

# A Gift of Grains

NEXT TO THE GRAVE of my beloved Greek grandfather, in the cooling shade of tall black-green cypress trees, I had the best food of my life. I was six years old, almost seven, when a little white paper bag was handed to me with an unusual concoction: whole sweetened wheat berries enveloped in fragrant spices and interspersed with crisp sugarcoated almonds, raisins, and large chunks of walnuts. As I used my small fingers to scoop the succulent grains into my mouth, I fell into a state of bliss. But I also remember another feeling creeping in as I chewed happily on my *koliva*, which is customary at memorial services in Greece. I somehow understood, despite my young age, that I shouldn't show too much exhilaration at this celestial confection in the midst of such aching sadness. And my wheat berries became even sweeter.

I did grasp that something earth shattering had recently occurred, causing my family much grief. My Greek grandmother, my *yiayia*, had suddenly turned up at our house, along with my aunt. Dressed entirely in black, they both wailed endlessly—much to the dismay of my German father. Concerned about the effects of this howling on the well-being of his children, he abruptly sent both of them home, upsetting my mother in turn.

My beloved *papous* had died that day, only weeks after closing his well-known hat-making business in a posh part of downtown Thessaloniki in northern Greece. The store had been his life for almost thirty-five years. He closed it against his will, nudged on by well-meaning family members concerned about his health. He died of heart failure soon afterward, collapsing at home as my grandmother was fetching him a glass of water.

So there I was, on the fortieth day after my grandfather's funeral, at the oldest cemetery in that sun-drenched Mediterranean city, enraptured by the first whole-grain dish of my life, munching on the sweetened boiled wheat while everyone around me stood crushed by grief. I savored the slightly chewy outer skin and soft starchy centers, oblivious to the tears of sorrow. Biting hard on the shiny silver dragées

and white candied Jordan almonds, I did not notice my family's pain. I couldn't help it. I was completely absorbed by the treat with which we remember the dead. I have longed for this childhood pleasure ever since.

*Koliva*, a tradition found in Orthodox communities across the Balkans and Russia, dates back to the early days of Christianity. In Greece, *koliva* is often impressively mounded on a large silver tray with white paper doilies and topped with a thick layer of confectioner's sugar to symbolize resurrection and the abundance of life. For me, death has never been so sweet again.

A few years later, when my family left Greece for Germany, where I had been born, the flavors of other whole grains entered into my life in new and surprising ways. In Bavaria, in a Munich suburb, my father would regularly return home with giant crusty loaves of German bread, nearly the size of bicycle tires. Every day for breakfast he would devour two huge slices of the loaf, while my brother and I looked on in awe. We hadn't ever seen bread this dark or this large while living in Greece.

Sometimes my brother and I were sent to stay with our *Oma*, my father's mother, in the city of Bonn. At night, my grandmother would prepare *Schnittchen*, bite-size pieces of different kinds of bread topped with butter and cheese or cold cuts. One such *Schnittchen*, served on pitch-dark pumpernickel bread from Rhineland, became an instant hit. Pumpernickel is traditionally baked from just two ingredients: whole rye flour and water. I soon discovered that if I chewed long enough on the coal-colored bread, it would turn mellow and sweet as I released the natural sugars in the rye. For years I kept this intense appreciation to myself, because I wasn't sure whether this affection for my favorite bread was normal.

In my early twenties, the whole-grain moments of my childhood faded as I spent my nights dancing and my mornings exhausted at a desk. As a young journalist, I happily dined on frozen pizza and spring rolls for weeks on end. Ready-made chocolate pudding with whipped cream from



the supermarket became my favorite breakfast, dessert, and late-night meal. Only when I became the correspondent for Germany's largest news agency, DPA, in the picturesque town of Würzburg, Bavaria, was my diet challenged. I can remember the day precisely. My neighbor Hildegard, a single mother raising a little girl, came over with a salad made from wheat berries. I was stunned. I don't remember exactly what else was in her salad—maybe colorful bell peppers, perhaps spring onions and fresh cheese with a simple marinade of olive oil, lemon juice, and parsley. Hildegard didn't make a fuss about this most unusual dinner. She simply set the bowl on the table and said, somewhat dryly, "Try this." So I did. It was as though the wheel had come full circle. The savor of wheat berries returned to my taste buds with a splash—and it hasn't left since.

Hildegard's austere whole-grain salad ended my joyful junk food days and led to an overnight fascination and near

**Above:** A dish of koliva.

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obsession with the world of grains, even as it reconnected me with my cultural roots. At first I allowed only certain familiar grains into my minimal kitchen: reddish whole-wheat berries, gray rye kernels, and sweet whole oats or oat groats. Then came tiny millet seeds, golden polenta, and heart-shaped buckwheat seeds. Before long I put up a shelf and lined the grains up in tall glass jars to enjoy their beauty. Not that I really knew what to do with any of them. But the whole grains had cast a spell on me.

Ultimately, the discovery of grains brought this fast-food lover into the kitchen, which I then had to equip for my gustatory adventures. I bought a hand mixer, a blender, tart and pie pans in all sizes and colors, bread forms and rising baskets, cookie cutters, glass forms and traditional

stoneware, and of course, exquisite china, formidable wine glasses, and French flatware. Not to mention cookbooks and magazines galore. I even bought a large wooden board for rolling out fresh dough for homemade fettucine and lasagne. My most prized possession was a powerful electric grain mill, which produced unsurpassed fresh flour from grains of all kinds.

Whole grains soon took center stage in my cooking, bewildering my family and friends. You cook millet? We use that as bird food! Buckwheat? What are you talking about? Barley? Great for beer, isn't it? Undeterred, I turned up all the flames on my stove and made it my secret mission to nudge friends, family, coworkers, and strangers simply to "try this," just as my friend Hildegard had done with me.

I learned to soak, cook, and dish out wheat berries in countless variations—creamed or curried, Serbian or Italian, vegetarian or with sizable chunks of meat. My first risotto, creamy and thick with Parmesan, dotted with green peas and saffron, enticed with its delicate bite of brown rice. A flavorful dish of coarsely ground barley with herbs and cheese, strikingly served in a ring form, became another favorite, as did thick country-style pancakes from light yellow millet, presaging the darker *bajra-rotlas* I would later experience in my husband's native India.

My fervor extended to baking. Soon my oven churned out classic German and Greek breads, some light and sweet, some savory and hearty, but always prepared with freshly ground flour. I twisted traditional Bavarian pretzels, stretched pizza dough, and double-baked yeast bread for sweet rusks, a childhood favorite. I formed Greek Lenten cookies with brandy, buttery French brioche, and German *Apfelkuchen* (apple cake) with a sweet meringue topping. And I discovered the slow-rising power and mesmerizing flavor of sourdough in traditional whole rye bread.

I spent all my free time testing and retesting recipes to understand the properties of the different whole grains, approaching these additions to my eating universe with the almost one-dimensional curiosity of a scientist. There were downsides to my early whole-grain days: unrisen whole wheat breads that turned into heavy brick loaves; old or undercooked grain berries, which required the chewing capacity of a cow; and whole-grain cookies that tasted more like crackers than delicate coffee treats. My early pie tarts would have worked well as Frisbees.<sup>®</sup> But I was convinced that I was on to something. At times I was so driven that I even swallowed my botched creations with considerable pride—dubious milestones on my path to whole-grain nirvana.

When I look back today, this passion for grains does not surprise me. As long as I can remember, food rich in carbohydrates exuded an almost magnetic appeal. The thick, sweet, and starchy milk rice my Greek grandmother prepared, sprinkled with fragrant cinnamon, is a favorite comfort food to this day. Freshly baked bread was our household staple. Fetched daily from the village baker or *fourno*, crusty loaves accompanied every meal in Greece. In Germany, dinner was sometimes just *Butterbrote*, slices of bread with butter and cheese or cold cuts. And then there were mashed potatoes, a perpetual battleground between my younger brother and me. My mother could never divide them equally enough to keep us from arguing.

Whole grains expanded this starchy comfort universe for me; their subtle differences providing limitless opportunity for exploration. To this day, I am seduced by a warm bowl of sweetened steel-cut oats, dotted with raisins or dried apricots and sprinkled with pine nuts or toasted almonds. A pot of slowly simmering polenta on the stove on a cold winter night, flavored only with butter and salt, is a divine addition to any meal. And nothing nourishes after a stressful day like quick-cooking fluffy millet, which blends easily with different garnishes of fish or meat.

And then there is chewing, a more private joy. I remember traditional Greek Easter celebrations, when extended families come together to devour a whole spring lamb roasted over an open fire. My memory lingers on a single chunk of meat, bone attached, on which I chewed with elation, until all that was left was the shiny bone, licked spotless. Even today, I find chewing heavenly, especially when it involves the crackle of a crusty dark bread or the crunch of whole-grain crackers. Chewing civilizes me, slows me down. It forces me to focus on what I am eating.

Today, I remain grateful for the matter-of-fact way in which Hildegard set her bowl of wheat-berry salad on the table. Had she tried to woo me with facts about health and nutrition, I would probably have turned a deaf ear to her words, as I did to the prescriptions of so many health-food advocates and holy-granola preachers of the 1980s in Germany. What mattered most that night was that Hildegard had invited me to share a simple and very tasty meal.

I think back to this meal as more and more experts recommend that Americans add whole grains to their diets. Alarmed by the obesity crisis, they stress the numerous health benefits of unprocessed grains, which by now are well documented, and the much-needed fiber, the complex carbohydrates, the vitamins, the minerals, and

the phytochemicals. Passionate as I am about grains, I am also somewhat dismayed by this approach. The single-minded emphasis on the health benefits of whole grains might easily turn people off, or turn my beloved staples into just another diet fad. After all, how joyous can a meal be if it is eaten with the sole purpose of being good for you?

I would like to offer another perspective. I believe that whole grains, with their exquisite bite and subtle flavors, have much to offer our palates. I cherish the comforting sweetness of whole oat kernels, the slight sourness of rye, and the pleasing nuttiness of wheat berries. I long for the warming lightness of millet, the tender chewiness of brown rice, and the translucent soft pearls of quinoa. These days, when I remember that first whole-grain treat of my childhood, I anticipate its comforting sweetness in the face of death. And now, when I prepare *koliva* on the anniversary of my father's death, I am embarrassed to admit that I more closely resemble the howling adults at my grandfather's memorial than the blissful and oblivious six-year-old. But I also remember my friend Hildegard, who set the tone for this lifelong journey.

So here's to the joy of preparing meals with all the ingredients this planet has to offer, including whole grains. The next time you encounter an unusual kernel, please be sure just to "try this." 🍷

#### NOTE

Further information on *koliva* can be found at the Web site of the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, Department of Youth and Young Adult Ministries, [www.goarch.org/en/archdiocese/departments/youth/youthworkers/sessions/goya\\_koliva.asp](http://www.goarch.org/en/archdiocese/departments/youth/youthworkers/sessions/goya_koliva.asp); and at Phyllis Meshel Onest, "Praying for the Dead," [www.theologic.com/offweb/inhome/prydead.htm](http://www.theologic.com/offweb/inhome/prydead.htm).

## Koliva

SERVES 8

*In memory of my Greek papous and my German father*

This is an unpretentious version of *koliva*, similar to my childhood treat. Although easily assembled, it is still a labor of love (and mourning), as the preparation extends over two days. Look for soft spring wheat berries, as hard winter wheat is significantly chewier and takes longer to cook.

1 cup whole wheat berries, preferably organic  
1 teaspoon cinnamon  
½ teaspoon cumin  
pinch of salt  
½ cup coarsely chopped walnuts  
½ cup dark raisins  
1 tablespoon whole-wheat or regular flour  
2 tablespoons silver dragées (optional)  
2 tablespoons sesame seeds  
¼ to ½ cup powdered sugar, to taste  
½ cup Jordan almonds for garnish

Soak the wheat berries for 8 hours or overnight, and then drain. Cover with 2 inches of water and boil in a medium saucepan for 45 minutes to 1 hour. The kernels should be tender but firm and not split open. Drain in a sieve for 10 minutes. Place a large dishcloth on the counter. Spread wheat berries across the middle section. Fold the sides over to cover the kernels and press lightly to remove moisture. Let sit for at least 1 hour to dry, and then transfer the wheat berries to a medium bowl.

Combine the cinnamon, cumin, and salt in a small bowl.

Toast the walnuts in a heavy frying pan, preferably cast iron, over medium to medium-high heat, stirring frequently to avoid burning, about 3 to 5 minutes, until fragrant. Transfer the nuts to a plate.

Add the flour to the pan and cook for 30 seconds, stirring frequently. Then add the wheat berries, stirring for about 2 minutes until the kernels turn dry. Add the walnuts, raisins, and spice mixture and cook for 1 minute more, until the spices turn fragrant. Immediately remove the pan from the heat and transfer the mixture to a bowl to cool for 1 hour. Add silver dragées, if using.

When ready to serve, cover a decorative plate with a paper doily. Place a round piece of wax paper in the center of the doily. Transfer the wheat-berry mixture onto the plate and pat into a mound with your hands.

Sprinkle with sesame seeds and sift a thick layer of powdered sugar on top. Using Jordan almonds, decorate with a cross or the initials of the deceased. Garnish the rim with remaining Jordan almonds. Serve in small bowls.

#### RECIPE NOTES

To prepare ahead, the wheat berries can be cooked one day ahead and stored, covered with plastic wrap, in the refrigerator.

Jordan almonds are candied white or colored toasted almonds. Like silver dragées, they are available in Greek and Middle Eastern markets.