





Preface

It seems that, with age, you sometimes feel the need to turn the clock back and talk about your childhood, to share the thoughts and feelings that have accompanied you over the years.

It looks as if this has happened to me and I have found a way to do it. Writing stories and recipes, there were moments when tears welled up and others when I smiled nostalgically. I am glad to share them with you and maybe they've offered me a way to look back into the past as painlessly as possible.

Summer. Summers. Many summers in the large old house of my grandmother and godmother in Petra.

The programme was always the same. Sitting in the kitchen, I wait for the clock to strike eleven, so that we can head for the sea. In the meantime I watch Nitsa, the granddaughter and successor of the house's cook, cooking under the stern gaze of my godmother, carefully following her instructions. There is a balance and calmness in the atmosphere and in the way they cook. I'm not bored in the slightest; actually, it's refreshingly different from the things I do in Athens during the winter.

Coming from an environment where cooking plays virtually no role in our lives, I find myself in a totally different climate, where the preoccupation with food and cooking accounts perhaps for the largest part of time of the house's female population.

The conversations start from the morning and continue throughout the day, to decide the following day's menu. The house is crowded, so there are many opinions, desires, and disagreements. Occasionally we might even see fall-outs. It is sometimes difficult for many housewives to coexist harmoniously.

The years went by. I grew up. I got married. Until then, I had almost never cooked. But now the time has come. The game, because that's how I saw it, was easy and pleasant. All the culinary memories of my childhood years gradually came back and the various ingredients found their way into the pot without much thought or hesitation.

The dishes I made were almost never bland. Besides, why should you have bland food, when the ingredients you use are delicious and you have a fair feeling of taste?

So what I want to tell you, not as a cook, but as a friend who perhaps has cooked more in her life than you, is that the traditional Greek cuisine is easy and simple.

There may be difficult and complex recipes that I do not know about. Maybe if you read what I think is easy in a recipe book it may seem complicated, but I'll show you my own way of cooking, which I have ensured is simple and fast, so that this daily process does not become a source of torment.

Also, as cooking is a daily task, you should not be afraid of mistakes. I do not know how and why, however, in some magical way the food usually comes out quite tasty.

So get cooking and invite your friends to a Greek lunch or dinner, enjoying the relaxed certainty of knowing that your dishes will be "poly nostimo" (very tasty).

Good luck and "Kali Orexi"!

Daphne







Our house in Petra

Life is strange. How much do you actually change over the years? You now look with distaste at the things you used to long after when you were young.

I waited impatiently for the summers to come. All the summers were always the same. I would travel by boat or plane, always wearing a new dress that marked the beginning of the summer.

When we reached Mytilini, we would always go to the same café, Fotiou, where the taxi that was to take us to Petra would always wait for us. I think that this luxury, because of course there was also a bus service, was paid by my godmother, who was my grandmother's sister.

The journey seemed endless, the roads narrow and serpentine. We always stopped at the same point on the road to admire the church of the Virgin Mary standing proud on a rock, the patron of the village and its inhabitants, protecting the land and sea that surrounded her.

There, on the large stone staircase at the entrance of the house, stood my godmother, with her proud, sometimes almost arrogant posture, the posture of the noblewoman, to welcome us and pay the taxi. Her welcome was warm, and I loved her very much. I -who so easily get confused about what love is and whom I love- know clearly, feel certain that I loved her.

So, from then on, for the days and months that followed, I felt like a princess. It was not only my

godmother's love that made me feel this way, it was the whole house, the white sheets on my bed - which was always made, the lunches - an inviolable condition was that lunch was always served at one, (hence indeed I learned good table manners so early on, because the family of my grandmother and godmother was educated); it was the sweet siesta with the shutters always half-shut, the doves twittering incessantly, my godmother's stories as we walked in the garden, it was the well, the cistern, the vineyard, the field, the figs; it was old mister Mitros who, tall like a beast, basted the almond trees, it was old Dimostis who looked after the garden, old Mrs. Thalia who cooked under the stern, strict gaze of my godmother; it was Nitsa, Thalia's granddaughter, who washed my clothes and made sure my underwear was sparkling clean, even the "saddles" as she called the inside cotton fabric of my pants; it was the MIRANDA cookies that I think were fresh on the market, spread with butter and paired as small sandwiches for our picnics in Tsamakia, Aghia Paraskevi or Kavaki. I think Nitsa, who always accompanied me on my walks, had her own ulterior motives. Angelos, her angel, was hidden somewhere waiting to see her.

It was... a lot of things, repeated with an enduring stability, that I really expected at the end of each school year, that I really needed.

And then I turned seventeen and suddenly decided to turn my back to all that. Besides, life in the house had changed.

I do not know what happened to all the persons I mentioned, I do not know where they went, how they disappeared from my life, I only know that my godmother ended up in a nursing home in Athens, and I found myself alone for the first time in the summer house in Petra.

I cannot describe how easily the respectable mansion turned into a barn, hosting long-haired youths with sleeping bags.

And thus both the house and I moved into the new era, an era where each day was unique, when sleeping on the beach was much better than sleeping on my white sheets, an era when all I wanted was a boy, or, to phrase it better, a relationship. The relationship did not come, but the boys did. I do not know if it was for the better or the worse; in retrospect, I think it wasn't worth it, but what did I say then?

But this time came to pass and was followed by others, better or worse, it is no longer important.

But what matters now is that, at fifty, I do not have any need for this repetition, this expectation of unchanged summers. It seems I'm stuck at seventeen and have not grown up yet.



Fasolakia

(Fresh runner-beans in tomato sauce)

1 kg fresh beans
2 potatoes
1-2 carrots
1 large onion
1 bunch parsley
 $\frac{3}{4}$ cup olive oil
1 tin (400 g) of chopped
tomatoes
(or tomato passata)
1 teaspoon sugar
salt/pepper

- 1 Wash the beans well.
- 2 Remove strings from beans.
- 3 Finely chop parsley.
- 4 Wash, peel and cut carrot into thin slices.
- 5 Either finely chop the onion or place in blender.
- 6 Peel, wash and cut potatoes into medium size pieces.
- 7 Place oil in deep pan and heat.

Notes

- Be sure that when the dish is ready that there is not too much liquid. It should have a little liquid sauce.
- In the winter, it is not so easy to find fresh beans and often I use frozen beans.

8 When oil is hot add onion and fry lightly till soft.

9 Then add beans, potatoes and carrots and fry them lightly for two minutes while stirring.

10 Pour in the tin of tomato and add the same amount of water (as much as in the tin).

11 Add salt, pepper, sugar and parsley and stir well.

12 Cook over medium heat for about an hour.



Naturally there are no strings to clean. You do not need to defrost the beans, but just place them in the pan and cook them in the same way but with less water and for less time.



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