

“Just a Taste of Greek Easter”

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From Andros, Greece, my “yiayia” (grandmother in Greek) settled into Southern New Jersey where my family and I have remained, along with our Greek culture and tradition. Staying within Burlington County and Camden County, my family and I have lived in South Jersey all of our lives where we continue to stick to our roots, keeping our Greek heritage alive. One way to do that is by passing down the traditional cooking styles and methods my grandmother has been using for years and is now teaching me. Though many people may have tried some Greek food before, such as gyros and baklava, there are other authentic dishes that are part of the Greek culture to be recognized as well.

Various meals that are special to certain cultures are most commonly made during specific events and holidays. Of the many holidays celebrated throughout the world, Easter happens to be the most important day of the year for members of the Greek Orthodox Church. Yes, we celebrate Christmas with Santa Claus and eat turkey on Thanksgiving – but I find myself quite proudly biased to say that no other religions celebrate Easter quite like us Greeks. It is stereotypically a big, fat, Greek celebration, most specifically in regards to the foods and dishes that are made explicitly for this holiday, which makes Easter my favorite holiday of the year. With my passion for cooking and desire to learn the ins and outs of Greek cuisine, my yiayia has given me hands-on experiences that will help me pass down these recipes for the future.

As a child growing up in Southern New Jersey with immigrant grandparents from Greece, I was surrounded by old-fashioned cooking and traditional dishes that seemed normal to

me, unaware that not all children ate a lamb that was rolling on a spit over a fire in their backyard during Easter. However, aside from lamb being the main meal for this holiday, there are other dishes during this time that I look forward to every year. My favorite holiday-related meal is the pre-Easter soup called “Magiritsa” (my-gee-reet-sah). For as long as I can remember, my yiayia made this soup for my family and I every year for Easter; we would attend the Holy Saturday midnight service at Church and then be at my yiayia’s house until 2AM, half-asleep, sitting around a table, eating magiritsa with all of my cousins – this is something I hope to continue doing with my family and continue to pass down.

The first part of Magiritsa is typically prepared on Holy Saturday evening so that its final components can quickly be added and ready to serve as family starts spilling in after the midnight service is over. To make magiritsa, yiayia’s recipe calls for the offal from 1 lamb – offal is the liver, kidneys, heart, spleen, and so on from the lamb and is used so as to not waste any meat from the animal – garlic, onion, dill, olive oil, rice, water, eggs, lemons, and salt and pepper. The preparation of this soup requires the lamb offal to be thoroughly washed and then boiled for 1 to 2 hours. The boiling water is then drained and the lamb parts are roasted until brown; then garlic, onion, and dill is added and cooked until tender. After that is done, water is put back into the pot and left to simmer until yiayia says it is time to add the rice. Just before the rice is almost done, yiayia shuts off the flame because the soup will be reheated later in which the last component of magiritsa will be added and the rice will finish cooking.

Once midnight service is over, yiayia usually rushes back home to finish the magiritsa which requires the addition of “avgolemono” (ahv-gaw-lem-awh-naw) and can be used in other Greek soups and sauces as well. To make avgolemono, eggs are beaten until light and frothy, lemon juice is then added, and then a small amount of hot broth from the magiritsa is slowly

incorporated to temper the eggs and prevent scrambling until they are warmed up enough to be added into the big pot; the magiritsa is now ready to be served! This is usually when all of the “kids” (who are not really kids anymore) get in line and wait for yiayia to put a big ladle of soup into their bowls. The rest of the night consists of everyone talking and laughing while simultaneously getting up to retrieve as many ladles of soup as they can get before it runs out.

Though this appeared to be one example of a typical Greek dish, it was also an illustration of how food comes to mean much more to a culture than just something to eat. When I watch my yiayia in the kitchen, without using measuring cups or looking at a physical recipe, reminiscing about family members or predicting how they will be, knowing that she can make this dish merely from experience and memory, mindlessly cooking and talking at the same time as if it were second-nature, I see how much she looks forward to making this meal and knowing her family will be together later that night even though she does it every single year. Food brings people together – it offers a time where people are able to enjoy one another’s company and share a meal. It does not matter what the dish is, when it is made, or where it is eaten; it is the people eating the meal together that make it important. I said magiritsa was my favorite holiday dish – I guess I cannot decide if it is simply for the taste or if it is for the overall occasion that it brings.