

Gastronomia

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THE GRAINS OF GREECE A PASSION FOR FLAVORS AND TEXTURES

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Threshing place, Santorini, Greece

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When my Greek mom needs a mood lift, she swings to the stove to whip up one of her favorite comfort foods, *katsamaki* – a golden mush of coarse stone-ground corn, similar to Italian *polenta*. Hers is a purist's version, a remnant of her childhood days. She likes her maize pillow soft and cloudy, while I prefer mine a bit firmer. But comforting it certainly is, as she adds a dab of butter and tops it with a little mild feta. For the longest time I remember my mother, who is a bit of a health nut, largely shunning carbohydrates. But today, like an increasing number of her compatriots, she looks back to the tasty and toothsome grains of her past.

While the Mediterranean diet and its many health benefits are much revered abroad, modern Greeks have left some of its best qualities behind. As the portions of meat and fish have grown with prosperity, grains such as corn, bulgur, wheat and barley have all but disappeared from their tables. I remember many restaurant meals when visiting family in Greece over the years, accompanied only by bland processed white bread and French fries. As concern over the increasing waistlines of Greeks grows, however, their pedestrian peasant grains are finding renewed appreciation. I cherish their comeback for their rich textures and distinct flavors, while the health conscious welcome

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the many vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and fiber they add back to the Greek diet.

Today, Greek food magazines showcase recipes with wheat berries, bulgur and cornmeal. And artisanal bakeries in metropolitan areas churn out fantastic loaves using different grains, chockfull of nuts and seeds. Rustic round *karbelia* with whole wheat flour have become available again as well as crusty farm-style breads made with cornmeal. You can even find classic dark German rye breads, as Greek guest workers have returned to their homeland after decades in the cold Northern climate, and now crave the hearty loaves of their working years.

Here is a brief introduction to some of the simple yet versatile whole grains of Greece:

Barley, celebrated in Homer's *Iliad* and once an important staple of the ancient Greeks, has pretty much disappeared from today's Greek table, with one exception – rusks. Pliny (A.D. 23 – 79) describes Greek barley as “the oldest of food” and introduces us to a comforting and common staple. The physician Hippocrates (460 – 377 B.C.) understood barley's healthful properties. He prescribed a diet of cereals and breads made solely from this grain in times of illness.

The use of barley survived into the modern-day diet in the form of spectacular rock-hard rusks or *paximadia*. Not long ago, you might have found a few forlorn packages in the corner of the grocery store – diet food for older relatives. Step into a posh bakery in Thessaloniki in northern Greece today, and you will be offered half a dozen kinds and shapes. Once central to the monotonous diet of the islands, rusks are made by coarsely milling whole grain barley, or a mixture of whole wheat and barley, and double baking the slices to preserve them. Cretan rusks are best-known. Until a generation ago, locals would eat them for breakfast, mellowed by

dipping them in wine. Today, they are served as a succulent bread salad, a satisfying starter. First softened in water, the rusks are then combined with tomatoes, herbs, and cheese, and drizzled with olive oil.



Corn, a more recent grain introduced from the Americas in the 16th century, still conjures up the poverty of the war years for many Greeks. Yet many traditional recipes survive, especially in northwestern Greece. There, cornmeal is whisked into speedy savory pies, with feta, leafy greens and fresh herbs. These rustic pies have become more popular again as has the *bobota*, a sweet cornbread, studded with raisins or currants, and sometimes soaked in orange-honey syrup.

Bulgur or *pligouri*, parboiled and cracked whole wheat, has become more widely used again. There are countless recipes, from deliciously simple grain salads with fresh herbs, lemon juice and olive oil to aromatic stuffings for eggplant, vine leaves or tomatoes. Paula Wolfert introduces a beguiling cinnamon-scented preparation from Cyprus with squash and golden raisins in her book *Mediterranean Grains and Greens*, similar to a dish my mother prepares. A bulgur pilaf with ground walnuts and parsley originated from by Greeks who emigrated from around the Caucasus. Cracked wheat or *chondros* is also still

prepared, in slow oven-roasted meat dishes, infused with onion and tomatoes.

Whole wheat berries have a special place in Greek tradition as well, though largely in ceremonial dishes. At the center is *koliva*, sweetened and fragrant whole wheat, which is boiled, then mixed with sugarcoated almonds, raisins, walnuts and spices. Often mounded on large silver trays and covered with a thick layer of powdered sugar, it is handed out on the 40th day after the burial of a loved one, symbolizing the resurrection and the abundance of life. This tradition is found in Orthodox communities across the Balkans and Russia, and dates back to the early days of Christianity.

Sprouted wheat, on the Dodecanese islands, is traditionally transformed into a festive sweet soup named *chrysafi*, served on Christmas and New Year's. And in the region of Epirus it is baked into an unusual unleavened bread. As you work this dough, an old woman recently explained to a Greek food writer, it has to feel “soft and tight like the breast of a woman.”

Given this rich heritage, and the comeback of some traditional foods, I look forward to returning to Greece this summer to seek out new mesmerizing recipes for grains and legumes, two of the many cornerstones of the Mediterranean diet. However, I do not only want to record and admire the recipes of yore. My dream is to soon find them served on the menu of a hip downtown restaurant on the waterfront in Thessaloniki. Just in case, though, I have asked my mom to fire up the oven for *bobota*...

Maria Speck is a veteran journalist and food writer. Raised in Germany and Greece, she has contributed to major US magazines, including *Saveur* and *Gastronomica*. She now lives in Cambridge, MA. For more information on the author and her work, www.graingourmet.us.