cook staka, the cream of the butter made with goat's milk. And of course the tourists that visit the island in the summer have no clue whatsoever of the regional variety of Cretan cuisine. They are always served the Cretan diet, that is fish, souvlaki, and moussaka. They are also served unbottled retsina, and thus also have no clue of the wine revolution that has taken place in Crete in the last ten years, where wine producers are exploring the rich possibilities possibilities of the amazing terroir of Crete and are rediscovering interesting local varieties.

The tourists in Greece, therefore, neither are they able to eat the Greek food that Greeks consider as Greek, as this is inaccessible to them, nor do they have the chance to taste the variety of regional cuisine as most restaurateurs in tourist places cater to the greasy Greek clichés that haunt the global conscience. So what do the Greek authorities do in order to promote Greece as

a culinary destination? With great consistency, they turn to the Mediterranean diet as the pole of gastronomic attraction. Despite the fact that SETE, the association of Greek Tourist Business, in its study of gastronomy in the marketing of tourism, has clearly criticized the lack of a regional gastronomic conscience, especially in the popular tourist resorts, and the need to promote good quality regional food as part of the Greek brand, the government persists in promoting an image of a healthy, sun drenched, olive oil, feta cheese view of Greek gastronomy. Nothing is mentioned of the mountainous, buttery, meaty, foggy, piquant and fatty cuisines of the northern and north western parts of Greece, of the tzigerosarmades of Thrace, a sort of haggis, i.e. chopped sheep intestines and entrails covered in delicious bolia, i.e. the crepine, or the caul that layers the animal's stomach; nothing is mentioned of boubaria the andouillettes of Thessaly, the antikrysta of Anogia, the sheeps cooked on vertical spits on the rugged mountains of Crete; nothing of the buttered drenched meat or cheese pies of Epirus, the stuffed with rice lambs served during Easter in the Cyclades; nothing of their dairy and their many pork products, the kopanisti and the louza of Mykonos. It is this rich, regional variety, in all of its unhealthy yet gastronomically exciting forms, that should constitute the true pole of attraction, the one that would make Greece a culinary destination; not a one dimension, gastronomically boring, and in reality, unreal, healthy Mediterranean food.

Professor Antonia Trichopoulou, a long time champion of the Mediterranean diet, was asked recently: Is the Mediterranean diet a powerful brand name for Greece? And her answer was: "*It is and*

*it isn't. It belongs to no one and to all the people of the Mediterranean, as they used to eat in the 60s. And exactly because it belongs to so many, one cannot use it as a brand name and invest money in it. What is of great importance is to define what is traditional".*

Unfortunately, not only we have not defined what traditional or regional cuisine is in Greece, but also we have, the public and the private sector, ignored it. A very few exceptions, notably, that of Giorgos Hatzigiannakis and his effort to explore the foods and traditions of Santorini, or of Diana Kochila, who literally wrote the book on Greek regional cuisine, Aglaia Kremezi and Evi Voutsina are worth mentioning here. Yet, regional constitutes the essence of Greek cuisine and this ought to have been the launch pad of any campaign to brand Greece as a culinary destination.

There is a last point and it comes, not only from Spain, but also from Denmark. Spain's nueva cocina has put Spain, as we said, on the map as a culinary destination. More recently, an unknown Danish chef, in a completely unknown restaurant in Copenhagen, a city renowned more for its mermaid, herrings and smorrebrod than its haute cuisine, put Denmark on the map as a culinary destination. His name is Rene Retzepi and the name of the restaurant, "Noma". Last year "Noma" was voted best restaurant in the world, and since then gastronomic pilgrims flock to the country in search of Nordic food (which is what Noma means). Retzepi has done nothing else but to search the terroir of his country and discover old foods, forgotten ingredients, ancient techniques and recipes and recreate them in his now celebrated

restaurant. This was not only of interest to the Danes in search of their culinary identity, but to the world as a whole. Exactly because Nordic cuisine, in its glorious variety and depth was so well represented by this extraordinary chef that it transcended its local boundaries to become a world cuisine.

In Greece, there is a movement, especially among young chefs, called New Greek Cuisine. Their restaurants hardly feature in any tourist guide and rarely if ever, are they visited by the average tourist in Greece. Yet, this is where the essence of Greek cuisine is cooked. It may be deconstructed, or covered by foams and jellies, yet its basis is unmistakably Greek. They are the ones that search to find the holly grail of Greek identity in our food. And, who knows, one among them, in the fullness of time and despite the distorted attempts of the Greek government, will be the one who, like Adria for Spain and Retzepi for Denmark, will make Greece a culinary destination.