

GREEK GASTRONOMY

Great Lent: The Greek Orthodox Tradition of Fasting Cleanses Both Body and Soul

By Georgia Kofinas

Special to The National Herald

ATHENS - When I recently asked my elderly uncle in Athens how they celebrated "Kathara Deftera" (Pure, or Clean Monday) in the village in the early 1920's, he told me that it was the day set aside for washing all the pots, pans and various utensils with soap and ash water to "purify" them from their use in cooking meat and dairy products. For the next six weeks, kitchen activities would be limited to preparing the frugal, yet nutritious Lenten meals to be shared by all the family members, young and old alike.

After the Second World War and the Depression, as Greece became more affluent and its inhabitants moved into the cities, the traditional Lenten dishes were seen as the "poor man's food" and were readily removed from the repertoire of the urban kitchen. It was not until my co-author and I started gathering recipes for our Lenten cookbook, "The Festive Fast," that we were able to find some of those long-forgotten recipes that had been stashed away in the memories of the older generations of family cooks. With the current trend of eating less meat and animal fat and more vegetables, fruit and olive oil, traditional Greek Lenten cuisine has recaptured its spot alongside many of today's healthy diets.

FASTING AS DEFINED BY THE CHURCH

Fasting, however, is not just a way of detoxifying our bodies and eating healthier foods. In the dictionary, fasting is defined as "abstinence from or reduction in the intake of certain foods", but there is much more to it than just that. The religious practice of fasting in the Orthodox Church is a way of life, not merely something someone does periodically. Another explanation of fasting comes from a very well known 4th century church father, St. John Chrysostom who gives us the medicinal aspect of fasting while supporting the Orthodox belief that the body and soul are inseparable. He refers to fasting as the "mother of bodily health", and says, "If you do not believe me, then ask the doctors about this and they will tell you better." He then goes on to say, "Pains of the legs and headache and apoplexy and tuberculosis and water retention and inflammations and abscesses and many other countless illnesses come from luxurious diets and over-eating. When the body becomes sluggish and weak, the soul undergoes damage as well. This is because the activities of the soul are determined by the conditions of the body." Chrysostom, which means "golden mouth" in Greek, was considered so because he had a sharp tongue and was to the point when he preached. He spared no one. Directing himself to women, he said: "Why do you destroy bodily vitality with fatty greasy foods? When you inflict your body with various illnesses, neither will you have a blossoming complexion nor will your health be in good condition and you will continuously be bent over with sluggishness and depression."

The way we fast in the Orthodox Church is carried over from the Jewish ascetic tradition where meat symbolizes feast and

celebration. In the eastern ascetic tradition, meat is associated with the arousal of passion and is thus abstained from during times of fasting. It also stems from the pagan practice of slaughtering an animal for sacrificial purposes. Thus, in many monasteries, there is no consumption of meat at all, even when not fasting. Fasting also entails abstinence from fish and dairy products although there are some fasting periods, such as the first four weeks before Christmas, which allow for



the consumption of fish. Dairy products are not allowed, as they are by-products of the milk that comes from animals. Seafood (as opposed to fleshy fish) is allowed during most fasts as the flesh of seafood does not contain blood.

There are also two types of fasting - (1) ascetic fasting and (2) liturgical fasting. Ascetic fasting encompasses the four fasting periods of the liturgical calendar, where there is a drastic reduction of the intake of food and abstinence from certain foods. The Church, however, does not see fasting in a legalistic way; it is a means and not an end in the spiritual struggle of its faithful. One usually fasts according to the guidelines set up by the Church, but one should also seek the guidance of a spiritual father. Ascetic fasting is also practiced on Wednesdays and Fridays and, in the monastic tradition, on Mondays (the day dedicated to the Holy Angels). Liturgical fasting (also known as "xerophagia") is practiced in anticipation of a great feast day and consists of only dry food; or in the case of preparing for Holy Communion, complete abstinence from any food or liquid.

THE LENTEN CUISINE

Since fasting involves over 180 days of the year, in a culture whose religion is a basic element of its foundation, it definitely has an impact on all aspects of life. And because Greece is a country whose cuisine is a rich expression of its traditions and customs, fasting has played an important role in shaping the way Greeks eat.

The basic ingredient in Lenten cuisine is undoubtedly olive oil, which is what gives the dishes their unique character and nutritional value. Specifically, there is a name for dishes cooked in olive oil - lathera. The name stems from the Modern Greek word for oil, lathi, and traditionally refers to vegetables and legumes cooked slowly on the stove top in a rich, olive oil-based sauce. Because of the duration of Great Lent and the change in season from winter to spring, lathera dishes can be prepared using a wide variety of ingredients. The colder days at the beginning of Lent will certainly include hearty soups and stews made with legumes such as beans,

chickpeas or lentils. Spinach, wild greens, cauliflower and leeks are among the winter vegetables often combined with grains or legumes to create a complete meal. Early spring dishes abound with fresh artichokes, peas, broad beans, spring onions, dill and other herbs. Lathera dishes display the Greek preference for soft vegetables cooked slowly in such a way that the flavors meld and the dish acquires its characteristically rich oily texture. Another attribute of lathera is that

these dishes can be served at room temperature or even cold, which means that they can be prepared from the day before they are served. Seafood dishes are highly favored during Lent, especially those found in the cuisine of the seacoast areas. Octopus figures prominently on the Lenten table in dishes as simple as grilled octopus drizzled with a lemon-oil dressing, or as complicated as ground octopus combined with spices and herbs to make octopus fritters. Shrimp is preferred grilled when dining out, but family style dishes will feature shrimp in a tomato-based pilaf or in a sauce served over pasta. Squid is usually simply dusted in flour and fried, but specialties also include stewing it in a spicy tomato sauce or, even more popular, stuffing it with rice and herbs. Less popular, but certainly not to be overlooked, is the humble cuttlefish, which actually has more nutritive value than its fellow cephalopods. Because it is considerably fleshy (it has only one flat spinal cartilage) it is quite versatile and can be cooked in numerous ways. Flattened, it makes a great grilled cuttlefish "steak", which may be served with a generous squeeze of lemon juice. Cut up, it goes into stews with spinach or other greens in either a lemony white sauce or a rich tomato sauce. It can even be stuffed with rice, herbs, and nuts and baked in a wine sauce.

Sweets are part of the Lenten cuisine, as hospitality and light entertaining for special occasions do not stop during this period. A nice lathero koulouraki (oil cookie) with a cup of Greek coffee serves as a perfect boost of energy for that mid-morning or afternoon slump. The base of all sweets is, of course, olive oil, which adds to the texture and moistness of cakes and sweet breads, gives cookies a nice crunch and offers a healthier way of frying such sweets as loukoumades (fried honey puffs) or tiganites (fritters). Because olive oil is also a natural preservative, sweets made with olive oil also last longer.

For those days when abstaining from olive oil, there are various sweets that can be made with tahini. Besides fulfilling

the need for a quick boost of energy, tahini, which is made from pulverized sesame seeds, is rich in calcium and protein while containing absolutely no cholesterol.

To get a start on changing your dietary habits I suggest trying out the following recipes: (From: "The Festive Fast", M. Kokkinou and G. Kofinas, Akritas Publications, Athens, Greece)

Stuffed Squid

3 ¼ lbs medium squid, defrosted
1 cup long grain rice
1 lb onions finely chopped
2 tbsp. fine bread crumbs
2 tbsp. pine nuts
¾ cup dry white wine
1 ½ cups peeled chopped tomatoes
1 cup olive oil
½ cup dill weed and parsley finely chopped
Salt, pepper

1. Clean squid by removing head (with tentacles) and discarding thin membrane in the center. Wash bodies to remove any sand. Finely chop heads and set aside.
2. Parboil onions in a little water until it evaporates and add half of the oil. Sauté for 1 minute and add chopped heads. Slowly pour in wine until liquid is deglazed.
3. Add rice, bread crumbs, dill and parsley, pine nuts, salt and pepper. Stir in well and remove from heat. Allow to cool.
4. Stuff bodies of squid loosely with mixture and close ends together with a toothpick. Set stuffed squid aside.
5. Heat remaining oil in wide skillet and add tomatoes. Simmer for about 2 minutes and arrange stuffed squid on top. Cover and simmer for about 1 - 1 ½ hours or until tender and sauce thickens.
6. Arrange in a platter and pour sauce over squid.

Orange Lenten Cake

3 ½ cups all-purpose flour
2 tsp. baking powder
1 tsp. baking soda
1 ¼ cups sugar
½ cup light olive oil
½ cup brandy (Greek Metaxa is fine)
1 ½ cups orange juice
½ cup black or white raisins
½ cup coarsely chopped walnuts
1 tbsp. grated orange zest
1 tsp. ground cinnamon
½ tsp ground clove
Powdered sugar for topping

1. Mix baking powder, soda, cinnamon and clove with flour.
2. Beat oil and sugar well and add brandy and orange juice. Slowly add in flour and, lastly, the walnuts, raisins and orange zest.
3. Pour batter into greased and floured baking pan (do not use tube or bundt pan).
4. Bake in pre-heated oven at 225° for about 45-60 minutes or until knife inserted in center comes out clean.
5. Cool and sprinkle with powdered sugar before serving.

Note: Lenten cakes are usually moister than other cakes and are not removed from cake form pans very easily. For this reason, we suggest using a baking pan and serving the cake from there.

Georgia Kofinas is a food writer, cookbook author and chef instructor at Alpine College, a hotel management and tourism school in Athens, Greece. Her culinary journeys have taken her to many regions of the Eastern Mediterranean and Asia Minor.



TNH/COSTAS BEJ

l. to r.: Dr. Maria Georgopoulou, Gennadius Library Director, Nicholas Bacopoulos, Gennadius Library Trustee, Amb. Vassilis Kaskarelis, Nassos Michas, Vice Chairman of Library Board of Trustees, April Michas, Dr. Edward E. Cohen, Gennadius Library Trustee, Lady Judith Thomson, School Trustee.

Flavorful Clean Monday Benefits Gennadius Library

By Angelike Contis and Constantine S. Sirigos

TNH Staff Writers

NEW YORK - Creamy taramosalata (caviar mousse), pine nut topped stuffed grape leaves and gigantes (giant beans) stew, were among the culinary rewards for the 120 benefactors of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, who attended the school's 10th Annual Clean Monday celebration.

The event, held at Manhattan's Molyvos restaurant, on February 15, featured the Lenten cuisine of Molyvos' Chef Partner Jim Botsacos, as well as recipes by food writer/culinary expert Diane Kochilas along with the music of Grigoris Maninakis and the Mikrokosmos Ensemble. The annual event stems from a meal held in the past in the gardens of the ASCSA's historic Gennadius Library grounds each Clean Monday, a holiday celebrated in Greece with kite flying and feasts of non-meat and non-dairy foods.

As guests dug into mountains of roasted prawns,

Molyvos to benefit the library's major future renovations. She said: "We are very pleased with the enthusiasm of our guests last night. The benefits of the evening will go beyond the amount raised last night. We have found new friends for the Gennadius Library who will spread the word about the remarkable collections and work that it does." She noted that the moneys raised will be applied to a matching National Endowment for the Humanities Challenge Grant that was awarded to the ASCSA in late January.

At the event, Chef Botsacos talked about his passion for Greek food and explained how he is especially interested in sharing dishes which use ingredients that are atypical in Greek cooking, but which are popular in one or more parts of the Hellenic world. With a father from the Mani region of Greece and a mother from Naples, Italy, his creations often blend traditions from those two countries. The stewed calamari with its tomato sauce was a felicitous union of



From left to right: Molyvos founder John Livanos, culinary writer/expert Diane Kochilas, co-owner Nickolas Livanos and John Stavros, at the event benefiting the Gennadius Library.

black eyed peas and okra, they were benefiting the Gennadius. Among the VIPs at the event was Greek Ambassador to the U.S. Vassilis Kaskarelis, who referred to the library of 116,000 holdings as "A custodian of Hellenism."

He was introduced by Nassos Michas, vice chairman of the library's board of trustees. Ambassador Loucas Tsilas, who has also served as Greece's Ambassador to the U.S. and is currently the Executive Director of the Alexander S. Onassis Public Benefit Foundation (USA), was present with his wife, Penelope Kartsonas-Tsilas.

Gennadius Library Director Maria Georgopoulou thanked the benefactors for their support, making special note of the Demos Foundation for its help in supporting the library's efforts to put material online. She said she was looking forward to the 29th Annual Walton lecture, organized in honor of Gennadius Librarian Francis Walton, which will take place at the Gennadius Library in Athens on March 2nd. Professor Robert Ousterhout, of the University of Pennsylvania, will speak on "Byzantine Constantinople: Visualizing a City in Transition."

The Gennadius' Byzantine holdings include manuscripts that go back as far as the 12th century.

The day after the event, Administrative Director Irene Romano, from ASCSA's Princeton, New Jersey base, noted that at least \$50,000 was raised at

his two heritages.

New York-raised, Greece-based writer Kochilas said that, for her, Clean Monday is always "a harbinger of spring." She regretted that Greeks in the U.S. do not celebrate Clean Monday as they do in Greece, a sentiment echoed by Ms. Georgopoulou, who has spent 18 years in the U.S. in the past.

Among the goodies distributed to guests was the booklet "Lenten Specialties: Recipes for Fasting in Style" featuring Mr. Botsacos' and Ms. Kochilas' recipes.

The ASCSA, whose endowment is based in the U.S., is shifting soon from a quiet to a more public campaign to raise \$50 million for an endowment and a series of projects, including renovations to its Gennadius and Blegen libraries. Some \$10 million may go towards the renovation of the Gennadius Library's West Wing, where a new underground extension will be created to house research collections in an open-stack system.

The library dates back to 1926, when it was built by architects John V. Van Pelt and W. Stuart Thompson.

The ASCSA, a consortium of some 180 educational institutions, has thousands of alumni. New members are added to these ranks each year; the association is currently processing applications of students interested in hands-on experience in Greece this summer and next year.

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GREEK POETRY

Clerical Workers

Clerical workers flicker
and go out
two by two, uninsulated wires.
Twin electricians - Death and
the State -
can make repairs.

Clerical workers sit in chairs
and blot
innocent white paper needlessly.
"And thus I have the honor, Sir,
to be etc.," they write.

That honor's all that's left
them when
each night at eight they climb
the hill
mechanically, clockwork men,

buy chestnuts, pondering
each rule
and regulation of exchange,
and shrug their shoulders:
none of this will change.

C.G. Karyotakis (1896-1928)
Translated by Rachel Hadas
in "The Greek Poets" edited
by Constantine, Hadas,
Keeley and Van Dyck.

Correction: On p.16 of "The 50 Wealthiest Greek Americans in America" special issue (February 13, 2010), the estimated wealth of Sotirios Vahaviolos was incorrectly listed as \$70.6 million and his rank indicated as #41. The correct figure was \$225 million and the correct ranking was #40.