

Food for Thought:

The Greek Cook Book in North America

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If there is any one stereotype that is unquestionably associated with Greeks in North America it is one having to do with cooking. In American popular culture there is a direct link between Greeks and pushcarts, diners, cafes, and the food business in general. Many Greek American seniors report that the term of derision thrown at them while they were growing up was "greasy spoon Greek."

The ubiquity of Greek festivals across America has perhaps reinforced this stereotype. Yet, despite all the association between Greek Americans and food there is no formalized history of traditional Greek cooking in North America.

The first Greek recipes were brought to North America by the pioneer immigrants. In 1855, a New York Times reporter wrote that when he needed to write about the Greeks of New Orleans, all he had to do was visit a Greek-owned restaurant, where they gathered. One such gathering place at the time was the Peloponnesus Restaurant, one of the first Greek-owned businesses in New York City, established in 1857. Greek Americans know however, that Greek cooking has changed considerably since those early days of Greek immigration.

Tselementes

One trademark of this transition, present in every Greek American home, was "Greek Cookery" by Nicholas Tselementes, a cookbook published in English by the D.C. Divry Press between 1950 and 1967. Tselementes

Greek-American history. It is during this period of the fabled Greek chef's life, that the English edition of "Greek Cookery" (New York: D.C. Divry, 1950) met with wide circulation. In recent years, Tselementes' recipes and approach to Greek cooking have been challenged. For those who know his legacy well though, such contemporary objections seem more dated than Tselementes' recipes.

As a Greek-American child, I spent much time in kitchens where Greek women gathered. I clearly recall seeing those Greek ladies flipping through their copies of Tselementes' cookbook. Heated discussions and long dissertations over its recipes were commonplace. Many women had alternative recipes and ingredients written in pencil on their copies. Others had slips of paper or index cards with their totally different recipes inserted between the book's pages. Regional variations of Tselementes' recipes, inspired by an individual housewife's family traditions and the sheer inventive nature of Greek women with access to America's cooking ingredients, soon helped Greek American housewives leave the book behind them. But its importance is universally recognized to this day.

The Recipe Club

With the arrival of the Hellenic Festivals in the 1960s came the appearance of the Hellenic Cookbooks. But how these volumes came about, who compiled them first, and how accurately they depict traditional Greek cookery remains a mystery.

Having said that, the case can be made that the first Greek cook-

was a Greek chef, who hailed from the island of Sifnos and had been trained in Europe. His lasting claim to fame is that, according to the Washington Post, he wrote "the first comprehensive cookbook in modern Greek. Published in 1910, it became an important resource for fashionable Greek women and sold more than 100,000 copies in 10 editions by the time Tselementes died in 1958." (www.washingtonpost.com)

It was during his tenure at the St. Moritz Hotel in New York City, on 50 Central Park South and Sixth Avenue that Tselementes enters

book aimed for the modern housewife based in North America was produced in the late 1950s by members of the St. Paul Greek Orthodox Church parish in Hempstead, Long Island.

At the time the Church's congregation had just moved from a smaller location to 110 Cathedral Avenue, where they remain until today. As part of the effort to raise monies for a new facility, a "Mr. and Mrs. Club" was formed by the parish members. One of the Club's initial projects was to establish a

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committee that would compile a traditional Greek cookbook in English to help raise the funds. Also known as "The Recipe Club of St. Paul Greek Orthodox Church," the committee included sixteen women: Mrs. George Arapakis, Mrs. Tom Barbatsuly, Mrs. George Calfo, Mrs. Theodore Carnavos, Mrs. Peter Carpou, Mrs. James Cidis, Mrs. William Djinis, Mrs. George Hayes, Mrs. James Kollar, Mrs. Christ Lourekas, Mrs. Charles Maravel, Mrs. George Papadeas+, Mrs. James Pappas, Mrs. Michael Poulos, Mrs. James Skeados, and Mrs. Lee Vlahakis.

From that initial group, Arapakis, Calfo, Carnavos, Carpou, Djinis, Kollar, Maravel and Poulos moved away from the community, and were replaced by new members by 1965.

As in all things Greek, these women had a mission: to write a cookbook for their children. However, they were aware that it might fall into the heads of some non-Greek cooks. So they tested their recipes again and again in order to compile a collection that would best represent Greek cuisine. In 1959, the Recipe Club raised money to pay for the publication of a soft cover volume entitled "The Grecian Gourmet."

Market-Savvy Businesswomen

The committee's women were - apart from good cooks- especially market-savvy businesswomen. The Recipe Club made sure a copy of their self-funded book reached the desk of Craig Claybourn, the well-known New York Times food critic. Claybourn raved about the book in an extended review, which proved pivotal for the immediate response to its publication as well as to its future. The book became an instant hit.

Around that time, fate smiled at the Recipe Club and their culinary art. Doubleday and Company was issuing a series of cookbooks under the collective title format, "The Art of Italian Cooking," "The Art of German Cooking" etc. The famous food writer that Doubleday approached to write a book about Greek cooking with a similar title had just read the Claybourn review and suggested to his editor, to con-

tact the committee's Greek women. As a result, the volume "The Art of Greek Cookery" -published by Doubleday in 1961- credited The Recipe Club of St. Paul. The book was distributed nationally.

Test and Simplify

The ladies involved in this project were serious about their work. They took the time and trouble to test and simplify the book's recipes: they cooked the recipes themselves and offered their insights, as well as variations of each recipe; while they also included in the recipes a list of ingredients and accurate measurements of their proportions.

This process required that the younger women had to watch the

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the sales has been
donated to
St. Paul Cathedral]

older women, who knew how to cook without measuring, and make the calculations. The ladies also promoted the volume.

After the success of "The Art of Greek Cookery," Doubleday wanted the Recipe Club to write a follow-up. The women agreed, but decided to revise the Club's membership, which was still a closed organization, and include several new women: Katherine Boulukos, Lydia Barris, Nina Bendo, Carol Efthimiou, Dede Hirsch, Helen Milukas, Mary Mormanis, Athena Philippides, Polidora Prieston, Maria Prois, and Epiphany Touris. The new group published "The Regional Cuisines of Greece" (New York: Doubleday/hardcover) in 1981. The book, which did well in sales, was aimed at going "beyond Chicken kapama to chicken breasts wrapped in phyllo." Soon afterwards however, Doubleday's management decided to get out of the ethnic cookbook business.

Microwave Ovens and Blenders

The hard-to-deter Recipe Committee found a new publisher, Harper Collins. At this stage, the committee selected recipes from the previous books and once again collectively tested and simplified them. This effort resulted in "The

Complete Book of Greek Cooking" (New York: Harper Collins, 1990). The book is the most updated volume produced by The Recipe Club of St. Paul's Cathedral. These recipes were tested and simplified with the help of microwave ovens and blenders. Its authors also incorporated recipes that reflected the modern American notions of healthy diet, and the media hype over the Mediterranean Diet and the importance of such traditional Greek ingredients as olive oil and phyllo dough.

Rightly Proud

The volume has since moved from hardcover to paperback and garnered steadily good sales along the way. It must be noted that this latest volume is not dedicated strictly to food. Various menus are included, as well as a glossary of food terms and wines. Greek traditions, calendar events, and other customs are prominently featured as well.

Individual members of The Recipe Club have never received reimbursement for their work. Over \$400,000 generated from the sales of their books has been donated to the St. Paul Cathedral. The Recipe Club is rightly proud of the fact that notable material and artistic improvements to the Cathedral are attributed to the success of their books. Donations have gone to St. Paul's stunning mosaics and their outstanding parish organ.

This success story has won the attention of other Greek communities, which have sought out the Recipe Club in order to learn how to go about compiling a Greek cookbook. Members of the Club have promoted their books in department stores and food shows, letting Americans know that there is more to Greek food than baklava and salad with feta cheese sprinkled on top.

Historians have yet to determine which of the Greek churches in North America first issued an English language cookbook presenting traditional Greek cookery. Regardless of their ultimate conclusions, it will always be the case that the Recipe Club of the St. Paul Greek Orthodox Church parish has through its long series of publications, served their community with distinction, honor and unyielding faith.