

Kariókes from Thessaloniki

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If going down Aristotélous Street, late in the afternoon, and buying a delicious-smelling and spicy *gyro* on pita bread and then going for walks up and down the waterfront, and seeing the sun setting at the sea, and the sky rose-colored, and all that with your boyfriend—and not with your father, and your mother, and your younger brother—if all that is a uniquely Thessalonikan experience, then I encountered it for the first time when I was 23. Then, in 1981 that is, Mark came to Greece for the first time. And I was put in charge of his initiation in the history and gastronomy of Thessaloniki. I and my family, all native Thessalonikans, proud know-it-all inhabitants of our city.

Now, you might be wondering: OK, I could initiate Mark in the secrets of the History of Art and Architecture, since that’s what I was studying abroad. But how could the poor guy learn about local cuisine at our house? My mother, as she was the first one to admit, was not a great “friend of the kitchen.” She cooked simple meals: fava bean soup; rice in thick tomato sauce; fried eggs in tomato sauce; fresh, steamed sardines with a squirt of lemon; or chicken cooked in the pressure cooker. Simple and healthy fare. And sometimes on holidays, she might also prepare fried Greek meatballs with French fries, thinly-sliced fried zucchini, served with the garlic-and-yoghurt dip called *tzatzíki*, and with the garlic-and-eggplant dip called *melitzanosaláta*. (Except that she steamed the eggplants in the pressure cooker, as opposed to roasting them in the oven first, as most self-respecting Greek mothers are supposed to do.) The specialties from her own family’s side, who hailed from the Cappadocia region of present-day Turkey, she would not even imagine serving to a guest from another country. For example: yoghurt sprinkled with salt and pepper; pickled vegetables; or *pastourmá*, that is, cured meats encased in a punishingly spicy garlic and coriander paste.

After all, in each marriage, only one of the cuisines prevails. In our case, how could the flavors from the deep hinterland of Cappadocia, the flavors of the rural Karamanli people, compete with the refined cuisine of cosmopolitan Smyrna, my father’s place of origin, a thriving commercial port on Turkey’s Aegean coast?

That is, how could my mother’s cooking compete with the cooking of Aunt Fofó, my father’s older sister, who was, in fact, born in Smyrna herself? First of all, when it came to Aunt Fofó, even if she just made you fried eggs, you would never forget them. What with the reception to her house, the kiss on each cheek, the white, crisply-ironed tablecloth, the crystal water pitcher, the crystal vase full of flowers, the white linen napkins and the large family—sons, daughters-in-law, grand-daughters all around, helping, shouting, explaining, serving, all looked like a scene from the Greek novel *Loxánda* or from the movie *A Touch of Spice*. Only here, instead of the cuisine of Constantinople, we were being initiated into the tastes of Smyrna: the dainty, individually-wrapped, triangular cheese-pies made of phyllo that melt in your mouth; the huge and light mussels, fried in batter; the rice with cuttlefish, cooked in its own ink; the golden brown, oven-roasted pork; the little dessert “birds’ nests,” also made of phyllo, filled with a sweet walnut-and-cinnamon filling. How on earth could Mark ever forget such dinners, so much attention!

“Yes, but life is not only about eating”, my father would insist later on, since he, maybe because he was born in Thessaloniki, and not in Smyrna, had adopted puritan ethics and considered the meals at his sister’s Fofó’s house excessive.

“Take Mark around in Thessaloniki,” my father would urge me. “Our city is full of important sites: there is the Ancient Agora; there is the Arch, or rather, the Arc of Galerius; there is St. Demetrius church, in our own neighborhood; the Lady of the Coppersmiths and the picturesque copper workshops and shops in the same area; there is the Church of *Acheiropoítos*, which means, “not-made-by-hand”, named after an icon found on that site; there is the White Tower that used to be a prison in the past; there are the Byzantine Walls in the Old Upper Town, where they also housed a prison earlier; and, of course, the church of Holy David, (to which I don’t exactly remember how you go, but ask anyone and he’ll tell you); and there is the Old Upper Town itself, with its traditional small, single-family houses, while the rest of the city has been filled, of course, with apartment buildings. So much to see . . . Take him around and show him the city. And on the way back, why don’t you get a *gyro* for him to try.”

To understand the earth-shaking significance of this suggestion, suffice it to say that I never, ever remember us buying a *gyro*-to-go.

“Who knows what kinds of meat they put in it?” my father would announce as we walked by the popular *gyro* restaurants on Egnatia or Aristotelous Streets. Their vertical spits laden with *gyro* –layers of seasoned pork and fat—turned slowly, the pungent, spicy smell of roasted meat overtaking the side-walk. “And such a heavy meal, it’s not good for your stomach. Add to that the fact that it’s not proper to eat on the street, with everyone else watching you, oil and spices smeared around your mouth, dripping on your clothes.”

But suddenly, with Mark’s arrival, we forgot all the sanitary suspicions and began to live like the locals. And Mark, being Italian-American, easily became a naturalized Greek in the eyes of my family, and joined the game of discovering local tastes with gusto.

When my brother and I were young, even the individual cheese-pies and spinach-pies, mouth-watering delicacies in the window of every corner bakery and pastry shop, we only saw from a distance.

“They don’t put real feta cheese in them,” my father would declare pre-emptively, as we passed still another bakery. “Who knows what kind of *mizíthra*, (soft cheese) they use?”

Of course, I didn’t even know what *mizíthra* cheese was, since at home we only had white, feta cheese and soft cheddar cheese. But how could I possibly go against my dad and shake the boat of family serenity? Kids grow up fine even without store-bought cheese pies, especially children in distant countries, like Bangladesh, for example.

Once in a while, my mother would make small cheese pies that looked a little like empanadas, only hers had a crumblier dough made with yoghurt. But she made at least five dozen, “so as not to turn the oven on for nothing,” as she would say, and we would be eating them for at least two weeks. I would sit out in the balcony, always with a book in hand, looking at the old mosque across from our apartment building (we lived above Kassandrou Street), eating my mother’s cheese pies and day-dreaming.

No matter how tasty and melt-in-your-mouth her cheese pies were, I fantasized what it must be like to be a grown up, say a junior in high school, and walk down to the church of Haghia Sophia, a common meeting spot, by yourself, on your way to the evening cram school. And then to choose by yourself the bakery from which you would like to buy a cheese pie or a spinach pie made with puff-pastry, as the store-bought ones were. And in addition, to choose, if you’d like, to buy also a lemon soda, without having to ask anyone for permission and without having to explain to anyone when you got home later why you don’t want to eat anything else that evening.

And so, Mark and I began buying cheese pies and spinach pies both from the anonymous corner shops and from the famous ones, like the Terkenlis pastry shop on Tsimiski Street, where, of course, you need to show up before noon, if you want to have one before they sell out. But we didn’t tell my mother, so that she wouldn’t think that we didn’t like the simple meal of pasta or string beans in tomato-and-onion sauce that was waiting for us at home.

When I went to America to study, I started meeting Greek fellow university students who were, for the most part, from Athens. And when they would find out that I came from

Thessaloniki, which they could probably guess by the way I pronounce the letter “el”, they answered in that well-known tone of superiority:

“Ah, we like Thessaloniki. It has picturesque little taverns, and good food.”

And I would shake my head and gaze in the distance, as if I were day-dreaming of evenings spent at some taverna up by the Byzantine Walls, without revealing to them, of course, that never but never had my father taken us out to a restaurant.

“Why do people go out to eat?” he would ask rhetorically. “So that everyone else knows what you ordered and can see you eating? Why wouldn’t I stay home to eat my simple meal that I know what it’s made of, that has pure ingredients and is also more tasty and cheaper?”

But even that rule went by the wayside when Mark arrived in Thessaloniki. We all went out, as a family, to eat *peinirli* at “Andrea’s,” that’s how, I think, the place was called, near the Arc of Galerius: my father, my mother, my brother, Mark and I. And already we had heard the praise for *peinirli*: simple and pure bread dough, fluffy and light, shaped in the form of a small boat, with a tasty filling inside—melted soft cheddar cheese and butter was the basic filling, with cured ham being extra. Beautiful evening, many people milling around the square -- young people, university students, other families -- and the Roman arc well lit. Super tasty the *peinirli* was, too, which is, in fact, a Turkish delicacy. “*Peinirli*” means “with cheese,” my mother explained to us. She knew Turkish, because when she was young, they spoke Turkish at home in Kavala, where she grew up. Her grandmother, who had come from Gelveri (in Turkey) with the exchange of minority populations between Greece and Turkey, had refused to learn Greek.

And as we all know, to be from Thessaloniki also means that you go for walks by the waterfront at sunset holding a small plastic container filled with *loukoumádes* that are sold by the numerous canteens that park around the White Tower. *Loukoumádes* are small fried dough balls, dripping with syrup, sprinkled with finely chopped walnuts. They are served with a mini Greek flag glued on a toothpick, stuck on one of them. And I never know what to do with this little flag once I’m done with the *loukoumádes*, because you are not, of course, allowed to throw the Greek flag in the garbage.

So, eating *loukoumádes* and *peinirli* might be all fine and dandy, but if you want to show off that you are a modern woman from Thessaloniki, then you also have to know the famous store-bought sweets of the city that are prepared in the known pastry shops. Like the “triangles of Panorama” (puff-pastry cones, dipped in syrup and filled with pastry cream) and the *kariókes* from the Hadjifotiou Pastry Shop behind the church of Haghia Sophia. At home, we only knew the “triangles from Panorama” by name. As for the *kariókes*, we never, ever bought them, because my parents thought they were of questionable quality. And that is because my grandfather, my mother’s father, who used to have a pastry shop, among other businesses, insisted that bakers use up any old cake filling they have left over from the day before to make the *kariókes*. And I believed it. Until I tried a *karióka* from Hadjifotiou for the first time. Then I was converted. And it was not only because of the taste of the sweet filling or the taste of cake with walnuts; it was also the thin layer of dark chocolate that encased it that conquered me from the first bite.

And after that, I strayed from the road of the homemade food and joined the ranks of the bourgeoisie, which means that when I go to visit relatives or friends I now bring along store-bought *kariókes* and not home-made candied orange in syrup, as my mother did. And little by little, my repertory of tastes of Thessaloniki grew. Along with the home-made tastes brought by my family from Asia Minor, I was now introduced to store-bought tastes that you come across in the restaurants and pastry shops, tastes that distinguish Thessaloniki in the eyes of the Athenians who know it all.

And so, when we went to Istanbul in the summer of 2005, to visit our friend Tuna (wife of a historian colleague) and her parents, I brought them “*kariókes* from Hadjifotiou.” The excuse for the trip was that I did – and still do—research for a book on the Asia Minor Catastrophe and population exchange between Greece and Turkey that happened in 1922--23. I wanted to meet

with people in Turkey who hailed from Greece and to ask them how they remembered the lands they had lost.

A university professor and a historian by now, I had exhausted all there was to know about Greece, ancient and modern, Greekness, Greek tradition, etc and I had started to wonder what it means to be from a particular place. For example, when I say that I am from Thessaloniki, but that my origins are from Smyrna, what exactly do I mean? Which city, I wonder, follows me, as the poet Cavafy would have said? I might declare that I come “from Thessaloniki,” but so does my friend Tuna (whose name means “Danube”). Even though she was born in Istanbul, she hails from Thessaloniki, since both of her parents were born in Thessaloniki. They were still babies when they left for Turkey with their families, around 1912—13, when conditions for them—Turkish Donmes—were becoming difficult.

So, Tuna’s parents invited us to go to their house in Tuzla, a sea-side suburb of Istanbul, to meet them and to discuss Thessaloniki with her father. It was close to mid-day when we arrived at their house, a simple summer home with a large garden. Her father, an educated, university professor, now pensioner, of course, welcomes us in English and we begin our conversation. I wonder what they said about Thessaloniki in his family and how he might think of Thessaloniki. He tells me that above all he is a Thessalonikan. And so, in the midst of his reminiscences and various comments, the photographs and the books he shows us, in the midst of phrases he passes in silence, I begin to understand how here, far away from Thessaloniki itself lives another Thessaloniki, inside his heart. A Thessaloniki that is unknown to me and that I wish to approach.

In the main room, Tuna’s mother has prepared a meal for us. On a large, round table, covered with a white tablecloth, she has served a variety of summer dishes: fresh string beans; pilaf; zucchini stuffed with rice; oblong meat-balls; tomato salad mixed with white boiled beans. Fresh tastes, light ones, similar to ours, but not exactly the same.

“These are recipes from Thessaloniki. Recipes from my mother,” she says simply.

And then, she brings the box of *kariókes*, unties the ribbon, opens the box, and offers us each one.

“They are from Thessaloniki,” she says with a smile, and takes one.

She opens the silver foil carefully, tastes the *karióka* slowly and smiles, as if she were tasting Thessaloniki itself.