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Souvlakia's journey: a Greek-Australian food odyssey

Abstract

From the days of the gold rushes, migrants have brought to Australian tables foods from all over the world. Amid the smorgasbord of dishes from Italy, China, and India, however, Greek cuisine is underrepresented. Even today, Greek dishes are less likely than pizza or Asian stir fry to be cooked in Australian kitchens and Greek restaurants are less prevalent than those of other ethnic communities. This article uses cookbooks of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s to chart the relatively slow progress of Greek cuisine across the Australian culinary landscape, and community cookbooks, personal recipe books and personal interviews to provide further insights about the meaning of 'Greek food' and about the real impact of Greek cooks on Australian cooking. The influence of Greek cuisine may be less obvious than that of Chinese and Italian cuisine, but it is evident in methods of preparation, rituals of consumption, the use of lemon juice and olive oil, and the desire for simple fresh ingredients – these factors comprise the essence of true Greek food.

Bibliographical note:

Dr Toni Risson's research interests focus on popular culture. Food, in particular, provides opportunities to explore topics as diverse as cookbooks, Greek migrants, shops, children's birthday cakes and beer. Toni's doctoral thesis on children's consumption of lollies identifies key Australian confectioners and reveals hitherto unexplored aspects of Australian children's culture. After producing *Aphrodite and the Mixed Grill: Greek Cafés in Twentieth-Century Australia* (2007), her enduring interest in the singularly Australian phenomenon known as the Greek café turns here to the influence of Greek migrants on Australian cuisine. Toni is Food Area Chair of the Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand.

Keywords

Greek food – Greek Café – Chinese café – Maria Kozslik Donovan – Nicholas Tselementes

Australia is a culinary league of nations, and this is due partly to immigration. If pioneers dined on Slippery Bob (kangaroo brains) and the likes of Fricassee of Cockatoo and Spitchcocked Opossum when food was scarce, early colonists generally maintained British traditions and culinary practices (Daunton-Fear & Vigar 1977: 6). According to Richard Daunton-Fear and Penelope Vigar, a ‘gastronomic revolution’ began when the world flocked to the goldfields in the 1850s: ‘On the diggings, side by side with the sturdy English-style pubs and eating-houses, arose establishments catering for other nationalities. Australians tasted for the first time such dishes as spaghetti and chop suey, and saw how foreigners prepared their food’ (1977: 15). Greeks joined the gold rush and, like Chinese and Italian migrants, had a significant impact on Australia’s food industry. In the 1880s, they began operating oyster saloons and refreshment rooms, and their province soon spread to confectioneries, fish shops, fruit shops, cafés, milk bars, and, ultimately, takeaways. Even in the 1980s, when they represented less than 2 per cent of the total population, Greek-Australians owned one third of all takeaway shops in Australia (Collins et al. 1995: 44-45, 63-65, 82-3). Despite this, Greek cuisine was not evident in home kitchens and urban restaurants until the 1970s, and Greek restaurants are still uncommon in country towns. Cookbooks of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s offer a means of charting the relatively slow progress of Greek cuisine as it ventured across the Australian culinary landscape, and of understanding some of the nuances of its journey to our tables. Trade books document the way in which continental recipes were represented, where publishers believed people’s interests lay, and what Australians may have eaten, and community cookbooks, personal recipe books and interviews provide further insights.

Compared with other ethnic cuisines, Greek food was slow to penetrate Australian culture. The British Raj exposed the English to curry. Tinned spaghetti was one of the first items Heinz produced when it began manufacturing in Australia in 1935, and pizza and spaghetti became so widely accepted that Australia’s first Pizza Hut opened in 1970. Australians frequented Chinese café/restaurants in capital cities from at least the 1950s, and most rural towns have long boasted a Chinese café. Australians accepted what they called ‘chop suey’ cuisine and embraced takeaway spring rolls and dim sum, and the 1960s saw the rise of Chinese chefs and cooking classes (Shun Wah & Aitken 1999: 11, 14, 53). Hostesses concocted ‘Chinese’ dishes with jars of Golden Circle’s Sweet ‘n’ Sour Pineapple and recipes from *The Golden Circle tropical recipe book* (1963). Melbourne has a large Greek community, but few of the Greek shops in Lonsdale Street operated prior to 1970; the proprietor of Tsindos Restaurant recalls only four or five restaurants at that time. It would be another 30 years before a Souvlaki Hut appeared.

From the 1920s to the 1960s, Greeks cafés thrived in every city and country town in the Eastern states, but they were synonymous with mixed grills and milkshakes, and their widespread success delayed the progress of Greek restaurants. Greeks did not serve Greek food; they catered instead to British-Australian taste and the gustatory aspiration of ‘meat ‘n’ three veg’ (Risson 2007). Greek proprietors, known as ‘dagos’, claim that they served ‘Aussie tucker’ because they ‘wouldn’t have made a penny’ otherwise and would have been ‘lynched’ for offering something like spinach pie (*Growing up in Greek cafés* 2004). One-time ‘cafe kid’ Con Castan claims that

serving Greek food ‘was inconceivable until about [30] years ago; no self-respecting Australian would touch ethnic of any kind’ (*Growing up in Greek cafés* 2004). Thus, the migrants who were likely to introduce Greek cuisine were busy employing American food-catering technologies like the soda fountain and the milk bar and popularising American foods like ice cream and hamburgers (Janiszewski & Alexakis 2003: 2). The Greek café is implicated in the fact that Australians knew little of spanakopita and tzatziki until relatively late in the twentieth century.

The Mediterranean diet is not peculiar to Greece, making it difficult to determine where dishes originate, so it may be that the number of Greek dishes attributed to Italian and Turkish cuisine contributes to a lack of awareness of Greek food and erases the Greekness of some Greek cuisine. Greece was once the centre of the ancient world, its food shaped by travel and conquest, so it shares with Italy characteristic elements like tomatoes, olives, olive oil, basil, garlic, and pasta, and with Turkey sweet delicacies like baklava and locoumia. Greek cooks use pasta, and yet spaghetti is synonymous with Italy: Greek pastitsio in its anglicised form, macaroni cheese, is more readily associated with Italian pasticcio; in the Nursing Mothers’ Association’s cookbook (1976), the pasta chapter is entitled ‘The Italian Touch’ (53-60). According to Greek food experts, ‘Greece conquered Rome...with her ... culinary artfulness’ (Tselementes 1959: 7) and then the ‘Italians...triumphantly publicized [traditional Greek dishes] all over the world’ (Kremezi 2001). Other Greek dishes have Turkish names because Greek cooks were forced to refer to dishes in Turkish after the fall of Constantinople (Tselementes 1959: 8). Defining Greek food is no simple task, even though Greece boasts ancient culinary traditions: the gods of Olympus supped on ambrosia and Greeks claim the world’s first cookbook – the recipes of Archestratus, dating from 320 BC (Middleton 1978: 4).

Early-twentieth-century books betray the influence of French cookery in terms like croquette, soufflé, and consommé and suggest that while Australian cooks were familiar with some ‘foreign’ cuisines they knew nothing of Greek food. Mrs Beeton’s ‘new and valuable recipes ... for foreign ... cookery’ [1893] (2011: 5) included curries and curry powders and Italian recipes. Flora Pell’s *Our cookery book* [1916] (1950-) promoted international cuisine with recipes like Macaroni, Vermicelli Pudding, and Indian Prawns. *The C.W.A. cookery book and household hints* [1936] included four pages of curries, numerous Italian recipes – Cheesotto, Vermicilli Pudding, Spaghetti with Italian Sauce – and a ‘Here and There’ chapter that embraced America, Arabia, Austria, Belgium, Brazil, China, Denmark, Egypt, France, Germany, Holland, Hungary, India, Israel, Italy, Jamaica, Malaya, Mexico, Portugal, Russia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and Turkey. None offered Greek recipes.

In 1955, Australian housewives had their own Continental cookbook, the influential *Continental Cookery in Australia*, penned by prominent Melbourne food writer Maria Kozslik Donovan, who wrote a continental food column for *The Age* (1954-1961) (Brien 2012). Hungarian-born and educated in Europe and America, Donovan claimed, ‘Continental cookery ... has now come within reach of the Australian housewife’, and ‘Australian housewives ... are now anxious to secure the genuine recipes and try their hand at foreign dishes’ (front flap). French, Italian, Viennese and Hungarian meals predominated. Donovan included Russian, Turkish, Swiss, Swedish,

Austrian, and Roumanian recipes along with those collected on her travels in the Middle East and the Balkans, and even American and Indonesian dishes. She unlocked the secrets of Minestrone, Quiche Lorraine, Risotto, Wiener Schnitzel, Boeuff Stroganoff, Hungarian Goulash, Crepes Suzette, and the smorgasbord, but proved little-acquainted with Greek food. ‘Moussaka a la Grecque (Greek)’ (1955: 76), consisting of layers of eggplant, mince, and onion with sour cream and egg (no cheese), was the only Greek recipe. Donovan made no mention of Greece in the section called ‘Speaking of Spaghetti’. She listed the souvlaki-like Shashlick (skewered lamb) as a Balkan Specialty and, while acknowledging Greeks among those who possess ‘the hamburger secret’, attributed kebabs (meat patties) to Serbia. By comparison, Elizabeth David’s *A book of Mediterranean food* (1950) indicates that Greek cooking had penetrated London kitchens by that time. In a cookbook for people who wanted to ‘bring a flavour of those blessed lands of sun and sea and olive trees into their English kitchens’ (1950: viii), David claimed that olive oil was readily available in London, ‘a fishmonger in Brewer Street [...sold] cuttlefish and octopus’, and ‘nearly everybody [knew] somebody [with] herbs in their garden’ (vii). David’s recipes for Skordalia, Beef Stuffado, Moussaka, Dolmades, and the like may have been available in Australia.

Sunbeam produced the popular Controlled heat automatic frypan in 1953, and this popularised some international dishes while ignoring Greek food. The 20-page instruction booklet (1953) included international recipes like Sukiyaki, Spanish Casserole, Mexican Luncheon, Sweet & Sour Pork, Spaghetti Neapolitan, Lobster American, Dry Curry, Southern Fried Apples and Crepe Suzette. The 40-page 1965 version hinted at non-British aspirations with recipes for Soup de Jour, Hamburger de Luxe, Cuban Eggs, Mexican Sausages, Steak Bermuda, Swiss Fondue, Curried Prawns, and Kabobs, and had a designated ‘International foods’ section – at the back – where Spaghetti Bolognaise, Chicken Maryland, Sweet and Sour Pork, Nassi Goreng, Beef Stroganoff, and Sukiyaki sat along with dishes that promoted their country of origin: Hungarian Goulash, Mexican Tamale, Chinese Chicken and Almonds, Indian Duck Curry, Spanish Paella, Javanese Rice, Italian Meatballs and Spaghetti. The ‘International foods’ section shrank to ten dishes in the *Sunbeam recipe and instruction book* (1972), but preceded baking, desserts, and preserves.

Two cookbooks indicate that moussaka was becoming synonymous with Greek food. *Day-to-day cookery for home economics students* was a Queensland secondary school textbook from the 1960s and 1970s that accompanied many women into married life. The lone Greek recipe amid numerous Italian and Chinese dishes, Moussaka appeared under ‘International dishes’ – again at the back – and consisted of egg and milk poured over a layer of aubergine and a layer of mince topped with grated cheese (Downes nd: 244). Moussaka is also the only savoury Greek dish in Rosa Peacock’s *A book of good food: 400 international recipes*, published in Australia in 1969 (43). Peacock included five Greek classics, but the others were sweet recipes.

The Margaret Fultoncookbook (1978), first published in 1968, betrayed the pre-eminence of French cuisine in terms like sauté, soufflé, vinaigrette, quiche, and hors d’oeuvre and in recipes for Foie Gras, Béchamel Sauce, Coquilles Saint-Jacques Provençale, Oysters au Naturel, and Coq au Vin. These were not relegated to an

international section. Neither were Beef Stroganoff, Nasi Goreng, Wiener Schnitzel, and Hungarian Goulash. Most Italian dishes – Lasagne, Pasticcio, Spaghetti and Meatballs – were in the ‘Pasta and Rice’ chapter, which also explained how to eat spaghetti and how to create an authentic Italian experience with crusty bread, wine, and parmesan cheese. The ‘Entertaining’ chapter included pizza recipes. ‘International: great dishes from around the world’ was the final chapter, accounting for 35 of the 250 pages and containing 70 recipes. Fulton, who was borrowing cooking utensils from Chinese grocery shops for magazine photographs as early as the 1950s (Shun Wah & Aitken 1999: 133), commenced this chapter with Chinese food. She described ingredients and utensils, and where to get them, explained cooking and cutting techniques, and gave 28 recipes including Sweet and Sour Pork and Chicken and Almonds. Eight curries, plus sambals, followed, then seven Spanish dishes, and four pizza recipes. The only Greek recipe, dolmades, appeared under the next subheading ‘Other Mediterranean dishes’. Consisting of mince and rice in cabbage/vine leaves simmered in beef stock and served with egg and lemon sauce (1978: 231), it was similar to the ‘Cabbage rolls’ recipe in the 1972 Sunbeam booklet and Holishkes in the 1965 edition (34). Although not acknowledged as such, Holishkes is a Jewish dish consisting of rice and mince rolled in cabbage leaves and simmered in tomato juice, lemon juice, sugar and water. ‘Great dishes from Europe’ followed ‘Other Mediterranean dishes’ and included Beef Bourguignonne, Crepes Suzette, Swiss Cheese Fondue, and Ossobucco. Although Dolmades was the only Greek recipe in the chapter, Zucchini a la Grecque (Greek style), Pilaf a la Grecque, and Greek Lemon Soup were listed elsewhere, as were meatballs in egg-lemon sauce and Pastitsio for a Crowd, but Fulton did not identify these as Greek.

Greek representation in cookbooks ran to an occasional dolmades or moussaka recipe until 1976, when Tess Mallos wrote *The Greek cookbook*. Mallos had trouble convincing publishers that Australians were ready for Greek food, but Leo Schofield credits her with transforming the way Australians perceived Greek cuisine. Although widely considered Australia’s first Greek cookbook, it was not the first Greek cookbook used in Australia. Many migrant women own a book by Greek chef and international food writer Nicholas Tselementes that has been dubbed ‘every [Greek] housewife’s cooking bible’ (*About.Com*). Tselementes (1878-1958) studied cooking in Vienna and achieved renown throughout Greece with a monthly magazine called *Odigos Mageirikis*, first published in 1910. After subsequently working in upmarket American restaurants, he returned to Greece in 1932 and wrote a cookbook that was reprinted more than fifteen times and was published in English as *Greek Cookery* in 1950. Although Tselementes was the Jamie Oliver of his time, Greek cuisine arrived in Australia officially with Mallos. The Nursing Mothers Association’s cookbook, also 1976, included recipes for yoghurt, Moussaka (cottage cheese, yoghurt and egg), and Mushrooms a la Grecque and instructions for cooking octopus and squid. In the hope of raising awareness of Greek food amongst non-Greeks, Beulah Middleton et al. released *Ya’ssou! Go Greek: by cooking recipes from the Greek Cookbook* (1978) at a Greek festival that predated Brisbane’s Paniyiri. In addition to moussaka, spanakopita, and dolmades, dips like tzatziki and taramasalata, and Greek pastries, Middleton et al. included Fried Mussels, Kalamaria in Wine, lentil soups, and traditional seasonal meals.

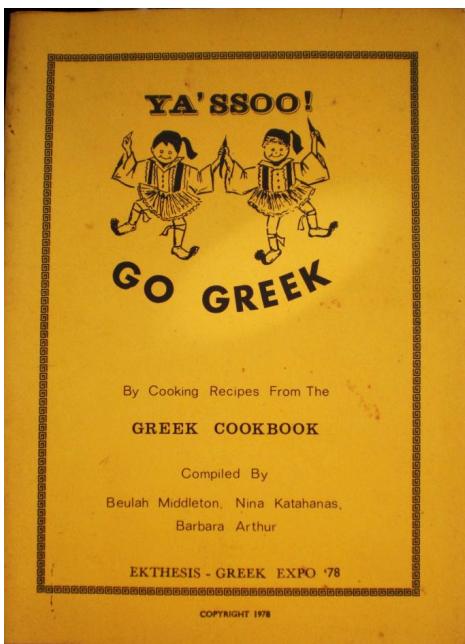


Fig. 1. *Ya'ssoo! Go Greek*, Brisbane, 1978. Courtesy Beulah Castan

One might conclude that because it did not cross café counters Greek food had little impact on Australian cuisine until the late 1970s, but it crossed backyard fences and was shared in café kitchens, an informal introduction not documented in cookbooks. Greek women migrated with their mothers' and grandmothers' recipes packed in their memories and they produced traditional Greek cuisine in suburbs all over the country from ingredients made available through determination and friendships with fellow migrants. Stella Aird, whose mother ran Gilgandra's ABC Café from 1936 to 1990, recalls, 'Most of my Mums Greek cooking was done from memory and she never measured anything! [...] In the cafe we served [...] 'aussie' meals and the Greek food was for family and friends. She did have a note book as well but it is in Greek and I think it was just a reminder notebook' (E-mail). Maria Theodorakis, whose family had cafés in Cootamundra and Batlow, recalls her grandmother's cooking:

I remember mum saying a lot of what [my grandmother] showed mum and my auntie was the 'hands on' type of instruction. I asked [my grandmother] once ... how she made Koulouria and she said 'aahhh you take a pinch of that, a handful of this, maybe 3 scoops of this ... No accurate measurements!!' (E-mail).

Greek women grew the ingredients essential to Greek cooking—basil, garlic, horta (wild greens), eggplant, artichoke, thyme and other herbs—in their backyards, often from plants smuggled into Australia. Mallos recalls that seeds were diligently saved: 'When Mum, or a relative, lost her seeds for, say, okra or aubergine, they would write to each other for replacements' (Schofield). The olive tree in front of Beulah Castan's (nee Middleton) childhood home grew from a cutting brought from Greece. Her mother marinated the olives and also made yoghurt. Beulah dreaded school friends recoiling at the sour milk smell as it hung in a cloth above the back patio, and plaits of garlic caused further concern, but she 'was the most popular kid on the block' because of her mother's baking. Thus, local women who waitressed in Greek cafés, delivery

men, neighbours, and school friends experienced the Mediterranean diet long before the rest of Australia (Risson 2007), and it is through them perhaps that aspects of Greek cuisine seeped into the Australian diet.



Fig. 2. Chris Kelly (centre) in the ABC Café, Gilgandra, 1950s. Courtesy Stella Aird

Few Greek recipes appeared in cookbooks prior to the 1970s, and Greek restaurants are less prevalent than other ethnic restaurants and are still uncommon in country towns, but what constitutes Greek food is a vexing question. Aglaia Kremezi argues that the dishes ‘most non-Greeks consider to be the epitome of traditional Greek cooking [...] have very little to do with traditional foods’. Tselementes set out to ‘cleanse’ Greek cuisine of Turkish and Roman influences, asserting that some French recipes were originally Greek (1959: 21), but purists claim the rich béchamel sauce in his moussaka recipe, which is now synonymous with Greek food, contradicts the spirit of traditional Greek cuisine. Too much refinement is non-Greek. According to Beulah, garlic, onion, lemon, and olive oil are the basic ingredients in Greek cooking: ‘Without the olive oil [...] there would be no Greek cooking’ (Middleton et al. 1978: 4). Australians traditionally used lemon in desserts: Pell relegated it to sago and suet pudding and all 27 C.W.A. lemon recipes were desserts. Australians equated olive oil with the dreaded castor oil dispensed for medicinal purposes, as Mallos explains: ‘If you wanted olive oil, only Faulding’s was available in small bottles from the chemist’ (Schofield 2010). Olive oil is found in the C.W.A. cookbook mostly in the section entitled ‘Simple home remedies’, where it serves as tarnish preventative, muscle embrocation, furniture polish, and tonic. Greek women, on the other hand, bought four-gallon drums of olive oil from Samios Foods in Brisbane, which retailed from the late 1940s/early 1950s, and from Italian producers in Griffith, applying it with lemon juice to salads, vegetables, soups, meats and fish.

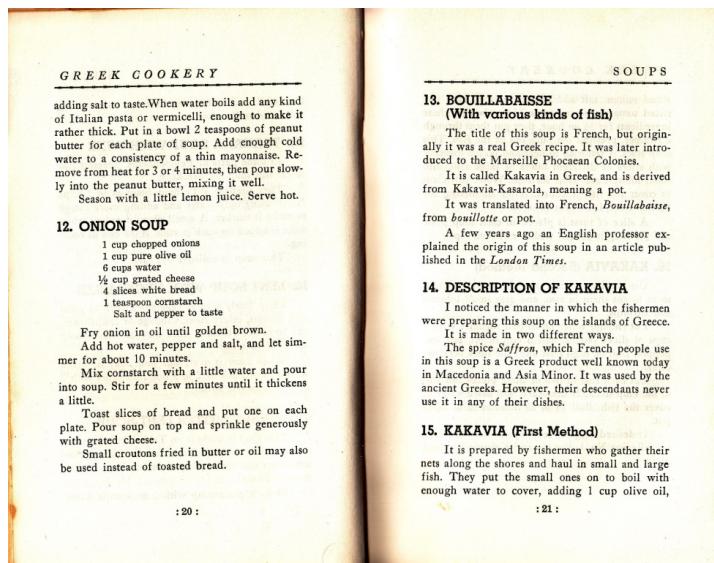


Fig. 3. Bouillabaisse recipe. Nicholas Tselementes' *Greek cookery* 1959, 20-21. Courtesy Maria Theodorakis. Photo: Toni Risson

Although moussaka features less regularly than pizza and Asian stir fry in the non-Greek-Australian kitchen, the legacy of Greek cuisine is more pervasive than one might suspect. For example, lemon and olive oil now commonly dress salads in Australian homes, and Greek salad, yoghurt, crusty bread, and olives are used widely. Many of us turn more readily to a simple salad of fresh greens, local olives, crumbled feta, and chunks of tomato laced with lemon and olive oil than to the fussy decorative arrangements of canned pineapple rings, boiled egg halves, beetroot slices, grated carrot and iceberg lettuce that feature in women's magazines of the 1960s. Food culture also encompasses methods of preparation and rituals of consumption, and here Greeks and Australians now hold in common practices that were once a source of difference: Greeks break bread and cut tomatoes into wedges, while Australians used to slice both; Greeks fry cheese, while Australians grilled it; Greeks dip bread into oil, while Australians buttered it; Greeks rely heavily on vegetables, while Australians viewed vegetables as an accompaniment to meat. Furthermore, on arriving in Australia, Greek immigrants listed home-centeredness as an Australian social behaviour that seemed unnatural to them: 'All Australians do is to go home from work, eat, watch television and go to bed. What sort of life is that? It would drive you mad' (Jupp 1966: 105, 125). For these migrants food had been part of a communal lifestyle that was absent in their new homeland. Although not exclusively Greek, a communal lifestyle, the use of simple fresh ingredients, and the practices involved in using those ingredients are the essence of true Greek cuisine, and these are very much a part of contemporary Australian culture. It may be less obvious than that of China, Italy and India, but the influence of Greek cuisine has been significant indeed.

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