

THE LACONIAN TABLE

A Culinary History of Sparta, the Parnonas, and the Mani

By Pericles Gregoriou

Preface: A Note on Voice and Memory

I spent almost every summer of my childhood in Polydrosos, the village also called Tsintzina, perched at around a thousand metres on the slopes of Mount Parnonas. But my grandparents raised me in Athens, and Sparta and Tsintzina were where we went for the summers. In my memory Polydrosos is not a picturesque destination but a place of stone houses, fir trees, and the sound of wind through the gorge. When I was a child, the road to the village was not paved. The electricity came in the 1980s. I remember when it arrived, and I remember what it was like before.

This book is not a scholarly survey with personal asides. It is my book, grounded in a childhood of Athens and a lifetime of summers in Sparta and on the mountain, and in the conviction that the history of Laconia is best understood through its table. My grandmother Katerina cooked a beef version of the Spartan broth—beef, broth, carrots, onion, lemon, olive oil. That broth is the heart of this book, and the thread that connects the ancient *syssitia* to my own childhood.

SECTION ONE: HISTORICAL AND REGIONAL SURVEY, WITH PANTRY REVIEW

Chapter 1: Three Layers of Laconia

Ancient Laconia: The *Syssitia* and the Spartan Way of Eating

The culinary history of Laconia begins not in the kitchen but in the common mess. The institution of the *syssitia* (or *pheiditia*) was the beating heart of Spartan social and military life, a ritualized daily gathering of roughly fifteen men who shared frugal meals and forged the bonds of comradeship that underpinned the Spartan state. Each member contributed a fixed monthly portion: barley groats, wine, cheese, figs, and a small sum for *opson* (relish). The contributions were substantial—the philosopher *Dikaiarchos* records the maximum as three Attic *hemimedinnoi* of barley, about eleven or twelve *choes* of wine, a weight of cheese, and figs. This was not mere sustenance; it was a mechanism of citizenship. The man who could not contribute lost his standing among the *Homoioi*, the Equals.

The contrast with the Athenian symposium is instructive. The symposium was a private, aristocratic drinking party enlivened by poetry, philosophy, and erotic play. The Spartan *syssitia* was public, egalitarian, and compulsory—a school of citizenship, not a stage for individual display. The austerity of the Spartan messes was deliberate, designed to contrast with aristocratic symposia and to level social distinctions among the citizen body. Recent scholarship has refined this picture. Archaic Sparta was not devoid of symposium culture; black-figure

Laconian vases from the sixth century BCE depict komastai and symposiasts with the same aristocratic trappings found elsewhere in Greece. But the classical syssitia transformed these aristocratic warrior rituals into an institution of the hoplite class, extending the common meal to all citizens and subordinating private pleasure to public discipline.

The famous "black broth" (melas zomos), a pork-blood stew, was notorious in Athens for its harshness. The broth gets its dark hue from pig's blood, emulsified with vinegar, which would have packed extra iron into the diet. But the syssitia also received game contributed by members, and Spartiates likely ate better than the average Greek in terms of protein and quantity. A Spartan at Sphacteria received two Attic choinikes of barley daily—roughly 1.4 kilograms, yielding about 4,600 calories, a substantial allowance for an active soldier. Wine was carefully rationed, for the state depended on constant sobriety.

For the book's ancient recipes, the foundational scholarship is Andrew Dalby's *Siren Feasts*, the first serious social history of Greek food, along with *A Companion to Food in the Ancient World* edited by Wilkins and Nadeau. These works provide the scaffolding for understanding what Laconians actually ate: barley rather than wheat as the staple grain, olives and olive oil, figs, cheese, honey, pork, and whatever the forests and mountains of Taygetos and Parnon provided in game and greens.

Byzantine Laconia: Mystras and the Palaiologan Table

The Byzantine centuries transformed Laconia's culinary landscape. The fortified city of Mystras, rising on the slopes of Taygetos near Sparta, became the capital of the Despotate of the Morea and a center of late Byzantine aristocratic culture. A 2023 conference held at Mystras examined the banquets and urban diet of Palaiologan Mystras through historical, literary, and archaeological sources. The published proceedings bring together sixteen studies that explore perceptions and attitudes regarding diet in the Despotate of Morea, as well as practices of food production, distribution, and consumption, through historical and literary sources, manuscripts, iconography, architecture, and other archaeological data. The volume emphasizes the factors that shaped dietary patterns—population mobility, trade, and socioeconomic developments—and highlights preservation and processing techniques, as well as the development of high-quality products and sophisticated gastronomic practices.

Andrew Dalby's *Tastes of Byzantium* brings this vanished cuisine to life, describing how Byzantine cooks fused Roman spices with the seafood and simple local foods of the Aegean and Greek world—a cuisine that was the direct precursor to much of modern Greek and Turkish food. For Laconia specifically, Mystras represents the crucial link between the ancient past and the modern table. The despotate's proximity to Sparta meant that the memory of the syssitia persisted even as the cuisine grew more refined, absorbing influences from Constantinople and the Italian maritime republics.

The Flight to the Refuges: How the Spartiate Bloodline Endured

The history of Laconia after the Roman conquest is often told as a story of decline: the *syssitia* dissolved, the *agoge* faded, and the once-mighty Spartan state became a tourist attraction for Roman travelers. But the bloodline of the ancient Spartiates did not disappear. It retreated—into the mountains, the fortified villages, and the remote strongholds that would preserve Laconian identity through centuries of invasion and occupation.

Parnonas was the first refuge. In antiquity, the high summer villages of the Parnonas served as seasonal encampments for Spartan warriors—places where the mountain pastures and cool air provided respite from the summer heat of the Eurotas valley. When the Slavic invasions swept through the Peloponnese in the sixth and seventh centuries, these summer villages became refuges in earnest, the places to which the descendants of the Spartiates withdrew when the valley was unsafe.

The remotest Mani was the second refuge. The Mani peninsula, that arid, rocky finger of southern Laconia, was never fully subdued by any outside power. Its tower houses and fortified settlements offered protection, and its poverty made it unattractive to invaders. The Maniots—fierce, independent, and deeply conscious of their Spartan ancestry—maintained their bloodline in isolation. Their cuisine, with its emphasis on preservation (*syglino*, *paspalas*, *rusks*), reflects the conditions of a people who expected siege and scarcity. The geomorphology of Inner Mani—rocky, barren, and non-arable for the most part, with high mountain peaks and low vegetation—shaped a way of life defined by the struggle for subsistence. The Maniots' eating habits and the formation of a local cuisine with a special character were direct responses to this landscape.

Monemvasia was the third refuge. The rock-fortress city, connected to the mainland by a narrow causeway, was nearly impregnable. It became a Byzantine naval base, a Venetian trading post, and an Ottoman prize—but through all these transitions, it remained a repository of Laconian identity.

Mystras was the fourth refuge. The fortified capital of the Despotate of the Morea, rising on the slopes of Taygetos near ancient Sparta, became the political and cultural center of late Byzantine Laconia. Here, the memory of Sparta was not merely preserved but reconstituted: the Despots of the Morea styled themselves as heirs to the ancient Laconian tradition, and the city's churches, palaces, and banquets reflected a self-conscious continuity with the classical past.

Together, these four refuges—Parnonas, the Mani, Monemvasia, and Mystras—formed a network of survival. The Spartiate bloodline was not maintained in a single place but dispersed across the strongholds of Laconia, each refuge contributing its own piece of the inheritance. In the modern Laconian table, all four refuges meet.

The Remoteness of the Parnonas Villages

I know this from Polydrosos, where we went every summer from Athens. Until the 1980s, the village had no reliable electricity. Until the 1990s, the road that reached it was largely unpaved.

This isolation was the very mechanism by which the old way of life was maintained—the mountain customs, the cuisine of preservation and self-sufficiency.

Vamvakou is the ancestral village of the Niarchos family. Stavros Niarchos, whose family came from Vamvakou and who was raised in Athens, brought electricity directly from Megalopolis to the village in the 1960s, "when it was nowhere to be found." He also brought running water. This act of private patronage gave Vamvakou a modernity that its neighbors lacked—a reminder that the Parnonas was not uniformly isolated but shaped by the particular histories of each village. In 2018, five young people hailing from the village, in collaboration with the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, founded Vamvakou Revival, a Social Cooperative Enterprise that has brought a restaurant, a café, and a guesthouse back to the village. The village, built in the fifteenth century at 903 metres amid fir, walnut, and chestnut trees, is once again alive with visitors and programming.

For Polydroso and the others—Karyes, Kastanitsa, Kosmas—the arrival of electricity and asphalt came only at the end of the twentieth century. When I eat Iphegenia's wild boar stew with dried figs, I am eating a dish that was cooked in the same village, over the same kind of fire, long before the road was paved or the lights came on.

The Villages of Parnonas as Summer Settlements

The travel.gr article I have consulted describes Parnonas (or Malevos) as a mountain 1,934 metres high and 100 kilometres long, extending from Tegea to Cape Maleas, its slopes covered in oak, fir, chestnut, and plane trees, with villages perched amid gorges, springs, and waterfalls. The article profiles four villages in detail—Vamvakou, Kastanitsa, Tsintzina (Polydroso), and Kosmas—but notes that "there are many villages" and that the mountain "boasts dozens of villages" beyond these. It specifically mentions Prastos, the old capital of Tsakonia, Agios Petros, the largest village of the region, Karyes, and Geraki with its Byzantine necropolis.

Drawing on the article and other sources, the villages of Parnonas include: Vamvakou, Kastanitsa, Polydroso (Tsintzina), Kosmas, Prastos, Agios Petros, Karyes, Geraki, Vaskina, Varvitsa, Vassaras, Veria, Vresthena, Megali Vrysi, Agrianoi, Chrysafa, Zarafona (Kallithea), and Goritsa.

The villages of the Parnonas were, for the most part, summer settlements—places to which the Spartans went when the heat of the Eurotas valley became unbearable. In antiquity these were the seasonal encampments of the Spartan warriors, where the mountain pastures and the cool air provided respite from the summer. In the centuries that followed, they remained what they had always been: the summer homes of Spartan families, who moved up the mountain in the warm months and returned to Sparta for the winter. Very few people were "from" the villages in the sense of having no other home. They were Spartans, and the villages were their summer places.

This is the way to understand the villages of my family. Polydroso, where I spent almost every summer of my childhood, was the summer village of Spartan families—the place we went when the plain grew hot, the place of the fir trees and the gorge and the cool nights. Zarafona, the village of my grandmother, was the same: a summer place, a mountain home, the village of a family whose life was in Sparta. Goritsa, the village of my grandfather Elias, is the exception that proves the rule—it is a winter village, the place the people of Polydroso move down to when the mountain cold sets in, and it is one of the few settlements lived in year-round.

The distinction matters for the book because it explains the character of the Parnonas table. The summer village is the mountain table of a Spartan family—the rooster roasted on a Sunday, the boar stewed with figs, the goglies pressed by hand, the lalangia fried for a festival. It is Spartan cooking in a mountain setting, and the people who eat it are Spartans at their summer homes. This is why the villages of the Parnonas preserve the Laconian table so faithfully: they were never separate from Sparta. They were Sparta's summer.

The remoteness I remember—the unpaved road, the late electricity—was the remoteness of a summer place, crossed every year by families who carried their tables with them. And the pattern held into my own childhood: raised in Athens, we returned each summer to Sparta and went up the mountain, as the family had always done. The summer village is not a memory of the distant past; it is the rhythm of my own life.

[PHOTO: The village of Polydroso (Tsintzina) on the slopes of Parnonas]

The Gregoriou and Manousopoulos Families: From Parnonas to Alexandria

My grandfather Elias Gregoriou came from the village of Goritsa, and my grandmother Katerina Manousopoulos came from Zarafona. Her father had moved the family back to Sparta in 1912, and she attended the Hill School in Athens—the girls' boarding school founded by American Episcopal missionaries John Henry Hill and his wife Frances in 1831, just after Greek independence, one of the earliest institutions in Greece to educate girls. The family's life was in Athens and Sparta both—the city for the school and the work, the Spartan home for the family, the mountain for the summers.

After their marriage, Elias took Katerina to Alexandria, where he took over the family cotton business. The move was part of a larger pattern of Greek commercial expansion in the eastern Mediterranean: the Greek community of Alexandria was one of the most prosperous and culturally vibrant in the diaspora, and cotton was one of the great commodities of the Egyptian economy. The family business connected the mountain villages of Parnonas to the cotton markets of Alexandria, and its fortunes were tied to the wider Greek world of the Mediterranean.

This is the story of modern Laconia: the village and the city, the mountain and the sea, Parnonas and Alexandria, Sparta and Chicago. A man from Goritsa took a woman from Zarafona, by way of Chicago and Sparta, to Alexandria, and the family's later life was in Athens

—with Sparta and Tsintzina as the summer return. The table they kept was a Laconian table, and the recipes in this book are the inheritance of that journey.

The Spartan Broth of My Grandmother

My grandparents raised me in Athens, and my grandmother cooked a beef version of the Spartan broth in Sparta, where we went for the summers. It was not the black broth of the ancient syssitia, the pork-blood stew that Athenians mocked. It was her own version: beef, beef broth, carrots, onions, garlic, bay leaves, lemon, olive oil, salt, and pepper. The lemon was the bright note at the end, the acidity that cut through the richness of the meat. The carrots gave sweetness. The onions and garlic gave depth. The olive oil was the foundation.

This is the dish that connects the ancient world to my own childhood. The melas zomos of Plutarch and Athenaeus was the centerpiece of the syssitia, the common mess of the Spartan warriors. Katerina's broth was the centerpiece of our table in Sparta. The ingredients had changed—beef instead of pork blood, lemon instead of vinegar—but the idea was the same: a nourishing broth, a dish of the household, a taste of Sparta.

When I eat this broth, I am eating the history of Laconia. I am eating the syssitia and the Byzantine table and the kitchen of Zarafona and the Spartan home of my grandparents. Katerina lived until 2000; she saw the twentieth century from beginning to end, and through all of it, she cooked. This is for her.

The Mani: A Land Never Occupied

The Mani peninsula occupies a unique position in the history of the Greek nation. While other regions of Greece at times opposed the Turks during the four-hundred-year Ottoman occupation, Mani continually opposed them. The peninsula was never fully subdued. After the Fall of Constantinople to the Fourth Crusade in 1204, Italian and French knights occupied parts of the Peloponnese, and in 1249 the Venetians occupied the Mani, building fortresses including Mystras and Passavas. But when Mystras fell to the Ottomans in 1460, the Mani was not subdued and retained its internal self-government in exchange for an annual tribute. Local chieftains governed on behalf of the Ottomans, but as Ottoman power declined, the mountains of the Mani became a stronghold of the kleftes, bandits who also fought against the Ottomans. The Maniots revolted eight different times against the Turks after 1453. The peninsula's rugged terrain, its tower houses, and its tightly bound clan society made it a place that invaders could enter but never hold. This is the historical condition that shaped the Maniot cuisine of preservation—syglino, paspalas, rusks—the food of a people who expected siege and refused submission.

[PHOTO: The tower houses of Limeni, Mani]

The Greek War of Independence: Initiated in the Mani, Led by Mavromichalis

The Greek War of Independence was initiated in the Mani. On March 17, 1821, the Maniots, under the leadership of Petrobey Mavromichalis, declared war against the Ottoman Empire in Areopoli. Raising an army of thousands, they marched on Kalamata and seized it from the Ottomans on March 23, 1821. The Hellenic Parliament's own historical account records that on March 23, 1821, in Kalamata, the Messinian Senate was constituted with Petros Mavromichalis at its head. In May 1821, at the initiative of the Messinian Senate, a pan-Peloponnesian assembly was held at the Monastery of Kaltetzon in Mantinea under the presidency of Petros Mavromichalis, with the participation of notables, clerics, military men, and members of the Filiki Etaireia. The Mani was not merely a participant in the revolution; it was its point of origin, and Mavromichalis was its first leader. The tower houses of the Mani, the clan loyalties, and the warrior ethos that had preserved the peninsula through centuries of external pressure now became the engine of Greek independence.

The Last Worshippers of the Ancient Gods

The Mani was the last place in Greece to give up the worship of the Olympian gods. Christianity reached the Mani slowly, impeded by its rugged terrain and tightly bound clan society. Archaeological evidence indicates that churches began appearing in the fifth and sixth centuries, yet older pagan practices continued for generations, observed in private or semi-public spaces. In several instances, Christian sites were constructed directly atop earlier pagan temples: the Monastery of Panagia Yiatrissa in Kastania is traditionally believed to stand on the ruins of a temple to Athena, and churches around Areopoli and Kitries incorporated Roman-era architectural elements from nearby sanctuaries. The 13th-century Church of St. John in Keria features an unusually large number of embedded ancient and medieval carved reliefs, columns, and capitals, preserving a tangible "material memory" of Mani's pre-Christian past.

Byzantine sources report that Mani's conversion eventually took place—and not peacefully. Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus credits Emperor Basil I with bringing Christianity to Mani, implying that imperial pressure and coercion played a decisive role. The peninsula drifted out of Byzantine control as the empire's power declined in the ninth century, and its mountainous terrain allowed the Maniots to evade Christianization efforts, preserving pagan traditions. The sources indicate that the worship of the Olympian gods persisted in the Mani until sometime in the ninth to twelfth century, making it the last redoubt of the ancient religion in the Greek world. This is the deepest layer of the Maniot inheritance: a people who held on to Sparta's gods long after the rest of Greece had turned to Christ.

Leonidio and the Tsakonian Eggplant: An Honorable Mention

To the northeast of Laconia, in the mountains of Arcadia, lies Leonidio—a town named for a Spartan king and the heartland of Tsakonia, where the ancient Doric dialect of Sparta is most clearly preserved. The Tsakonians are the descendants of ancient Laconians who retreated to the mountains, and their speech is the closest living relative of the dialect spoken in ancient Sparta.

The etymology of "Tsakonian" is a linguistic puzzle. The most widely accepted theory derives Tsakonas from "Exo-Lakonians" ("Ἐξω Λάκωνες"—"Outer Laconians" or "Laconians outside [Laconia]"). These were Laconians who lived beyond the borders of the traditional Laconian territory, and over time the phrase contracted: Exo-Lakones → Etsolakones → Etsakones → Tsakones. Other theories connect the name to trachon (τράχων), meaning "rough, uneven ground," or to diakones (διάκονοι), "servants" or "guards," reflecting the historical role of Tsakonians as fortress guards in the Byzantine military. Byzantine writers record that the Tsakonians were assigned to guard frontier fortresses.

The surname Tsakonas (Τσάκωνας) is therefore not merely a regional identifier but an ethnic name carried by individuals whose ancestors hailed from Tsakonia. It is a name that literally means "the Tsakonian"—the descendant of the ancient Laconians who preserved the Doric dialect.

The Tsakonian eggplant (melitzana Tsakoniki), a PDO product of Leonidio, is therefore not merely a Peloponnesian neighbor to Laconian cuisine: it is a living link to the ancient Laconian world, a taste of the Doric heritage that survived outside Laconia's borders. Leonidio is named for a Spartan king; its people speak the oldest surviving form of Doric; and its eggplant is the vegetable of that inheritance.

Chapter 2: The Laconian Pantry

The pantry of Laconia is built on a few fundamental ingredients, each with deep historical roots.

Olive Oil. The Koroneiki olive, named for Koroni in neighboring Messinia but cultivated throughout Laconia, produces the region's signature extra virgin oil. The landscape has been shaped by olive groves since antiquity. Boukouvala—fresh olive oil spread on charcoal-grilled bread—is a harvest celebration food.

Barley and Wheat. The ancient Spartiates ate barley (alphita). Modern Laconian cooking uses wheat flour for lalangia (crispy fried dough ribbons, eaten with graviera and honey) and handmade pastas like goglies, hylopites, and trachanas. Trachanas is a fermented grain-and-milk pasta, prepared in summer and dried in the sun, used to make a hearty winter soup.

Cheese. Sfela, a semi-hard white PDO cheese, is the Mani's great contribution. It appears in pies, salads, and on its own. Mizithra, fresh or dried, is grated over pasta and used in pies. Anthotyro is the fresh, soft cheese of the region.

Cured Meats. Syglino is pork cured with salt and smoked over olive wood, flavored with orange peel and spices. Paspalas is its close kin, a pork confit. Orange sausages, seasoned with orange peel, are another Mani specialty.

Wild Greens and Herbs. From the slopes of Taygetos and Parnonas come wild greens, thyme, sage, oregano, and other aromatic herbs. Villagers still dry tomatoes and herbs in the sun.

Honey. Thyme, pine, sage, orange, and blossom honeys are all produced in Laconia, with Taygetos honey particularly prized.

Legumes. Lupin beans (lupina) were the food of the poor in nineteenth-century Mani—the "lupin-eaters"—but are now appreciated for their nutty flavor after the long soaking and boiling that removes their bitterness. In the Mani, they were boiled in large pots, then placed in sacks and thrown into the sea for forty-eight hours before being dried in the sun.

Citrus. Laconia has one of Greece's largest orange groves. Oranges appear in salads, sausages, pies, stews, and sweets.

Fish and Seafood. From the Gulf of Laconia and the Myrtoon Sea come fresh fish, octopus, and shellfish, central to the coastal tavernas of Limeni and Gytheio.

Prickly Pear. The fruit of the prickly pear cactus, abundant in the Mani, is made into a jam that is both sweet and slightly tart.

Chapter 3: The Tables of Laconia—A Restaurant Guide

Sparta

Kexribari sits in the central square of Sparta, and it is the ouzeri of the city—the place of small plates, mezedes, and the long afternoon. The modern taverna puts Laconian specialties at the center: crispy pitarouda, smoked syglino, and regional sfela, alongside beef ribs with kritharaki in graviera cream and pasta made the grandmother's way. It is the table where the Spartan pantry is served in small dishes, with ouzo or tsipouro, and it is the first place to send a traveler who wants to taste Laconia in the city.

Tsipouradiko tou 50 is the other ouzeri of the center, serving traditional meze with tsipouro and Greek music. It has a nice courtyard in summer and a local, lived-in atmosphere—the kind of place where the Spartans themselves sit, and where the traveler is welcome without being a customer. It is the ouzeri of the evening, the table of conversation and song.

En Hatipi (Στου Τσαγκάρη) is repeatedly described as the number one traditional taverna in Sparta for home-cooked food. The lunch menu of magirefta is served at very low prices, and the atmosphere is warm—the place locals recommend when asked for good cooked food.

Taverna Kakaletis is praised in reviews as serving the best pork steak some customers have ever eaten, with warm hospitality, a fireplace in winter, and a garden in summer.

Loukoulos is a family-owned restaurant that blends modern elegance with a welcoming atmosphere, known for rich gnocchi and a fillet with fig and cream sauce.

Marmara Restaurant is described as a hidden treasure capturing Greek hospitality, with homemade bread, grilled fish, and a signature olive oil available for purchase.

Lesxi Symmetron (Symmetron) sits on the ground floor of the neoclassical City Hall building on the central square, a space dating to 1910 that now functions as a café-bistro with a library and dining room. It is the place for coffee, a light meal, or a glass of wine while watching the city go about its business.

Ta Tsintzina (Οινομαγειρείον Τα Τσίντζινα), on Konstantinou Palaiologou 82, is a family-run wine-cookery that reviewers describe as "mom's cooking"—lamb, burgers, horta, and yuvarlakia, from a sixty-three-year-old family business. It is the kind of place where the food tastes of the village, even in the city.

Polydroso / Tsintzina (Parnonas)

Koukounari, run by Iphegenia, is the heart of the village table. Her wild boar stew with dried figs is the signature dish of the house—dark, sticky, and deeply aromatic, the meat falling from the bone and the figs melting into the sauce. Equally celebrated is her roasted rooster, slowly roasted with local herbs, olive oil, and wine until the skin is crisp and the meat tender. The family produces nearly everything they serve—bread, cheese, vegetables, wine, and tsipouro—on their own land. Pritanio offers the traditional breakfast—fresh bread, honey, cheese, preserves—and is where you sleep and start the day.

Vamvakou

Voureiko sits on the main square of Vamvakou, the ancestral village of the Niarchos family, serving traditional Greek cuisine in the shadow of the church of Agios Haralambos and the great plane tree. The Ruga of Vamvakou has a café-tavern alongside its rooms.

Kastanitsa

Liakouris is a traditional tavern a few meters from where you leave your car, as you climb the cobbled path toward the center of the village—local flavors and ingredients in a chestnut-tree setting. The village, built amphitheatrically at 840 metres amid chestnut trees, is known for its slate-roofed tower houses.

Kosmas

Kedros serves traditional Greek flavors in a courtyard with a view, in the village at 1,150 meters amid the fir forests and what is probably Greece's largest chestnut forest.

Karyes / Arachova

The main square of Karyes is the gastronomic heart of the village, and two tavernas stand at its center as constants. Taverna Platanos, run by the Koutsogiorga family, and Taverna Parnonas, run by the Papastavrou family, are the famous establishments that have made the square one of the most beloved dining destinations in the Peloponnese. Platanos is the older of the two, its history reaching back through generations, and it is known for its grilled meats and its parade of Peloponnesian dishes—fricassee, stews, and the local specialty of lemonade with chestnuts and peas. But the king of its menu is the Bardouni rooster, the Maniot preparation that carries the flavors of the southern Mani into the Parnonas mountains, followed by a juicy walnut pie with a light aroma of bergamot. Parnonas, alongside it, is the other pillar of the square, a traditional restaurant that has fed travelers and villagers alike for decades. The newer MELIOS café-mezedopoleio and the ever-present SAVAS cafe-bar-snack complete the square, making it a place where the old Laconian table is not a memory but a daily practice. The village is a traditional settlement at 950 metres on the slopes of Parnonas, known for its local products: chestnuts, walnuts, organic oil and olives, tea, oregano, honey, cheese, sweets, pasta, village bread, and rusks.

Mystras

Beyond the village tavernas, two resort restaurants offer a different register of Laconian dining. At Euphoria Retreat, the Gaia Restaurant serves healthy and creative gourmet cuisine, prepared with fresh local ingredients and designed to nourish and rejuvenate. The tables sit under the dappled shade of mulberry trees, with panoramic views of citrus groves and the mountains, and the menu emphasizes seasonal, local produce, with options for vegetarian, vegan, and dairy-free diets. Euphoria's culinary approach customizes dishes to guests' personal metabolic needs—a philosophy that is the opposite of the taverna's abundance, but which shares with it a commitment to the ingredients of the place. At the Mystras Grand Palace Resort & Spa, the dining is more conventional but no less rooted in the region: the hotel has two restaurants, Georgia's Restaurant, serving Mediterranean cuisine with a family, traditional, and romantic atmosphere for dinner, and Elia Restaurant, serving Greek cuisine at breakfast. The resort also offers a Palataki Restaurant on site, and its breakfast is a generous buffet that includes the opportunity to experience traditional Greek coffee.

In the villages around Mystras, Taverna Pikoulia is in the mountain village of Pikoulia, a short detour from Mystras—a family tavern with a panoramic terrace, generous portions, and dishes like beef stewed with citrus and fried zucchini. O Ellinas sits on the central square of Mystras, known for its roast pork and a warmth that reviewers describe as "a warm hug of home cooking."

[PHOTO: The Byzantine churches of Mystras]

Monemvasia

Monemvasia has two souls: the atmospheric castle on the rock, and the more relaxed seaside town across the causeway. Inside the walls, the lanes hide some of the best tables in Laconia.

Marianthi sits in a traditional Monemvasian house, where Mrs. Magda—sister of Marianthi, who first opened the taverna back in 1970, when Monemvasia was nothing like it is today—cooks and serves dishes that taste of the old town: soutzoukakia heavy with cumin, handmade cheese pies with honey and sesame, meatballs fragrant with mint, and unmatched zucchini fritters. You accompany them with wine and stories of the old Monemvasia, and you pay around €20 per person, with fruit offered at the end.

Matoula is the oldest and most beloved taverna in town, open since 1950, when it was the only cookshop inside the castle walls. Today the daughter and son-in-law continue the tradition, with the famous home-cooked dishes now spread across one of the most beautiful balconies in the castle. Here you eat soutzoukakia with plenty of cumin, cabbage rolls in egg-lemon sauce, pork braised with orange, rooster with noodles, moussaka, and the local tsaitia—herb pies with thin handmade phyllo.

Kanoni (To Kanoni) is the favourite for its rooftop terrace overlooking the main square, the cannon, and the sea beyond. The menu runs from breakfast—omelets, yogurt with honey—to moussaka, calamari, lamb, and aubergine, with a seafood orzo that reviewers single out, and a sea bream fricassee with boiled greens and creamed celeriac that one guest called divine. The castle restaurants are a little more expensive than elsewhere, but still reasonable for the quality and the setting.

Chrisovoulo Restaurant & Wine Bar is the poshest of the castle tables, with gourmet Greek plates and carefully curated wines served with sea views. The menu offers creative salads, veal, risotto, sea bass, octopus, and desserts, and reviewers praise the salmon fillet and the traditional saiti pie—a turnover filled with tangy greens and feta—along with a lemon curd that one called out of this world. Prices are higher than elsewhere in Monemvasia, and the service has drawn mixed reports, but the setting and the cooking justify a visit for those who want a special evening.

Voltes, just inside the castle gate, is a warmer, more affordable option, with a menu that includes meatballs, Grandma Zoe's glina in the pan, grilled feta with honey, and local wines, including orange and unfiltered bottles. Reviewers praise the brioche buns with octopus, the stuffed aubergine rolls, and the lemon and chocolate mousses with olive oil and sea salt.

Oinomelo offers some of the old farm recipes that the other restaurants do not, and reviewers who have eaten across the Peloponnese call it the best meal of their trip—baked chicken with grapes and pistachios, pork steaks with orange and honey, and an Imam that one table ordered three times. The terrace is lovely, the service warm, and the local house wine inexpensive.

Outside the walls, in the town itself, Asterias sits by the sea with a view of the rock, specializing in fresh seafood—barbouni from Monemvasia, shrimp, calamari—alongside traditional Greek

dishes and a shrimp pasta and an "Asterias" seafood salad that regulars recommend. Ampelakia Taverna, a family operation a short distance from the sea, emphasizes authentic Greek cooking with ingredients the owners often produce themselves, and its home wine is a point of pride.

[PHOTO: The rock of Monemvasia]

Limeni (Mani)

Taki's is the fish tavern right on the water, where you can see a local fisherman cleaning freshly caught seafood before you, and wild turtles swimming beside you as you eat fish grilled in the woodfire oven with local olive oil, lemon, oregano, and salt.

Gytheio

I Trata (Η Τράτα) is the corner taverna on the waterfront overlooking the port, family-run since 1987. Its defining feature is the glass display cooler where the day's catch is laid out on ice—you choose your fish, it is weighed, cleaned, and grilled over charcoal for you. The menu also includes fish soup, grilled octopus, fried red mullet, and shrimp saganaki.

Saga Fish Restaurant is the white-tablecloth seafood destination by the water, known for fish soup, grilled shrimp, and riganada.

Diosmos is the hidden gem away from the tourist waterfront, with elevated Greek cooking and a local wine list.

Palirria Fish Tavern sits on the waterfront with a view of Cranae, and it is the kind of place reviewers describe as "a good fisherman's meal with no frills"—fresh fish, fried calamari, and ouzo appetizers, served with a smile at prices that do not punish you for eating by the sea.

To Limperdon – Kyra Argyro is a short drive outside Gytheio, in the hills, and it is worth the ride. The Kapetanakos family runs it—Matriarch Kyria Argyro and her children Gregory, Irini, and Vasso—and everything comes from their own farm or the surrounding land: honey, wine, eggs, oil, olives, vegetables, cheese, meat. The kleftiko is among the best reviewers have had, the rabbit is a reason to return, and the day's dishes are presented verbally by Kyria Argyro herself. One guest called it "having dinner with the family," and another gave it six stars out of five. It is the village table at its purest, and it belongs in this book alongside the waterfront tavernas.

[PHOTO: The waterfront of Gytheio with the islet of Cranae]

Elafonisos

Elafonisos lies in the open sea off the southern tip of Laconia, a small, flat island of nineteen square kilometres reached in ten minutes by ferry from Pounta. The main settlement is the

center of life: in summer the waterfront road often becomes a pedestrian promenade, and in the little harbor the boats stay tied a few metres from the taverna tables, while daily life moves at a slow pace—food beside the wave, conversation without hurry, direct contact with the sea.

Ourania Taverna Ouzeri is the small, family-run place on the seafront where the locals sit, which is the best recommendation a traveler can follow. The mother cooks and a son waits tables, and the menu runs to grilled sardines, green beans, moussaka, horta, marinated anchovies, dakos, fried fish, and the local tsaiti—the thin-pastry cheese pie of Laconia—along with stuffed squid and a local cheese pie that reviewers single out. The portions are generous, the prices are among the most reasonable on an island that runs expensive, and the final touch of a small ice cream is offered by the house. It is the non-pretentious local fish taverna, and it is the table to seek out first.

Boukas Fish Tavern is the fish taverna and ouzeri that the gastronomy awards of the region recognize for its fresh seafood and mezedes, with daily access to fresh fish and a warm, hospitable character that serves the local culinary tradition. Aronis is the traditional family fish taverna on Kontogoni beach, with fish from the family's own caique and from local fishermen, olive oil from their own groves in the Kato Nisi area, organically grown wine, and dishes like traditional fish soup, stuffed calamari, and seafood pasta.

Limnitsa sits near the beach on Panagia, with a traditional and relaxed atmosphere, a sea view, and umbrellas and sunbeds for those who swim and eat in the same afternoon. Reviewers praise the eggplant salad, the grilled catch of the day, the chicken souvlaki, and the fish soup, though the reports are mixed on consistency. Ntagiantás is on the water in the main town, a neat restaurant with homemade food and kind staff, where the fish is weighed before it is prepared and the fish soup is served with the fish on an extra plate rather than floating in the broth.

For the traveler who wants a table away from the tourist main street, Sta Kala Kathoumena is the hidden gem, with vegan options like imam and stuffed vegetables, friendly service, and food that one visitor called the best restaurant on the island. Estiatório Antónis at the port has a dedicated vegan section on the menu with stuffed vegetables and orzo, though the reports on price and execution vary.

The island's tables are not the grand tavernas of the Mani or the ouzeri of Sparta. They are the summer tables of a small island, where the fish is what the boats brought in, the oil is from the grove, and the wine is local. Elafonisos is the last stop before the open sea, and it belongs in this book because it is still Laconia—the same coast, the same pantry, the same hospitality, carried across a ten-minute ferry ride.

Leonidio (Arcadia—Honorable Mention)

To Pachni sits on the road to Tsitalia, just outside Leonidio, and it is a traditional grill house with local meats, roasted dishes, and mezedes—the kind of place that feeds the traveler who has

come to see the Tsakonian eggplant growing in the fields of the Doric heartland. It is not a gourmet destination; it is a village table, and that is precisely the point. The town itself is included in the book as the honorable mention—the Spartan foundation, the Tsakonian Doric dialect, the PDO eggplant.

Goritsa

Goritsa is a semi-mountainous village on the western slopes of Parnonas at 342 metres, twenty-three kilometres from Sparta, and it is the winter home of the few remaining inhabitants of Polydroso, who move down when the mountain cold sets in. It has narrow alleys, traditional stone houses, and the Church of the Presentation of the Virgin at its center. It is the village of my grandfather Elias. The village keeps the Laconian pantry in its kitchens—olives, cheese, tomatoes, sardines, octopus, whatever the day provides—and the table there is the household table, the everyday table of a small mountain village.

SECTION TWO: ANCIENT DISHES FROM ANTIQUITY

Each recipe is preceded by a historical essay and followed by a full-page photograph.

Recipe 1: Black Broth (Melas Zomos)

Historical Essay:

The most infamous dish of ancient Sparta. The "black broth" was a pork-blood stew, the centerpiece of the *syssitia*. It consisted of blood and boiled pork, and was reportedly so valued that the older men would give their meat to the young and content themselves with the soup. Outsiders found it repellent. One Athenian wit remarked that Spartans were the bravest of men for enduring it. But the broth was not merely a test of endurance: it was the taste of citizenship, the daily sacrament of the common mess.

The *syssitia* was not a restaurant. It was an institution. Each member contributed his portion—barley, wine, cheese, figs, and money for relish—and the meal was prepared collectively. The broth was the constant, the dish that defined the table. To eat it was to affirm that one belonged among the Equals.

The broth's ingredients were as austere as the institution that served it. Pork blood, boiled with pork meat and thickened with barley or vinegar, produced a dark, heavy stew that outsiders found almost inedible. Yet it was nutritionally sophisticated: the blood provided iron, the pork provided protein and fat, and the barley provided the carbohydrates that fueled the Spartan soldier. It was a dish designed for endurance, not for pleasure, and in that it perfectly embodied the Spartan ideal.

[PHOTO: A dark, rich stew in a coarse ceramic bowl, with barley bread alongside, shot in the shadow of the Menelaion]

Equipment: Heavy lidded pot or Dutch oven, 4–5 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle; 4 earthenware bowls.

Yield: 4–6 servings as a main course with bread.

Ingredients:

- 500 g pork shoulder, cut into 3 cm cubes
- 400 g fresh pork blood (or 400 g dark blood sausage, casing removed and meat crumbled)
- 100 g pearl barley
- 1 large onion (about 150 g), finely chopped
- 1.5 litres water, plus more as needed
- 2 tbsp red wine vinegar, plus more to taste
- 1 tsp dried oregano, crumbled
- 2 tsp fine sea salt, plus more to taste
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: If using fresh blood, stir it well before measuring so it is uniformly liquid. If using blood sausage, remove the casing and crumble the filling with your fingers. Rinse the barley under cold water until the water runs clear.

Method:

1. Set the pot over medium-high heat. Add the pork cubes in a single layer and brown on all sides, 8–10 minutes total. Do not add oil; the pork fat will render.
2. Add the onion and cook, stirring, until soft and translucent, 5–6 minutes.
3. Add the barley and stir for 1 minute to coat it in the fat.
4. Pour in the water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer until the barley is tender and the pork pulls apart under a spoon, 60–75 minutes. Check occasionally and add hot water if the pot looks dry; the mixture should stay loose, like a thick soup.
5. Stir in the blood (or crumbled sausage), vinegar, oregano, salt, and a generous grind of pepper. Return to a gentle simmer, uncovered, and cook 10–15 minutes, stirring often, until the broth darkens and thickens enough to coat the back of the spoon.
6. Taste. It should be savory, faintly sour from the vinegar, and earthy. Add vinegar 1 tsp at a time if it tastes flat, salt if it tastes dull.
7. Ladle into earthenware bowls and serve with barley bread.

Notes:

- Fresh pork blood must be used the day it is bought. Ask the butcher to stir it as it is collected, or it will clot.
- If the broth thickens too much on standing, loosen it with hot water, not cold, or it will seize.
- The vinegar is not optional; it is what makes the blood palatable and what the Spartans themselves used.

To serve: Barley bread, black olives, and a glass of homemade retsina. Nothing else—the dish is a meal.

Recipe 2: Barley Groats with Honey and Cheese

Historical Essay:

Barley was the Spartan staple. The ration at Sphacteria—two Attic choinikes per day—was barley, not wheat. This simple dish, boiled barley with honey and fresh cheese, represents the frugal but nourishing base of the ancient Laconian diet. It is the kind of food that sustained the syssitia, the everyday substance of the common table. The honey and cheese were the luxuries that made it edible, the small pleasures that the Spartan regime permitted.

Barley was the grain of the common people throughout the Greek world, while wheat was the grain of luxury. The Spartan preference for barley was a statement of identity. To eat barley was to eat like a Spartan. The honey of Laconia was famous in antiquity, and the cheese of the region—the ancestor of the modern mizithra—was a staple of the mountain economy. The combination of barley, honey, and cheese is one of the oldest and most enduring flavor pairings in the Mediterranean.

[PHOTO: A bowl of golden groats drizzled with dark honey, crumbled cheese on top, on a wooden table with olive branches]

Equipment: Medium saucepan, 2 litre capacity; wooden spoon; 4 shallow bowls.

Yield: 4 servings as a breakfast or light supper.

Ingredients:

- 200 g pearl barley
- 700 ml water
- ½ tsp fine sea salt
- 120 g fresh mizithra, ricotta, or well-drained cottage cheese
- 4 tbsp thyme honey, warmed slightly
- 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

Preparation: Rinse the barley under cold water for 30 seconds, until the water runs clear. Warm the honey by setting the jar in a bowl of hot water for 5 minutes.

Method:

1. Combine the barley, water, and salt in the saucepan and bring to a boil over high heat.
2. Reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer, stirring occasionally, until the barley is tender and has absorbed nearly all the water, 35–45 minutes. It should be soft but still hold its shape; if it is still firm at 40 minutes, add 100 ml hot water and continue.
3. Remove from the heat and let stand, covered, 5 minutes.
4. Divide among the bowls. Crumble the cheese over each portion, drizzle with the warm honey and then the olive oil, and serve immediately.

Notes:

- Do not salt the cheese; mizithra and feta are already salty, and the barley has its own salt.
- If using cottage cheese, drain it in a sieve for 20 minutes first, or the dish will be watery.

- The honey must be warm, not hot, or it will not pour evenly.

To serve: A bowl of this and a cup of Greek coffee is the Spartan breakfast.

Recipe 3: Roasted Game with Figs

Historical Essay:

The forests of Taygetos and Parnon supplied boar, deer, and hare to the Spartan mess. Game was contributed by members to the *syssitia*, a supplement to the barley and broth. The ancient Greek technique of roasting with fruit—figs, quinces, apples—is attested in the culinary literature. This recipe imagines the mountain table: the meat of the hunt, the fruit of the tree, the fire of the hearth.

Xenophon, in his treatise *On Hunting*, describes the techniques of boar hunting in the Greek mountains, and the Spartan training included hunting as preparation for war. The game contributed to the *syssitia* was not merely a supplement to the diet; it was a demonstration of skill and a contribution to the common table. Figs were cultivated throughout Laconia, and dried figs were a source of concentrated energy and a flavoring agent in savory dishes. The combination of roasted game with figs is a technique that appears in the cuisine of many Mediterranean cultures.

[PHOTO: A rustic platter of roasted boar with dried figs and herbs, photographed outdoors against the Parnonas fir forest]

Equipment: Heavy lidded casserole or Dutch oven, 5 litre capacity; large bowl for marinating; kitchen tongs; roasting platter.

Yield: 6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1.5 kg wild boar shoulder or leg, or venison shoulder, cut into 5 cm chunks
- 250 g dried figs, stems removed, halved
- 500 ml dry red wine
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme, or 1 tsp dried
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 2 bay leaves
- 2 tsp fine sea salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 200 ml hot water

Preparation: Pat the meat dry. In the large bowl, combine the wine, oil, garlic, thyme, oregano, bay leaves, salt, and pepper. Add the meat, turn to coat, cover, and refrigerate 4–12 hours,

turning twice. Remove from the refrigerator 1 hour before cooking. Heat the oven to 160°C (140°C fan).

Method:

1. Lift the meat from the marinade and pat dry, reserving the marinade. Set the casserole over medium-high heat, add the meat in batches, and brown on all sides, 3–4 minutes per batch. Do not crowd the pan. Set the browned meat aside.
2. Pour the reserved marinade into the hot casserole and bring to a boil, scraping the browned bits from the bottom with a wooden spoon. Boil 2 minutes.
3. Return the meat to the pot, add the figs and the hot water, and bring back to a simmer.
4. Cover and transfer to the oven. Cook until the meat is completely tender and pulls apart with a fork, 2½–3 hours. Check at 2 hours; if the liquid has reduced too far, add 100 ml hot water.
5. Remove the bay leaves. If the sauce is thin, set the pot over medium heat, uncovered, and reduce 10–15 minutes until it coats a spoon.
6. Taste and adjust salt.

Notes:

- Wild boar is lean and can be tough; the long, low braise is not optional. If using farmed boar or pork shoulder, reduce the time to 2 hours.
- Very dry figs will absorb a great deal of liquid; if the sauce disappears, add more hot water, not wine.
- The dish is better on the second day. Cool, refrigerate, and reheat gently.

To serve: With barley bread or goglies, and a glass of the same red wine used in the marinade.

Recipe 4: Ancient Cheesecake (Placenta)

Historical Essay:

Cato's placenta is the ancestor of modern cheesecake—a layered pastry of cheese and honey. The Roman recipe, recorded in *De Agri Cultura*, describes a dough of flour and oil, layered with a mixture of cheese and honey, baked and finished with more honey. The combination of cheese and honey is one of the oldest sweets in the Mediterranean, and it survived into the Byzantine tradition and the modern Laconian dessert table.

The placenta was a ceremonial dish in Roman religion, offered to the gods and served at weddings. Its structure—layers of dough and cheese, sweetened with honey—is the ancestor of the modern tyropita and galaktoboureko, as well as the cheesecake of the Western tradition. In the Laconian context, it represents the sweet end of the ancient meal, a reminder that even in austere Sparta there was room for sweetness.

[PHOTO: A golden, layered cheesecake on a Byzantine-style plate, with Mystras in the background]

Equipment: Mixing bowls; rolling pin; rectangular baking dish, 20 × 30 cm; pastry brush; wire rack.

Yield: 12 squares.

Ingredients:

For the dough:

- 300 g plain flour
- 80 ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 100–120 ml cold water
- Pinch of fine sea salt

For the filling:

- 500 g fresh mizithra or ricotta, drained
- 150 g thyme honey
- 2 large eggs
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 2 tbsp olive oil, for brushing

To finish:

- 3 tbsp honey, warmed
- 1 tsp cinnamon

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Oil the baking dish. If the ricotta is wet, drain it in a sieve for 30 minutes and press it dry.

Method:

1. Make the dough: combine the flour and salt, add the oil, and rub in with your fingertips until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs. Add the water a little at a time, stirring with a knife, until a soft, pliable dough forms. Knead 2 minutes on a lightly floured surface. Cover and rest 20 minutes.
2. Make the filling: beat the cheese, honey, eggs, and cinnamon together until smooth.
3. Divide the dough into 4 pieces. Roll each into a rectangle roughly the size of the dish, about 2 mm thick.
4. Lay one sheet in the dish and brush with oil. Lay a second sheet on top and brush with oil. Spread half the filling over it.
5. Top with a third sheet, brush with oil, then the fourth sheet. Spread the remaining filling on top.
6. Fold any overhanging dough inward and brush the surface with oil.
7. Bake until the pastry is deep golden and the filling is set and slightly puffed, 35–40 minutes. A knife inserted in the center should come out clean.
8. Cool on the rack 20 minutes. Drizzle with the warm honey and dust with cinnamon. Cut into squares and serve warm or at room temperature.

Notes:

- The dough must rest, or it will shrink and tear.
- If the filling browns too quickly, cover the dish loosely with foil after 25 minutes.
- This is the ancestor of galopita and of modern cheesecake; it is meant to be dense and honeyed, not light.

To serve: As a sweet at the end of an ancient meal, with a small glass of tsipouro.

Recipe 5: Lentils with Smoked Pork (Phakes)

Historical Essay:

Lentils were the food of the many in ancient Greece. The comic poets frequently mocked the lentil as the food of the poor, but the lentil was also a staple of the Spartan diet, and the syssitia would have served lentil soups alongside the barley and the black broth. The lentil is one of the oldest cultivated legumes in the Mediterranean, grown in Laconia from the Neolithic period.

The combination of lentils with smoked or preserved pork is a technique that appears in the cuisine of many mountain cultures. The smoke of the cured meat flavors the lentils, and the fat of the pork enriches the soup. In the Mani, this combination survives in the modern dish of lentils with syglino. The lentil soup was a winter dish, made when fresh vegetables were scarce and the preserved meats were brought out of the storeroom.

[PHOTO: A terracotta bowl of dark lentil soup with chunks of smoked pork, on a stone table]

Equipment: Heavy pot, 3 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle.

Yield: 4–6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 300 g brown or green lentils
- 150 g syglino or smoked bacon or smoked pork belly, cut into 1 cm dice
- 1 large onion (150 g), chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1.2 litres water, plus more as needed
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar (optional, to finish)

Preparation: Rinse the lentils and pick them over for stones. Do not soak.

Method:

1. Set the pot over medium heat, add the oil and the diced smoked pork, and cook until the fat renders and the meat crisps at the edges, 6–8 minutes.
2. Add the onion and garlic and cook until soft, 5 minutes.
3. Add the lentils, bay leaf, and water. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a bare simmer.
4. Cook, partially covered, until the lentils are completely tender and the liquid has thickened, 40–50 minutes. Stir occasionally and add hot water if the pot threatens to dry out; the finished dish should be soupy, not stiff.

5. Remove the bay leaf. Season with salt and pepper. If the flavor is flat, stir in the vinegar.
6. Rest 10 minutes off the heat before serving.

Notes:

- Salt the lentils only after they are tender; early salt toughens the skins.
- If using syglino, taste before adding salt—it is very salty.
- The dish thickens on standing; loosen with hot water when reheating.

To serve: With crusty bread, a bowl of olives, and homemade retsina.

Recipe 6: Grilled Fish with Olive Oil and Oregano

Historical Essay:

Fish was a luxury in ancient Sparta, but the Laconian coast provided access to the sea. The Gulf of Laconia and the Myrtoon Sea were rich fishing grounds, and the coastal settlements of the Mani and the region around Gytheio would have supplied fish to the inland villages. The ancient Greeks grilled fish simply, with olive oil, salt, and herbs, and this recipe reconstructs that technique.

The fish of the Laconian coast included sea bass, sea bream, red mullet, and octopus. The opsarion—the relish of fish—was a supplement to the barley and bread of the diet, and the syssitia would have received fish when it was available. The olive oil of Laconia, with its peppery finish, is particularly suited to this preparation, and the oregano that grows wild on the mountainsides complements the richness of the fish.

[PHOTO: A whole grilled fish with charred skin, olive oil, and oregano, on a rustic platter by the sea]

Equipment: Charcoal grill, or a ridged cast-iron grill pan; fish basket or wide spatula; small bowl; pastry brush.

Yield: 2 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole fish, 700–900 g, cleaned and scaled (sea bass, sea bream, or 2 red mullet per person)
- 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano, crumbled
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- 1 lemon, halved

Preparation: Ask the fishmonger to clean and scale the fish but leave the head and tail on. Rinse and pat very dry inside and out—wet fish will not crisp. With a sharp knife, make 3 diagonal slashes on each side, about 5 mm deep, through the skin to the bone. Rub the fish inside and out with 1 tbsp of the oil and season with the salt and half the oregano.

Method:

1. Light the charcoal and let it burn until covered with white ash, 25–30 minutes. The coals should be hot but not flaming; you should be able to hold your hand 15 cm above the grate for 4 seconds. Alternatively, heat the grill pan over high heat until smoking.
2. Oil the grate or pan. Lay the fish on it and grill without moving it for 5–6 minutes, until the skin releases easily and is blistered and charred in spots.
3. Turn the fish carefully with the basket or two spatulas. Grill the second side 4–5 minutes, until the flesh at the bone is opaque and flakes.
4. Transfer to a warm platter. Drizzle with the remaining oil, scatter with the remaining oregano, and squeeze over half the lemon.
5. Serve at once, with the other lemon half.

Notes:

- The slashes are what let the heat reach the bone evenly; do not skip them.
- Do not oil the fish and then leave it sitting; oil it just before it goes on the fire.
- If the fish sticks, it is not ready to turn. Wait 30 seconds and try again.

To serve: With wild greens dressed with oil and lemon, and a glass of cold white Kydonitsa.

Recipe 7: Honey and Sesame Bars (Pasteli)

Historical Essay:

Pasteli is one of the oldest sweets in Greece, a combination of honey and sesame that has been made since the Bronze Age. The ancient Greeks called it sesamis or pastillos, and it was offered to the gods and eaten at festivals. The Spartan syssitia may not have served sweets, but the household kitchens of Laconia made pasteli for celebrations and for the journey.

Sesame was cultivated in the eastern Mediterranean from antiquity, and honey was the primary sweetener of the ancient world. The ancient physician Galen recommended pasteli for its nutritional properties, and the athletes of the ancient games ate it for energy. The pasteli of Laconia was made with the honey of the Taygetos and Parnonas mountains, and the sesame came from the East, through the trade routes that connected Laconia to the wider Mediterranean.

[PHOTO: A plate of golden pasteli bars, cut into rectangles, with sesame seeds scattered alongside]

Equipment: Heavy saucepan, 1.5 litre capacity; candy thermometer; dry frying pan; wooden spoon; 20 × 20 cm tray lined with parchment; oiled knife.

Yield: About 24 bars.

Ingredients:

- 300 g sesame seeds
- 200 g thyme honey

- ½ tsp fine sea salt
- 1 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, for the parchment

Preparation: Line the tray with parchment and brush it lightly with oil. Have the tray, the spoon, and a heatproof spatula ready before you begin; the mixture sets quickly.

Method:

1. Toast the sesame seeds in the dry frying pan over medium heat, shaking often, until golden and fragrant, 4–6 minutes. Do not let them scorch. Tip them into a bowl.
2. Put the honey in the saucepan and set it over medium-low heat. Bring to a simmer and cook until it reaches 120°C on the thermometer, about 5 minutes. It will foam; stir down the foam with the wooden spoon.
3. Remove from the heat and stir in the salt and all the sesame seeds. Work quickly; the mixture will be stiff.
4. Scrape into the lined tray and press flat with the oiled spatula or a piece of oiled parchment, to an even thickness of about 1.5 cm.
5. Cool at room temperature until completely firm, at least 1 hour.
6. Turn out onto a board and cut into bars with the oiled knife. If it cracks, warm the blade in hot water and dry it before each cut.

Notes:

- Honey at 120°C is the setting point; below it, the bars stay sticky, above it, they harden like toffee.
- Work fast once the seeds go in—the mixture stiffens as it cools.
- Wrap individual bars in parchment; they keep for weeks in a tin.

To serve: As a sweet with coffee, or carried in a pocket on the mountain, as the shepherds did.

SECTION THREE: MEDIEVAL DISHES

Each recipe is preceded by a historical essay and followed by a full-page photograph.

Recipe 8: Mystras Lentil Soup with Smoked Pork

Historical Essay:

The Byzantines followed the Mediterranean diet, rich in grains, legumes, and game, while the ruling class ate more luxuriously than the peasants. The published proceedings of the 2023 Mystras conference explore perceptions and attitudes regarding diet in the Despotate of Morea, as well as practices of food production, distribution, and consumption, through historical and literary sources, manuscripts, iconography, architecture, and archaeological data. The volume emphasizes the factors that shaped dietary patterns—population mobility, trade, and socioeconomic developments—and highlights preservation and processing techniques.

Lentils were the everyday protein of the Byzantine table. At Mystras, the garrison and artisans would have eaten soups like this one—lentils simmered with whatever smoked or preserved pork was available. The dish connects the Byzantine pantry to the modern Laconian syglino, the

smoked pork that is still produced in the Mani and the Parnonas. The lentil soup was a winter dish, a food that sustained the body through the cold months.

[PHOTO: A terracotta bowl of thick lentil soup with chunks of smoked pork, on a stone wall overlooking the Mystras ruins]

Equipment: Heavy pot, 3 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle.

Yield: 4–6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 300 g brown lentils
- 150 g syglino or smoked pork, diced
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1.2 litres water, plus more as needed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Rinse the lentils and pick them over for stones. Do not soak. If using syglino, cut it into 1 cm dice and blanch it for 2 minutes in boiling water to reduce its salt, then drain.

Method:

1. Set the pot over medium heat, add the oil and the syglino, and cook until the fat renders and the meat crisps at the edges, 6–8 minutes.
2. Add the onion and garlic and cook until soft, 5 minutes.
3. Add the lentils, bay leaf, and water. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a bare simmer.
4. Cook, partially covered, until the lentils are completely tender and the liquid has thickened, 40–50 minutes. Stir occasionally and add hot water if the pot threatens to dry out; the finished dish should be soupy, not stiff.
5. Remove the bay leaf. Season with salt and pepper, tasting first because the syglino is salty.
6. Rest 10 minutes off the heat before serving.

Notes:

- Salt only after the lentils are tender; early salt toughens the skins.
- The soup thickens on standing; loosen with hot water when reheating.
- A spoonful of red wine vinegar at the table is the Byzantine finish.

To serve: With crusty bread and a bowl of olives.

Recipe 9: Byzantine Fish with Orange and Herbs

Historical Essay:

Andrew Dalby's *Tastes of Byzantium* describes the Byzantine love of seafood combined with the new citrus fruits arriving from the East. The Byzantines used garos, a fermented fish sauce,

as their most widespread condiment. This recipe uses orange juice and zest with local fish, reflecting the fusion of Roman spice traditions and Aegean simplicity.

The orange was a late arrival in the Byzantine world, brought through the trade routes that connected Constantinople to Persia and India. By the late Byzantine period, citrus fruits were cultivated in the Peloponnese, and the orchards of Laconia—which would later become one of the great orange-growing regions of Greece—were already being planted. The combination of fish with orange is a Byzantine innovation, a fusion of the ancient love of seafood with the new flavors of the East.

[PHOTO: A whole baked fish glistening with orange and herbs, on a blue tablecloth in Monemvasia]

Equipment: Baking dish large enough to hold the fish; small bowl; pastry brush; foil.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole fish, about 1 kg, cleaned and scaled (sea bass or sea bream)
- 2 oranges, juice and zest
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried thyme
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan). Rinse and pat the fish dry. Score it 3 times on each side, 5 mm deep. Zest one orange and juice both.

Method:

1. Mix the orange juice, zest, oil, thyme, salt, and pepper in the small bowl.
2. Lay the fish in the baking dish and pour the mixture over it, turning to coat.
3. Bake uncovered until the flesh at the bone is opaque and flakes, 25–30 minutes, basting twice with the pan juices. If the fish browns too fast, cover loosely with foil after 20 minutes.
4. Transfer to a warm platter and spoon the pan juices over it.

Notes:

- The fish must be dry before it goes into the dish, or the orange juice will steam rather than glaze.
- Do not overcook; the fish continues to cook as it rests.
- The same mixture works on thick fish steaks, but reduce the time to 15–18 minutes.

To serve: With wild greens or a simple rice pilaf.

Recipe 10: Tsaiti and Saiti (Cheese Pie and Filled Flatbread)

Historical Essay:

The tsaiti of Monemvasia is a thin-dough cheese pie, and its filled-flatbread cousin saiti is the same dough wrapped around a filling and cooked on a griddle. The pie tradition runs from ancient placenta through Byzantine tyropita to the modern Monemvasian tsaiti. In the Mani, the pie is the everyday food of the household, the dish that uses what is available—cheese, greens, whatever the garden provides—wrapped in dough and baked or fried.

The Byzantine tyropita was a staple of the Byzantine table. The monasteries of Mystras and the villages of the Parnonas made pies with the cheese of the region and the wild greens that grew on the mountainsides. The pie was a way of stretching expensive ingredients and feeding a family from the resources of the household. The tsaiti of Monemvasia is a direct descendant of the Byzantine tyropita.

[PHOTO: A golden pie cut open to reveal melting cheese and greens, on a windowsill in Monemvasia with the sea beyond]

Equipment: Mixing bowl; rolling pin; baking sheet lined with parchment; heavy frying pan or griddle for the saiti; pastry brush.

Yield: 8 small pies or flatbreads.

Ingredients:

For the dough:

- 500 g plain flour
- 200 ml warm water
- 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp fine sea salt

For the filling:

- 300 g sfela or feta, crumbled
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 tbsp chopped wild greens or parsley (optional)
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Make the dough: combine the flour and salt, add the oil and water, and knead 5 minutes into a soft, smooth dough. Cover and rest 20 minutes. Mix the filling ingredients together.

Method (Tsaiti):

1. Divide the dough into 8 balls. Roll each into a thin circle about 15 cm across.
2. Place a spoonful of filling on half of each circle, fold the other half over, and press the edges firmly to seal. Crimp with a fork if you like.
3. Place on the lined baking sheet and brush the tops with oil.
4. Bake until golden, 25–30 minutes.

Method (Saiti): Roll the dough thinner, wrap it around the filling, and cook on a hot dry griddle 3–4 minutes per side, until blistered and golden.

Notes:

- Press the seals twice—they open in the oven.
- Do not overfill, or the pies burst.
- The filling must be dry; drain any watery greens and squeeze them in a cloth.

To serve: Warm, with a glass of retsina.

Recipe 11: Grilled Octopus with Olive Oil and Oregano

Historical Essay:

Octopus was a staple of the Byzantine coastal diet. The Byzantines grilled it simply, with olive oil, salt, and oregano, and the technique has survived unchanged to the present day. The octopus of the Laconian coast was famous in antiquity, and the Byzantine fishermen of Gytheio and Monemvasia would have caught and prepared it in the same way that the modern tavernas of Gytheio still do.

The technique of drying the octopus in the sun before grilling it gives the meat its characteristic texture—firm, slightly chewy, and deeply flavored. The octopus was beaten against the rocks to tenderize it, then dried and grilled over charcoal. The olive oil of Laconia and the oregano of the mountainsides completed the dish.

[PHOTO: A grilled octopus tentacle on a rustic plate, with the Gytheio harbour behind]

Equipment: Large pot; charcoal grill or grill pan; tongs; sharp knife.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 1 fresh octopus, about 1 kg, cleaned
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano, crumbled
- 1 lemon
- Fine sea salt

Preparation: Freeze the octopus for 24 hours and thaw it—this tenderizes it. Alternatively, beat the tentacles against a stone or with a mallet for 10 minutes.

Method:

1. Simmer the octopus in unsalted water for 45–60 minutes, until a knife pierces the thickest part of a tentacle easily. Do not boil hard; a gentle simmer keeps it tender.
2. Drain and cool. Cut the tentacles from the head; discard the head.
3. Dry the tentacles in the sun or in a low oven (80°C) for 1–2 hours, until the surface is dry and slightly stiff. This is the step that gives the texture.

4. Grill over hot coals or in a smoking pan 3–4 minutes per side, until charred in spots and the tentacles curl.

5. Cut into pieces and dress with the oil, oregano, lemon juice, and salt.

Notes:

- The drying is not optional—wet octopus steams and turns rubbery.

- Undercooking at the simmer stage cannot be fixed by grilling.

To serve: As a meze with ouzo, or alongside a fish soup.

Recipe 12: Byzantine Honey and Walnut Cake

Historical Essay:

The Byzantines inherited the Roman love of honey and nuts, and the combination of honey and walnuts was a favorite of the Byzantine table. The karydopita—walnut cake—was a sweet of the Byzantine household, made with the walnuts of the mountains and the honey of the Taygetos and Parnonas. The cake was baked in the monasteries of Mystras and the villages of the Parnonas, and it survives in the modern Laconian table.

The walnut tree was cultivated throughout the Peloponnese from antiquity. The honey of the mountains was the primary sweetener of the Byzantine world, and the combination of honey and walnuts was a way of preserving the nuts and creating a sweet that would last through the winter. It was a symbol of hospitality, offered to guests with a glass of wine.

[PHOTO: A golden walnut cake drizzled with honey, on a Byzantine-style plate]

Equipment: 22 cm round tin, greased and lined; mixing bowls; whisk.

Yield: 8–10 slices.

Ingredients:

- 300 g plain flour
- 1 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 150 g thyme honey
- 100 ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 large eggs
- 150 g walnuts, roughly chopped

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan).

Method:

1. Whisk the flour, baking powder, and cinnamon together.
2. Beat the honey, oil, and eggs until pale and thickened, 3–4 minutes.
3. Fold the dry ingredients into the wet in two additions, until just combined. Fold in the walnuts.
4. Scrape into the tin and level the surface.

5. Bake until golden and a skewer comes out with moist crumbs, 35–40 minutes.
6. Cool in the tin 10 minutes, then turn out onto a rack. Drizzle with warm honey to serve.

Notes:

- Do not overmix once the flour goes in, or the cake turns tough.
- The cake is dense by design; it is not a sponge.
- It keeps 5 days wrapped, and improves after a day.

To serve: With Greek coffee or a small glass of tsipouro.

Recipe 13: Byzantine Fish Soup with Rice and Lemon

Historical Essay:

The Byzantine psarosoupa—fish soup—was a staple of the coastal diet, made with the fish of the Aegean and the rice that the Byzantines cultivated in the Peloponnese. The soup was a way of using the smaller fish and the scraps, simmering them with onions, rice, and lemon to create a nourishing dish for the household. The fishermen of Monemvasia and Gytheio made the soup on the beach, and the monasteries of Mystras made it for the poor.

Rice was cultivated in the Byzantine Peloponnese from the tenth century, and the combination of rice and fish was a Byzantine innovation. The lemon was used to brighten the flavor and to cut through the richness of the fish. The soup was a complete meal, served with bread and olives.

[PHOTO: A bowl of rich fish soup with rice and lemon, on a waterfront table]

Equipment: Heavy pot, 3 litre capacity; fine sieve; wooden spoon.

Yield: 4–6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 kg small fish, cleaned (or fish frames and heads)
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 100 g rice
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1.5 litres water
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Rinse the fish; if using whole small fish, leave them whole.

Method:

1. Soften the onion and garlic in the oil over medium heat, 5 minutes.
2. Add the fish and water. Simmer 20 minutes, skimming the foam.

3. Lift out the fish. Strain the broth through the sieve and return it to the pot. Pick any flesh from the fish and reserve it.
4. Bring the broth to a simmer, add the rice, and cook 15–18 minutes until tender.
5. Return the reserved fish flesh, stir in the lemon juice off the heat, and season.
6. Rest 5 minutes before serving.

Notes:

- Do not boil hard after the fish goes in, or the broth turns cloudy.
- Add the lemon off the heat so it stays bright.
- The soup thickens on standing; loosen with hot water.

To serve: With crusty bread and a few olives.

Recipe 14: Byzantine Spinach Pie (Spanakopita)

Historical Essay:

The Byzantine spanakopita—spinach pie—was a staple of the Byzantine table, made with the wild greens of the mountains and the cheese of the region. The pie was a way of using the abundant greens of the Parnonas and Taygetos, wrapping them in dough with cheese and baking them until golden. The monasteries of Mystras made the pie for the poor, and the villages of the Parnonas made it for the family.

The spinach—or the wild greens that the Byzantines called spanaki—was cultivated and gathered throughout the Peloponnese. The cheese was the sfela or mizithra of the region, and the dough was the thin phyllo that the Byzantine cooks had perfected. The pie was a complete meal, served with bread and olives.

[PHOTO: A golden spinach pie cut open to reveal the greens and cheese]

Equipment: Baking dish 20 × 30 cm; pastry brush; clean tea towel; mixing bowl.

Yield: 8 portions.

Ingredients:

- 8 sheets phyllo (or 12 for a deeper pie)
- 500 g spinach or mixed wild greens
- 200 g sfela or feta, crumbled
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Oil the dish. Wash the greens and blanch 2 minutes; drain and squeeze out thoroughly in a clean towel, then chop. Wet greens will ruin the pie.

Method:

1. Mix the greens, cheese, eggs, salt, and pepper.
2. Lay 4 sheets of phyllo in the dish, brushing each with oil and keeping the rest under a damp towel.
3. Spread the filling evenly.
4. Top with the remaining 4 sheets, brushing each with oil. Tuck the edges in and brush the top.
5. Score the top sheets lightly into portions with a sharp knife.
6. Bake until deep golden and crisp, 35–40 minutes.
7. Rest 10 minutes before cutting.

Notes:

- Squeeze the greens twice—this is the difference between a crisp pie and a soggy one.
- Work quickly with phyllo; it dries out in minutes.
- Score before baking so the top shatters cleanly.

To serve: Warm or at room temperature, with a glass of retsina.

SECTION THREE: MEDIEVAL DISHES

Each recipe is preceded by a historical essay and followed by a full-page photograph.

Recipe 8: Mystras Lentil Soup with Smoked Pork

Historical Essay:

The Byzantines followed the Mediterranean diet, rich in grains, legumes, and game, while the ruling class ate more luxuriously than the peasants. The published proceedings of the 2023 Mystras conference explore perceptions and attitudes regarding diet in the Despotate of Morea, as well as practices of food production, distribution, and consumption, through historical and literary sources, manuscripts, iconography, architecture, and archaeological data. The volume emphasizes the factors that shaped dietary patterns—population mobility, trade, and socioeconomic developments—and highlights preservation and processing techniques.

Lentils were the everyday protein of the Byzantine table. At Mystras, the garrison and artisans would have eaten soups like this one—lentils simmered with whatever smoked or preserved pork was available. The dish connects the Byzantine pantry to the modern Laconian *sygolino*, the smoked pork that is still produced in the Mani and the Parnonas. The lentil soup was a winter dish, a food that sustained the body through the cold months.

[PHOTO: A terracotta bowl of thick lentil soup with chunks of smoked pork, on a stone wall overlooking the Mystras ruins]

Equipment: Heavy pot, 3 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle.

Yield: 4–6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 300 g brown lentils
- 150 g syglino or smoked pork, diced
- 1 onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 1 bay leaf
- 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1.2 litres water, plus more as needed
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Rinse the lentils and pick them over for stones. Do not soak. If using syglino, cut it into 1 cm dice and blanch it for 2 minutes in boiling water to reduce its salt, then drain.

Method:

1. Set the pot over medium heat, add the oil and the syglino, and cook until the fat renders and the meat crisps at the edges, 6–8 minutes.
2. Add the onion and garlic and cook until soft, 5 minutes.
3. Add the lentils, bay leaf, and water. Bring to a boil, then reduce to a bare simmer.
4. Cook, partially covered, until the lentils are completely tender and the liquid has thickened, 40–50 minutes. Stir occasionally and add hot water if the pot threatens to dry out; the finished dish should be soupy, not stiff.
5. Remove the bay leaf. Season with salt and pepper, tasting first because the syglino is salty.
6. Rest 10 minutes off the heat before serving.

Notes:

- Salt only after the lentils are tender; early salt toughens the skins.
- The soup thickens on standing; loosen with hot water when reheating.
- A spoonful of red wine vinegar at the table is the Byzantine finish.

To serve: With crusty bread and a bowl of olives.

Recipe 9: Byzantine Fish with Orange and Herbs

Historical Essay:

Andrew Dalby's *Tastes of Byzantium* describes the Byzantine love of seafood combined with the new citrus fruits arriving from the East. The Byzantines used garos, a fermented fish sauce, as their most widespread condiment. This recipe uses orange juice and zest with local fish, reflecting the fusion of Roman spice traditions and Aegean simplicity.

The orange was a late arrival in the Byzantine world, brought through the trade routes that connected Constantinople to Persia and India. By the late Byzantine period, citrus fruits were cultivated in the Peloponnese, and the orchards of Laconia—which would later become one of the great orange-growing regions of Greece—were already being planted. The combination of fish with orange is a Byzantine innovation, a fusion of the ancient love of seafood with the new flavors of the East.

[PHOTO: A whole baked fish glistening with orange and herbs, on a blue tablecloth in Monemvasia]

Equipment: Baking dish large enough to hold the fish; small bowl; pastry brush; foil.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole fish, about 1 kg, cleaned and scaled (sea bass or sea bream)
- 2 oranges, juice and zest
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried thyme
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan). Rinse and pat the fish dry. Score it 3 times on each side, 5 mm deep. Zest one orange and juice both.

Method:

1. Mix the orange juice, zest, oil, thyme, salt, and pepper in the small bowl.
2. Lay the fish in the baking dish and pour the mixture over it, turning to coat.
3. Bake uncovered until the flesh at the bone is opaque and flakes, 25–30 minutes, basting twice with the pan juices. If the fish browns too fast, cover loosely with foil after 20 minutes.
4. Transfer to a warm platter and spoon the pan juices over it.

Notes:

- The fish must be dry before it goes into the dish, or the orange juice will steam rather than glaze.
- Do not overcook; the fish continues to cook as it rests.
- The same mixture works on thick fish steaks, but reduce the time to 15–18 minutes.

To serve: With wild greens or a simple rice pilaf.

Recipe 10: Tsaiti and Saiti (Cheese Pie and Filled Flatbread)

Historical Essay:

The tsaiti of Monemvasia is a thin-dough cheese pie, and its filled-flatbread cousin saiti is the same dough wrapped around a filling and cooked on a griddle. The pie tradition runs from ancient placenta through Byzantine tyropita to the modern Monemvasian tsaiti. In the Mani, the pie is the everyday food of the household, the dish that uses what is available—cheese, greens, whatever the garden provides—wrapped in dough and baked or fried.

The Byzantine tyropita was a staple of the Byzantine table. The monasteries of Mystras and the villages of the Parnonas made pies with the cheese of the region and the wild greens that grew on the mountainsides. The pie was a way of stretching expensive ingredients and feeding a

family from the resources of the household. The tsaiti of Monemvasia is a direct descendant of the Byzantine tyropita.

[PHOTO: A golden pie cut open to reveal melting cheese and greens, on a windowsill in Monemvasia with the sea beyond]

Equipment: Mixing bowl; rolling pin; baking sheet lined with parchment; heavy frying pan or griddle for the saiti; pastry brush.

Yield: 8 small pies or flatbreads.

Ingredients:

For the dough:

- 500 g plain flour
- 200 ml warm water
- 3 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ tsp fine sea salt

For the filling:

- 300 g sfela or feta, crumbled
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 2 tbsp chopped wild greens or parsley (optional)
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Make the dough: combine the flour and salt, add the oil and water, and knead 5 minutes into a soft, smooth dough. Cover and rest 20 minutes. Mix the filling ingredients together.

Method (Tsaiti):

1. Divide the dough into 8 balls. Roll each into a thin circle about 15 cm across.
2. Place a spoonful of filling on half of each circle, fold the other half over, and press the edges firmly to seal. Crimp with a fork if you like.
3. Place on the lined baking sheet and brush the tops with oil.
4. Bake until golden, 25–30 minutes.

Method (Saiti): Roll the dough thinner, wrap it around the filling, and cook on a hot dry griddle 3–4 minutes per side, until blistered and golden.

Notes:

- Press the seals twice—they open in the oven.
- Do not overfill, or the pies burst.
- The filling must be dry; drain any watery greens and squeeze them in a cloth.

To serve: Warm, with a glass of retsina.

Recipe 11: Grilled Octopus with Olive Oil and Oregano

Historical Essay:

Octopus was a staple of the Byzantine coastal diet. The Byzantines grilled it simply, with olive oil, salt, and oregano, and the technique has survived unchanged to the present day. The octopus of the Laconian coast was famous in antiquity, and the Byzantine fishermen of Gytheio and Monemvasia would have caught and prepared it in the same way that the modern tavernas of Gytheio still do.

The technique of drying the octopus in the sun before grilling it gives the meat its characteristic texture—firm, slightly chewy, and deeply flavored. The octopus was beaten against the rocks to tenderize it, then dried and grilled over charcoal. The olive oil of Laconia and the oregano of the mountainsides completed the dish.

[PHOTO: A grilled octopus tentacle on a rustic plate, with the Gytheio harbour behind]

Equipment: Large pot; charcoal grill or grill pan; tongs; sharp knife.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 1 fresh octopus, about 1 kg, cleaned
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano, crumbled
- 1 lemon
- Fine sea salt

Preparation: Freeze the octopus for 24 hours and thaw it—this tenderizes it. Alternatively, beat the tentacles against a stone or with a mallet for 10 minutes.

Method:

1. Simmer the octopus in unsalted water for 45–60 minutes, until a knife pierces the thickest part of a tentacle easily. Do not boil hard; a gentle simmer keeps it tender.
2. Drain and cool. Cut the tentacles from the head; discard the head.
3. Dry the tentacles in the sun or in a low oven (80°C) for 1–2 hours, until the surface is dry and slightly stiff. This is the step that gives the texture.
4. Grill over hot coals or in a smoking pan 3–4 minutes per side, until charred in spots and the tentacles curl.
5. Cut into pieces and dress with the oil, oregano, lemon juice, and salt.

Notes:

- The drying is not optional—wet octopus steams and turns rubbery.
- Undercooking at the simmer stage cannot be fixed by grilling.

To serve: As a meze with ouzo, or alongside a fish soup.

Recipe 12: Byzantine Honey and Walnut Cake

Historical Essay:

The Byzantines inherited the Roman love of honey and nuts, and the combination of honey and walnuts was a favorite of the Byzantine table. The karydopita—walnut cake—was a sweet of the Byzantine household, made with the walnuts of the mountains and the honey of the Taygetos and Parnonas. The cake was baked in the monasteries of Mystras and the villages of the Parnonas, and it survives in the modern Laconian table.

The walnut tree was cultivated throughout the Peloponnese from antiquity. The honey of the mountains was the primary sweetener of the Byzantine world, and the combination of honey and walnuts was a way of preserving the nuts and creating a sweet that would last through the winter. It was a symbol of hospitality, offered to guests with a glass of wine.

SECTION FOUR: MODERN DISHES

Each recipe is preceded by a historical essay and followed by a full-page photograph.

Recipe 15: Iphegenia's Wild Boar Stew with Dried Figs

Historical Essay:

This is the signature dish of Iphegenia's taverna Koukounari in Polydrosos. The wild boar is hunted in the forests of Parnonas, and the stew is dark, sticky, and deeply aromatic, the meat falling from the bone and the dried figs melting into the sauce. The family produces nearly everything they serve—bread, cheese, vegetables, wine, and tsipouro—on their own land. When I eat this dish, I am eating my childhood summers, and I am eating the history of Laconia.

The wild boar has roamed the forests of Parnonas and Taygetos since antiquity. The ancient Spartans hunted it, and the Byzantine cooks of Mystras prepared it with the figs and wine of the region. The dish that Iphegenia serves at Koukounari is a direct descendant of that tradition—the mountain game, the dried fruit, the slow cooking over a wood fire.

[PHOTO: A deep bowl of dark, sticky boar stew with figs, on the taverna terrace with the village and mountains behind]

Equipment: Heavy lidded casserole or Dutch oven, 5 litre capacity; large bowl for marinating; kitchen tongs; wooden spoon.

Yield: 6–8 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1.5 kg wild boar shoulder or leg, cut into 5 cm chunks
- 250 g dried figs, stems removed, halved
- 500 ml dry red wine
- 2 large onions (300 g), chopped

- 4 garlic cloves, crushed
- 2 sprigs fresh thyme, or 1 tsp dried
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 2 bay leaves
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tsp fine sea salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper
- 200 ml hot water

Preparation: Pat the meat dry. Combine the wine, oil, garlic, thyme, oregano, bay leaves, salt, and pepper in the large bowl. Add the meat, turn to coat, cover, and refrigerate 4–12 hours, turning twice. Bring to room temperature 1 hour before cooking.

Method:

1. Lift the meat from the marinade and pat dry; reserve the marinade. Brown the meat in batches in the casserole over medium-high heat, 3–4 minutes per batch. Set aside.
2. Add the onions to the pot and cook until soft, 6–8 minutes.
3. Pour in the reserved marinade and boil 2 minutes, scraping the base.
4. Return the meat, add the figs and hot water, and bring to a simmer.
5. Cover and cook over the lowest heat, or in a 160°C oven, until the meat is completely tender and pulls apart, 2½–3 hours. Add hot water if it reduces too far.
6. Discard the bay. If the sauce is thin, reduce uncovered 10–15 minutes until it coats a spoon. Season to taste.

Notes:

- Wild boar is lean; the long, low braise is essential. Farmed boar or pork shoulder takes 2 hours.
- Very dry figs absorb a great deal of liquid; add hot water, not wine, if the pot dries.
- The stew is better on the second day.

To serve: With goglies or crusty bread, and the same red wine used in the marinade.

Recipe 16: Iphegenia's Roasted Rooster

Historical Essay:

The second signature dish of Koukounari. The rooster is slowly roasted with local herbs, olive oil, and wine until the skin is crisp and the meat tender and deeply flavored. Poultry is central to Laconian village cooking, the festive bird of the Sunday table. The technique of slow roasting, with potatoes absorbing the pan juices, is the essence of the mountain kitchen.

The rooster—kokoras—is the bird of the household, tougher than the hen but richer in flavor. The slow roasting tenderizes the meat, and the herbs of the mountainside perfume the skin. The potatoes, roasted in the pan juices, are as important as the bird itself. This is the Sunday table of Polydroso.

[PHOTO: A golden roasted rooster on a rustic platter, surrounded by potatoes and herbs, on the taverna terrace at Polydrosos]

Equipment: Large roasting pan; kitchen string; carving board; meat thermometer.

Yield: 6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole rooster, about 2 kg
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 4 garlic cloves, halved
- 1 tbsp dried thyme
- 1 tbsp dried oregano
- 250 ml dry white wine
- 1 kg potatoes, peeled and quartered
- 2 tsp fine sea salt
- 1 tsp freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Pat the rooster dry inside and out. Rub it all over with the oil, lemon juice, garlic, thyme, oregano, salt, and pepper, working some under the skin of the breast. Toss the potatoes with a little oil and salt.

Method:

1. Place the rooster breast-side up in the roasting pan and scatter the potatoes around it. Pour the wine into the pan, not over the bird.
2. Roast uncovered 1½–2 hours, basting every 30 minutes with the pan juices, until the skin is deep golden and the juices at the thigh run clear. A thermometer in the thickest part of the thigh should read 82°C.
3. If the skin browns too fast, tent loosely with foil after 1 hour.
4. Rest 15 minutes before carving, loosely covered, so the juices redistribute.
5. Serve with the potatoes and the pan juices spooned over.

Notes:

- A rooster is tougher than a chicken; do not shorten the time, or it will be stringy.
- The potatoes must be in a single layer, or they steam rather than roast.
- If the pan dries out, add a splash of hot water, not more wine.

To serve: With a green salad dressed with oil and lemon, and homemade retsina.

Recipe 17: Kokoras Bardouniotikos (Maniot Rooster)

Historical Essay:

The signature dish of the Mani. The rooster is cooked in steam with feta, syglino, and grilled sausages—a layered, deeply savory preparation that is a different animal from coq au vin. The dish reflects the Maniot pantry: the preserved meats, the cheese, the mountain herbs. It is the

food of the fortified table, the dish of a people who expected siege and made the most of what they had.

The name Bardouniotikos comes from Bardounia, the region of the Mani around Areopoli, where the dish is said to have originated. The rooster is the bird of the household, and the syglino is the preserved pork of the smokehouse. The feta and the sausages are the additions that make the dish a celebration.

[PHOTO: A dark, rich rooster stew in a heavy pot, with chunks of sausage and melting feta, with the Mani towers in the background]

Equipment: Heavy lidded pot or Dutch oven, 5 litre capacity; wooden spoon; tongs.

Yield: 6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 whole rooster, about 2 kg, jointed into 8 pieces
- 200 g syglino or smoked pork, cut into 1 cm dice
- 4 grilled sausages, sliced into thick rounds
- 200 g feta, crumbled
- 2 onions, chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, sliced
- 250 ml dry white wine
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried thyme
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Pat the rooster pieces dry and season with the salt and pepper. Blanch the syglino 2 minutes in boiling water and drain, to reduce its salt.

Method:

1. Brown the rooster pieces in the oil over medium-high heat, in batches, 3–4 minutes per side. Set aside.
2. In the same pot, render the syglino 3–4 minutes, then add the sausages, onions, and garlic and cook until soft, 5–6 minutes.
3. Pour in the wine and boil 2 minutes, scraping the base.
4. Return the rooster to the pot, add the thyme and oregano, and bring to a simmer.
5. Cover tightly and cook over the lowest heat, or in a 160°C oven, until the rooster is tender and the meat pulls from the bone, 1½–2 hours. Check at 1 hour; add a splash of hot water if the pot is dry.
6. Scatter the crumbled feta over the top, cover, and let it soften off the heat for 5 minutes.
7. Serve from the pot.

Notes:

- The pot must be tightly covered; the dish cooks in its own steam.
 - Do not stir after the feta goes on, or it will break up and string.
 - The syglino and feta are both salty; taste before adding more salt.
- To serve: With crusty bread to mop the juices, and a glass of Laconian red.

Recipe 18: Mani Syglino with Orange and Potatoes

Historical Essay:

Syglino is the Mani's signature preserved meat—pork cured with salt and smoked over olive wood, flavored with orange peel and spices. In the arid Mani, where poverty and isolation shaped a cuisine of resourcefulness, syglino was the winter provision, the taste of the smokehouse. Combined with orange and potatoes, it becomes a dish of the modern table, the old preservation meeting the new citrus.

The orange was a late arrival in the Mani, but it became one of the region's defining flavors. The orange groves of Laconia, one of the largest in Greece, supply the fruit that flavors the sausages and the syglino. The combination of smoked pork, orange, and potatoes is a Maniot classic—the sweetness of the orange cutting through the smoke of the meat.

[PHOTO: Slices of syglino with roasted potatoes and orange segments, against a backdrop of a Mani tower house in Limeni]

Equipment: Roasting pan large enough for a single layer; kitchen tongs.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 300 g syglino, sliced 1 cm thick
- 1 kg potatoes, peeled and quartered
- 1 orange, sliced into thin rounds
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 200°C (180°C fan). If the syglino is very salty, blanch the slices 2 minutes in boiling water and pat dry.

Method:

1. Toss the potatoes with the oil, oregano, salt, and pepper, and spread in a single layer in the pan.
2. Roast 20 minutes, until beginning to color.
3. Add the syglino slices and orange rounds, nestling them among the potatoes.
4. Roast a further 20–25 minutes, until the potatoes are golden and the syglino is crisp at the edges and the orange has caramelized.

5. Serve hot, straight from the pan.

Notes:

- The syglino must not be crowded, or it will stew rather than crisp.
- Orange slices on the base will burn; keep them on top of the potatoes.
- Taste before salting—syglino is salty enough on its own.

To serve: With a sharp green salad, and a glass of cold white.

Recipe 19: Goglies with Rooster and Mizithra

Historical Essay:

Handmade pasta is the pride of Laconian village kitchens. Goglies—irregular, thumb-pressed noodles—are served with rooster in a rich tomato sauce, grated mizithra on top. The pasta tradition connects to hylopites, trachanas, and triftades, the family of handmade pastas that define the mountain table.

The goglies are made by rolling the dough into a rope and pressing it with the thumb, creating a hollow shape that holds the sauce. The rooster is braised in tomato and wine, and the mizithra is grated over the top. It is the Sunday dish of the Parnonas, the food of the family table.

[PHOTO: A rustic ceramic plate of noodles and rooster, with a view of the Parnonas valley]

Equipment: Large pot for the pasta; heavy lidded pot for the sauce; wooden spoon; colander; grater.

Yield: 6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 500 g goglies (or tagliatelle)
- 1 rooster, about 2 kg, jointed
- 400 g tomatoes, grated (or 400 g tinned chopped tomatoes)
- 2 onions, chopped
- 4 garlic cloves, sliced
- 250 ml dry red wine
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 2 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- 100 g mizithra, grated
- A handful of flat-leaf parsley, chopped

Preparation: Pat the rooster pieces dry and season with half the salt. Grate the mizithra and set aside.

Method:

1. Brown the rooster in the oil over medium-high heat, in batches, 3–4 minutes per side. Set aside.
2. Add the onions and garlic to the pot and cook until soft, 6 minutes.
3. Pour in the wine and boil 2 minutes, scraping the base.
4. Add the tomatoes, oregano, remaining salt, and pepper. Return the rooster to the pot and bring to a simmer.
5. Cover and cook over low heat, or in a 160°C oven, until the rooster is tender and pulls from the bone, 1½–2 hours. Add a splash of hot water if it reduces too far.
6. Lift out the rooster, pull the meat from the bones, and return it to the sauce. Discard the bones and skin.
7. Meanwhile, cook the goglies in well-salted boiling water until al dente; drain, reserving a cup of the water.
8. Toss the pasta with the sauce, loosening with pasta water if needed.
9. Serve with the grated mizithra and parsley.

Notes:

- The sauce should be thick enough to cling; reduce uncovered if loose.
- Goglies cook unevenly because of their shape; test a thick piece.
- Do not grate the mizithra in advance if it is very soft—it clumps.

To serve: With a glass of Laconian red and a green salad.

Recipe 20: Lalangia with Honey and Graviera

Historical Essay:

These crispy fried dough ribbons are the festive food of Laconia and Messinia, present at every celebration. The lalangia are a tradition of the region, made in homes, bakeries, and cultural associations during religious festivals. Eaten with honey or with cheese, they are the taste of the festival table.

The lalangia are made from a simple dough of flour, water, and olive oil, rolled thin and cut into ribbons, then fried until golden. The honey of the Taygetos and the graviera of the mountains complete the dish. It is the food of the panegyri, the festival, and the family celebration.

[PHOTO: A pile of golden lalangia drizzled with honey, with a wedge of graviera, on a festive table]

Equipment: Mixing bowl; rolling pin; sharp knife or pastry wheel; deep heavy pan for frying; slotted spoon; wire rack over paper towel.

Yield: About 40 ribbons; 6–8 servings.

Ingredients:

- 500 g plain flour
- 100 ml extra-virgin olive oil, plus 1 litre for frying

- 7 g dried yeast (1 sachet)
- 250 ml warm water
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- 200 g thyme honey, warmed
- 200 g graviera, cut into wedges

Preparation: Dissolve the yeast in the warm water and let it stand 10 minutes until frothy. Combine the flour and salt in the bowl, add the 100 ml oil and the yeast water, and knead 8–10 minutes into a smooth, soft dough. Cover and let rise 1 hour, until doubled.

Method:

1. Punch down the dough and divide it into 4 pieces.
2. Roll each piece into a thin sheet, about 3 mm thick. Cut into ribbons 2 cm wide and 10 cm long.
3. Heat the frying oil to 175°C. Fry the ribbons in batches, 1–2 minutes per side, until golden and puffed. Do not crowd the pan.
4. Lift out with the slotted spoon and drain on the rack.
5. Pile on a platter, drizzle generously with warm honey, and serve with the graviera alongside.

Notes:

- The oil must be at 175°C; too cool and the dough absorbs fat, too hot and it browns before it cooks through.
- Fry in small batches and keep the finished ribbons warm in a low oven.
- The honey must be warm so it coats rather than sits.

To serve: At a festival table, with tsipouro or Greek coffee.

Recipe 21: Sparta Orange Cake

Historical Essay:

The orange groves of Laconia are one of the region's great agricultural treasures. This cake uses whole oranges and olive oil, drawing on the flavors of the Spartan plain. It is the cake of the village kitchen, the sweet that accompanies coffee and conversation.

The orange cake is a modern Laconian classic, made with the whole fruit—peel, pith, and flesh—boiled and puréed, then mixed with olive oil and flour. The result is a moist, fragrant cake that tastes of the Spartan summer. It is the cake that Katerina made, and it is the cake that the village kitchens of the Parnonas still make.

[PHOTO: A golden-orange cake on a cake stand, with fresh oranges and orange blossoms, in a stone village kitchen]

Equipment: 24 cm springform or round tin, greased and lined; large saucepan; food processor or blender; mixing bowls; whisk; skewer for testing.

Yield: 10–12 slices.

Ingredients:

- 2 whole oranges, about 400 g, washed
- 300 g plain flour
- 2 tsp baking powder
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 200 ml extra-virgin olive oil
- 250 g caster sugar
- 3 large eggs
- For the syrup (optional): juice of 1 orange, 3 tbsp honey

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Put the whole oranges in the saucepan, cover with water, bring to a boil, and simmer 1 hour, until completely soft. Drain and cool slightly. Cut open, remove any pips, and purée the fruit—skin, pith, and all—in the food processor.

Method:

1. Whisk the flour, baking powder, and cinnamon together.
2. Beat the oil, sugar, and eggs until pale and thickened, 4 minutes.
3. Beat in the orange purée.
4. Fold in the dry ingredients in two additions, until just combined.
5. Scrape into the tin and level.
6. Bake until golden and a skewer comes out clean, 45–50 minutes. Cover with foil after 35 minutes if browning too fast.
7. Cool in the tin 15 minutes, then turn out onto a rack.
8. If using the syrup, warm the orange juice and honey and spoon over the warm cake.

Notes:

- The oranges must be boiled until completely soft, or the pith stays bitter.
- Do not skip removing the pips; they turn the cake bitter.
- The cake is very moist and keeps 4 days wrapped.

To serve: With Greek coffee, or a spoonful of thick yoghurt.

Recipe 22: Mani Lupin Bean Salad

Historical Essay:

The "lupin-eaters" of Mani have a history that stretches from ancient necessity to modern delicacy. The bitter beans were boiled in large pots, then placed in sacks and thrown into the sea for forty-eight hours before being dried in the sun. The long soaking and boiling removes their bitterness, transforming them into a tender, nutty salad.

The lupin was the food of the poor in the Mani, the legume that sustained the population through the lean months. The technique of soaking the beans in the sea is a Maniot innovation, using the resources of the coast to process the food of the mountains.

[PHOTO: A bowl of pale lupin beans dressed with olive oil, lemon, and herbs, on a wooden table with the Mani coastline visible]

Equipment: Large pot; large bowl or sack for soaking; colander; mixing bowl.

Yield: 6 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 300 g dried lupin beans
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 1 red onion, finely chopped
- 2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Soak the lupins in plenty of cold water 24 hours, changing the water 3 times. Drain. Boil in unsalted water 45–60 minutes, until tender but not mushy. Drain and rinse. Then soak in cold water, ideally seawater, for 48 hours, changing the water every 8 hours—this is what removes the bitterness. Taste one after 24 hours; if still bitter, continue soaking.

Method:

1. Drain the prepared lupins well and pat dry.
2. Toss with the oil, lemon juice, onion, parsley, salt, and pepper.
3. Let stand 30 minutes for the flavors to combine.

Notes:

- The soaking water must be changed regularly; this is not optional.
- Do not salt the boiling water—it toughens the skins.
- The salad keeps 3 days refrigerated and improves on the second day.

To serve: With ouzo, as a meze, or alongside grilled fish.

Recipe 23: Sfela Cheese Pie

Historical Essay:

Sfela is the PDO cheese of the Mani, and this simple pie—layers of phyllo, crumbled sfela, and wild greens—is the essence of Maniot home cooking. The pie is the everyday food of the household, the dish that uses what is available and makes it into something sustaining.

The sfela is a semi-hard white cheese, salty and slightly sour, made from the milk of the sheep and goats of the Mani. The wild greens—horta—are gathered from the mountainsides in the spring.

[PHOTO: A slice of pie revealing the melted cheese and greens, on a plate with a view of the Limeni harbour]

Equipment: Baking dish 20 × 30 cm; pastry brush; clean tea towel; mixing bowl.

Yield: 8 portions.

Ingredients:

- 8 sheets phyllo
- 300 g sfela, crumbled
- 200 g wild greens (or spinach), blanched, squeezed dry, and chopped
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Oil the dish. Squeeze the blanched greens thoroughly in a clean towel.

Method:

1. Mix the cheese, greens, eggs, and pepper.
2. Lay 4 sheets of phyllo in the dish, brushing each with oil and keeping the rest under a damp towel.
3. Spread the filling evenly.
4. Top with the remaining 4 sheets, brushing each with oil. Tuck the edges in and brush the top.
5. Score the top into portions.
6. Bake until golden and crisp, 35–40 minutes.
7. Rest 10 minutes before cutting.

Notes:

- Do not add salt; sfela is salty enough.
- The greens must be very dry, or the pie will be soggy.
- The pie is good warm or at room temperature.

To serve: With a glass of retsina and a bowl of olives.

Recipe 24: Gytheio-Style Grilled Octopus

Historical Essay:

The grilled octopus of Gytheio is a representative of the port's flavors. At I Trata, the octopus is dried briefly in the sun, then grilled over charcoal until the tentacles curl and the surface chars. It is served with olive oil, lemon, and oregano—nothing more. The technique of sun-drying before grilling gives the meat its characteristic texture.

The octopus of the Gulf of Laconia is famous throughout Greece. The fishermen of Gytheio bring it to the tavernas, where it is prepared with the simplicity that defines the best Greek cooking.

[PHOTO: A grilled octopus tentacle on a rustic plate, with the Gytheio harbor and the islet of Cranae in the background]

Equipment: Large pot; charcoal grill or grill pan; tongs; sharp knife.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 1 fresh octopus, about 1 kg, cleaned
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano, crumbled
- 1 lemon
- Fine sea salt

Preparation: Freeze the octopus 24 hours and thaw, or beat the tentacles against a stone for 10 minutes, to tenderize.

Method:

1. Simmer in unsalted water 45–60 minutes, until a knife pierces the thickest part of a tentacle easily.
2. Drain and cool. Cut the tentacles from the head and discard the head.
3. Dry in the sun or a low oven (80°C) 1–2 hours, until the surface is dry and slightly stiff.
4. Grill over hot coals or in a smoking pan 3–4 minutes per side, until charred in spots and curled.
5. Cut into pieces; dress with oil, oregano, lemon juice, and salt.

Notes:

- Drying is essential; wet octopus steams and turns rubbery.
- The char is the point—do not be timid with the heat.

To serve: With ouzo, or alongside the fish soup.

Recipe 25: Gytheio Fish Soup (I Trata)

Historical Essay:

Fish soup is a staple of the waterfront tavernas in Gytheio, and I Trata's version is among the most praised. It is made from the day's smaller catch, simmered with onions, tomatoes, and olive oil. The fishermen's wisdom of using every part of the catch is the foundation of the dish.

The fish soup of Gytheio is a dish of the household and the taverna, the food of the fishermen and the travelers. The small fish are simmered with the tomatoes and onions of the Laconian garden, and the result is a rich, reddish broth that tastes of the sea.

[PHOTO: A bowl of rich, reddish fish soup with chunks of fish, on a table at I Trata with the port in the background]

Equipment: Heavy pot, 3 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle; fine sieve (optional).

Yield: 4–6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 kg small fish, cleaned (or a mix of small fish and fish frames)
- 2 onions, chopped
- 3 tomatoes, grated (or 400 g tinned chopped tomatoes)
- 4 garlic cloves, sliced
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 bay leaf
- 1.5 litres water
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper
- A handful of flat-leaf parsley, chopped

Preparation: Rinse the fish well.

Method:

1. Soften the onions and garlic in the oil over medium heat, 6 minutes.
2. Add the tomatoes and cook down 10 minutes, until jammy.
3. Add the fish, bay leaf, and water. Bring to a simmer and cook 30 minutes, skimming the foam.
4. If you want a clear broth, strain through the sieve and return the broth to the pot, reserving the fish flesh. If you want a rustic soup, leave as is.
5. Season with salt and pepper, stir in the parsley, and rest 5 minutes.

Notes:

- Do not boil hard, or the broth turns cloudy and bitter.
- If the soup is thin, mash a few pieces of fish into the broth to thicken it.
- The soup is better the next day.

To serve: With crusty bread, a drizzle of oil, and a glass of retsina.

Recipe 26: I Trata's Grilled Catch of the Day

Historical Essay:

This recipe is less a set of instructions than a method, and it is the method of I Trata in Gytheio. You choose your fish from the glass cooler on ice—whatever the boats brought in that morning—and it is weighed, cleaned, and grilled over charcoal. The essay describes the ritual: the walk to the cooler, the conversation with the owner about what is freshest, the weighing, and the short wait while the fish is prepared.

The glass cooler is the heart of I Trata. It sits at the corner of the waterfront, overlooking the port, and it displays the day's catch on ice. The customer chooses the fish, and the kitchen prepares it simply, with olive oil, lemon, and oregano.

[PHOTO: The glass display cooler itself, filled with fish on ice, with the Gytheio port visible through the window behind it]

Equipment: Charcoal grill or ridged grill pan; fish basket or two spatulas; pastry brush.

Yield: As needed; allow 400–500 g whole fish per person.

Ingredients:

- Fresh whole fish, whatever is available—sea bass, sea bream, red mullet, saddled bream, or a larger fish for sharing
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- Dried oregano
- Fine sea salt
- Lemon wedges

Method:

1. Ask the fishmonger to clean and scale the fish but leave the head on. Rinse and pat very dry inside and out.
2. Score the thicker fish 3 times on each side, 5 mm deep. Small fish need no scoring.
3. Rub inside and out with oil, salt, and oregano.
4. Burn the charcoal to white ash, 25–30 minutes; the coals should be hot enough to hold your hand above the grate for 4 seconds.
5. Oil the grate. Grill the fish without moving it. Small fish take 3–4 minutes per side; a 1 kg fish takes 6–7 minutes per side. The skin should release easily and blister.
6. Turn once, carefully, and finish the second side.
7. Serve whole, with lemon and a final drizzle of oil. Nothing else.

Notes:

- The fish must be dry; wet fish will not crisp.
- If it sticks, it is not ready to turn.
- Judge doneness at the bone: the flesh should be opaque and flake, not translucent.

To serve: With a green salad, bread, and cold white wine.

Recipe 27: Shrimp Saganaki (I Trata)

Historical Essay:

Shrimp saganaki is one of the dishes for which I Trata is known, and it exemplifies the simplicity of Gytheio cooking: fresh shrimp, tomatoes, onions, a little ouzo, and cheese melted over the top. The dish belongs to the broader Peloponnesian tradition of saganaki—foods cooked in a two-handled pan.

The shrimp of the Gulf of Laconia are sweet and tender, and the tomatoes and ouzo of the Laconian kitchen complete the dish. It is the taste of the Gytheio taverna, and it is the taste of the Laconian summer.

[PHOTO: A small two-handed pan of bubbling shrimp saganaki, with a view of the Gytheio waterfront behind it]

Equipment: Two-handed saganaki pan or a heavy ovenproof frying pan, 24 cm; wooden spoon.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 500 g fresh shrimp, peeled and deveined
- 3 tomatoes, grated (or 300 g tinned chopped tomatoes)
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 50 ml ouzo
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 100 g feta or sfela, crumbled
- 2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Peel and devein the shrimp, keeping the tails on if you like. Pat dry.

Method:

1. Soften the onion and garlic in the oil over medium heat, 5 minutes.
2. Add the tomatoes and simmer 10 minutes, until thick.
3. Pour in the ouzo and let it burn off 1 minute.
4. Add the shrimp, season, and cook 3–4 minutes, until just pink. Do not overcook.
5. Scatter the cheese over the top and place under a hot grill until melted and bubbling, 2–3 minutes.
6. Scatter with parsley and serve in the pan.

Notes:

- The shrimp continue cooking under the grill; pull them early.
- The tomato must be reduced, or the dish will be watery.
- Use a pan that can go under the grill.

To serve: With crusty bread to mop the pan, and a glass of ouzo.

Recipe 28: Grilled Shrimp (I Trata)

Historical Essay:

Grilled shrimp at I Trata are prepared with the same restraint as the fish: fresh shrimp, olive oil, lemon, and a little salt. They are grilled briefly over charcoal until the shells are pink and the flesh is just opaque. The simplicity of Gytheio seafood cooking depends on not overcooking.

The grilled shrimp are the taste of the Gytheio port—the sweetness of the fresh shrimp, the char of the grill, the brightness of the lemon.

[PHOTO: A plate of grilled shrimp with lemon wedges, on a table overlooking the Gytheio port]

Equipment: Charcoal grill or grill pan; tongs; pastry brush.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 500 g fresh whole shrimp
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Juice of 1 lemon
- Fine sea salt
- Lemon wedges, to serve

Preparation: Rinse the shrimp and pat dry. If they are large, run a skewer through them lengthwise so they do not curl.

Method:

1. Toss the shrimp with the oil and salt.
2. Grill over hot coals or in a smoking pan 2–3 minutes per side, until the shells are pink and the flesh opaque.
3. Pile on a plate, squeeze over the lemon, and serve with lemon wedges.

Notes:

- Do not overcook; shrimp turn rubbery in seconds.
- Skewering keeps them flat against the grill.
- Head-on shrimp are sweeter; leave them whole if you can.

To serve: With ouzo, bread, and a bowl of olives.

Recipe 29: Fried Red Mullet (Barbouni)

Historical Essay:

Fried red mullet is another I Trata staple—small fish, lightly floured and fried in olive oil until crisp. The Greek tradition of frying small fish whole is one of the oldest techniques in coastal cooking, and the red mullet is the most prized of the small fish of the Aegean.

The barbouni of the Gulf of Laconia is among the best in Greece. The fish is dredged in flour and fried in olive oil until the skin is crisp and the flesh is tender.

[PHOTO: A plate of golden fried red mullet with lemon, on a table at I Trata with the harbor behind]

Equipment: Deep heavy frying pan; slotted spoon; wire rack over paper towel; shallow dish for the flour.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 500 g small red mullet, cleaned and scaled
- 100 g plain flour
- 500 ml extra-virgin olive oil, for frying
- Fine sea salt
- Lemon wedges

Preparation: Rinse the fish and pat very dry inside and out. Season lightly with salt.

Method:

1. Heat the oil in the pan to 180°C; a cube of bread should brown in 30 seconds.
2. Dredge each fish in flour, shaking off the excess.
3. Fry in batches of 4–5, 3–4 minutes per side, until golden and crisp. Do not crowd the pan.
4. Drain on the rack and sprinkle with salt.
5. Serve immediately, with lemon.

The fish must be bone dry before flouring, or the coating will slide off in the oil.

- Fry in small batches; crowding drops the oil temperature and the fish go greasy.
- The heads are the best part—crisp them well and eat them.

To serve: With lemon, bread, and a glass of cold white wine or ouzo.

Recipe 30: Hylopites with Syglino and Mizithra

Historical Essay:

Hylopites are thin handmade pasta ribbons, served with syglino and grated mizithra—a dish of the Maniot pantry. The hylopites connect to the broader Peloponnesian pasta tradition, and the syglino is the economy of preserved meats that sustained the mountain household through the winter.

The hylopites are made from a simple dough of flour and water, rolled thin and cut into ribbons. The syglino is the smoked pork of the Mani, and the mizithra is the fresh cheese of the region. The dish is the food of the mountain household, the pasta of the winter table.

[PHOTO: A bowl of ribbon pasta with chunks of syglino and grated cheese, on a rustic table]

Equipment: Large pot for the pasta; heavy frying pan; wooden spoon; colander; grater.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 400 g hylopites (or tagliatelle)
- 200 g syglino, cut into 1 cm dice
- 100 g mizithra, grated
- 2 onions, chopped

- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Blanch the syglino 2 minutes in boiling water and drain, to reduce its salt.

Method:

1. Render the syglino in the oil over medium heat until crisp at the edges, 6–8 minutes.
2. Add the onions and garlic and cook until soft, 5 minutes.
3. Meanwhile, cook the hylopites in well-salted boiling water until al dente. Drain, reserving a cup of the water.
4. Toss the pasta with the syglino mixture, loosening with pasta water if needed.
5. Serve with the grated mizithra and a grind of pepper.

Notes:

- Taste before salting; syglino and mizithra are both salty.
- The dish is best eaten at once; the pasta stiffens as it cools.
- A splash of pasta water is what makes the cheese cling.

To serve: With a glass of Laconian red and a green salad.

Recipe 31: Trachanas Soup

Historical Essay:

Trachanas is a fermented grain-and-milk pasta, used to make a hearty soup—a winter staple of the Laconian mountains. The trachanas is made in the summer, when the milk is abundant, and dried in the sun. The fermented pasta is cooked in water or broth, and the result is a thick, sour, nourishing soup.

The preservation of milk in pasta form is one of the oldest techniques of the mountain household. The trachanas sustained the villages through the cold months, when fresh food was scarce.

[PHOTO: A bowl of thick trachanas soup with a drizzle of olive oil, on a stone table with the Parnonas forest behind]

Equipment: Medium saucepan, 2 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle; fine sieve.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 200 g trachanas
- 1 litre water or light chicken broth
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

- 100 g sfela or mizithra, crumbled (optional)

Preparation: Rinse the trachanas briefly in a sieve under cold water to remove loose starch.

Method:

1. Bring the water or broth to a boil in the saucepan.
2. Add the trachanas in a slow stream, stirring to prevent clumping.
3. Reduce the heat and simmer 15–20 minutes, stirring often, until thick and the grains are tender. Add hot water if it becomes too stiff.
4. Season with the oil, salt, and pepper.
5. Crumble the cheese over the top, if using, and serve.

Notes:

- Stir constantly at the start, or the trachanas will clump.
- The soup thickens dramatically on standing; loosen with hot water when reheating.
- Trachanas is already sour; taste before adding lemon or vinegar.

To serve: With bread and olives, as a winter supper.

Recipe 32: Triftades with Honey and Walnuts

Historical Essay:

Triftades are hand-rolled pasta, often served sweet with honey and walnuts—a dish that bridges the savory and sweet traditions of Laconia. The triftades are made by rolling the dough into small, irregular pieces, then boiling them and tossing them with honey and walnuts. It is the sweet pasta of the village table, the dessert of the festival and the family celebration.

[PHOTO: A plate of triftades drizzled with honey and scattered with walnuts, on a festive table]

Equipment: Mixing bowl; rolling pin; sharp knife; large pot; colander; small saucepan for the honey.

Yield: 4–6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 300 g plain flour
- 100 ml water
- 2 eggs
- Pinch of fine sea salt
- 150 g thyme honey, warmed
- 100 g walnuts, roughly chopped
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon

Preparation: Combine the flour, salt, eggs, and water and knead 8 minutes into a stiff dough. Cover and rest 30 minutes.

Method:

1. Roll the dough into ropes about 1 cm thick and cut into short, irregular pieces.
2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Drop in the triftades and cook 3–4 minutes, until they float and are tender.
3. Drain well and tip into a warm bowl.
4. Drizzle with the warm honey, scatter with the walnuts and cinnamon, and toss gently.
5. Serve immediately.

Notes:

- The dough must be stiff; a soft dough gives mushy pasta.
- Drain thoroughly, or the honey will slide off.
- These are best eaten hot, straight from the pot.

To serve: As a dessert, with a small glass of tsipouro.

Recipe 33: Mani Rusks with Tomato and Sfela

Historical Essay:

Paximadia—Mani rusks—are the everyday bread of the region, baked twice and lasting for weeks. Served with grated tomato, sfela, and olive oil, they are a simple, ancient combination. The rusks are the food of the sailor and the shepherd, the bread that lasts.

[PHOTO: A plate of rusks topped with tomato and sfela, with a view of the Mani coast]

Equipment: Grater; small bowl; serving plate.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 4 Mani rusks (or other hard barley or wheat rusks)
- 2 ripe tomatoes, grated
- 100 g sfela, crumbled
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 tsp dried oregano, crumbled
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: If the rusks are very hard, dip them briefly in water and let them soften 2 minutes—but do not soak them.

Method:

1. Spoon the grated tomato over each rusk.
2. Crumble the sfela on top.
3. Drizzle with the oil, scatter with oregano and pepper, and serve at once.

Notes:

- Grate the tomato on the coarse side and discard the excess liquid.
- Assemble just before serving, or the rusks go soggy.
- A little sea salt may be needed if the tomatoes are sweet.

To serve: With ouzo or retsina, as a meze.

Recipe 34: Amygdalota of Monemvasia

Historical Essay:

The amygdalota of Monemvasia are a famous almond sweet—small, chewy, and fragrant with rosewater. The tradition of almond sweets runs through the Byzantine and Ottoman periods, and the Monemvasian version is among the most celebrated.

The amygdalota are made from ground almonds, sugar, and egg whites, flavored with rosewater and rolled in powdered sugar. They are the sweet of the Monemvasian festival, the taste of the rock-fortress city.

[PHOTO: A plate of white almond sweets, with the rock of Monemvasia in the background]

Equipment: Food processor; mixing bowl; baking sheet lined with parchment; small bowl of powdered sugar.

Yield: About 24 sweets.

Ingredients:

- 300 g ground almonds
- 200 g caster sugar
- 2 egg whites
- 1 tsp rosewater
- 100 g icing sugar, for rolling

Preparation: Heat the oven to 160°C (140°C fan). Line the baking sheet.

Method:

1. Mix the almonds and caster sugar.
2. Whisk the egg whites to soft peaks, then fold into the almond mixture with the rosewater, to a firm, sticky paste.
3. Roll into balls the size of a walnut and place on the sheet, spaced apart.
4. Bake 15–20 minutes, until set and faintly golden at the edges. They should be chewy, not crisp.
5. Cool 5 minutes, then roll in icing sugar while still warm.

Notes:

- Do not overbake, or they become hard.
- If the paste is too sticky to roll, chill it 20 minutes.
- Roll in icing sugar twice, once warm and once cold, for a thicker coat.

To serve: With Greek coffee, as the Monemvasiots do.

Recipe 35: Galopita (Milk Pie)

Historical Essay:

Galopita is a milk pie—a sweet custard baked in pastry, a dessert of the Laconian festive table. The galopita is made from phyllo, milk, sugar, eggs, and semolina, baked until the custard is set and the pastry is golden. It is the sweet of the village festival, the dessert of the family table.

[PHOTO: A slice of golden milk pie, with a glass of tea or coffee, on a village table]

Equipment: Baking dish 20 × 30 cm; pastry brush; saucepan; whisk; clean tea towel.

Yield: 12 portions.

Ingredients:

- 8 sheets phyllo
- 1 litre whole milk
- 200 g caster sugar
- 3 eggs
- 100 g fine semolina
- 100 g butter, melted
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Butter the dish.

Method:

1. Heat the milk, sugar, and semolina in the saucepan over medium heat, whisking constantly, until thickened, 8–10 minutes. Remove from the heat.
2. Beat the eggs in a bowl, then whisk in a ladleful of the hot milk to temper them. Return the mixture to the pan and whisk over low heat 2 minutes. Do not boil.
3. Lay 4 sheets of phyllo in the dish, brushing each with melted butter and keeping the rest under a damp towel.
4. Pour in the custard.
5. Top with the remaining 4 sheets, brushing each with butter. Tuck the edges in.
6. Bake 40 minutes, until set and golden. A knife inserted should come out clean.
7. Cool to room temperature, dust with cinnamon, and cut into portions.

Notes:

- Do not let the custard boil once the eggs go in, or it will curdle.
- The pie sets as it cools; do not cut it warm.
- It keeps 3 days refrigerated.

To serve: At room temperature, with coffee.

Recipe 36: Diples with Honey and Walnuts

Historical Essay:

Diples are thin, fried dough sheets drizzled with honey and sprinkled with walnuts—a festive sweet of Laconia and the wider Peloponnese. The diples are made from a thin dough of flour, eggs, and water, rolled out and cut into sheets, then fried until golden and crisp. The honey and walnuts are the finishing touch, the taste of the festival.

[PHOTO: A plate of golden diples drizzled with honey and walnuts, on a festive table]

Equipment: Mixing bowl; pasta machine or rolling pin; sharp knife or pastry wheel; deep heavy pan; slotted spoon; wire rack; two forks.

Yield: About 20 pieces.

Ingredients:

- 300 g plain flour
- 3 eggs
- 100 ml water
- Pinch of fine sea salt
- 1 litre olive oil, for frying
- 200 g thyme honey, warmed
- 100 g walnuts, finely chopped
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon

Preparation: Combine the flour, salt, eggs, and water and knead 10 minutes into a smooth, elastic dough. Cover and rest 30 minutes.

Method:

1. Roll the dough as thin as possible—a pasta machine on its thinnest setting is ideal—and cut into rectangles about 10 × 15 cm.
2. Heat the oil to 180°C.
3. Fry one sheet at a time, pressing the centre with two forks so it curls and bubbles, 30–40 seconds per side, until golden.
4. Drain on the rack.
5. Pile on a platter, drizzle generously with warm honey, and scatter with walnuts and cinnamon.

Notes:

- The dough must be paper-thin; thick sheets stay raw in the middle.
- The forks are what give diples their folded shape.
- Fry in small batches to keep the oil hot.

To serve: At a festival table, with tsipouro.

Recipe 37: Broustoulas (Fried Dough Sweet)

Historical Essay:

Broustoulas is a fried dough sweet, a village specialty of Laconia. The broustoulas are made from a soft dough of flour and water, shaped into small pieces and fried until golden. The honey and walnuts are the finishing touch, the taste of the village festival.

[PHOTO: A plate of golden broustoulas drizzled with honey, on a rustic table]

Equipment: Mixing bowl; deep heavy pan; slotted spoon; wire rack; small saucepan for the honey.

Yield: About 30 pieces.

Ingredients:

- 300 g plain flour
- 150 ml warm water
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, plus 1 litre for frying
- Pinch of fine sea salt
- 150 g thyme honey, warmed
- 100 g walnuts, chopped

Preparation: Combine the flour, salt, water, and 4 tbsp oil and knead 5 minutes into a soft dough. Cover and rest 20 minutes.

Method:

1. Pinch off small pieces and roll into irregular balls about 2 cm across.
2. Heat the frying oil to 175°C.
3. Fry in batches 3–4 minutes, turning, until golden and puffed. Drain on the rack.
4. Pile on a platter, drizzle with warm honey, and scatter with walnuts.

Notes:

- Keep the pieces small; large ones stay doughy inside.
- The oil must be hot enough that the dough puffs at once.
- Best eaten warm.

To serve: With Greek coffee or a glass of tsipouro.

Recipe 38: Pasteli (Sesame and Honey Bar)

Historical Essay:

Pasteli is a sesame and honey bar—an ancient sweet that has been made in Laconia since antiquity. The pasteli is made from sesame seeds and honey, pressed into a tray and cut into bars. It is the sweet of the ancient world, the taste of the Spartan festival, and the energy bar of the mountain shepherd.

[PHOTO: A plate of pasteli bars, with a view of the Spartan plain]

Equipment: Dry frying pan; saucepan; candy thermometer; 20 × 20 cm parchment-lined tray; oiled knife.

Yield: About 24 bars.

Ingredients:

- 300 g sesame seeds
- 200 g thyme honey
- ½ tsp fine sea salt

Preparation: Line and lightly oil the tray.

Method:

1. Toast the sesame in the dry pan over medium heat, shaking, 4–6 minutes, until golden. Tip into a bowl.
2. Heat the honey to 120°C, about 5 minutes, stirring down the foam.
3. Off the heat, stir in the salt and all the sesame. Work quickly.
4. Press into the tray to 1.5 cm even thickness.
5. Cool at least 1 hour until firm.
6. Cut into bars with the oiled knife.

Notes:

- 120°C is the setting point.
- Wrap in parchment; keeps for weeks.

To serve: With coffee, or carried on the mountain.

Recipe 39: Prickly-Pear Jam

Historical Essay:

Prickly-pear jam is a Mani specialty, made from the fruit of the cactus that grows abundantly in the arid landscape. The prickly pear—fragosyko—was brought to Greece from the Americas in the Ottoman period, and it thrived in the arid Mani. The jam is made from the fruit, sugar, and lemon juice, cooked until thick and dark. It is the taste of the Maniot summer, the sweet of the tower-house table.

[PHOTO: A jar of deep pink jam, with prickly pear fruits and a view of the Mani coast]

Equipment: Heavy saucepan; wooden spoon; jars with lids, sterilized; tongs; clean cloth.

Yield: About 1 litre.

Ingredients:

- 1 kg prickly pear fruits
- 500 g caster sugar
- Juice of 1 lemon

Preparation: Handle the fruit with tongs or thick gloves—the spines are fine and painful. Peel and deseed, working over a bowl to catch the juice.

Method:

1. Put the fruit, sugar, and lemon juice in the saucepan and bring to a boil, stirring to dissolve the sugar.
2. Reduce the heat and simmer 40–50 minutes, stirring often, until thick and dark. Skim any foam.
3. Test for set: a drop on a cold saucer should wrinkle when pushed.
4. Pour into sterilized jars, seal, and invert 5 minutes.

Notes:

- The jam thickens further on cooling; do not over-reduce.
- Wear gloves—the spines are worse than they look.
- Keeps 1 year unopened; refrigerate after opening.

To serve: With bread and sfela, or with yoghurt.

Recipe 40: Tsakonian Eggplant Salad (Honorable Mention—Leonidio)

Historical Essay:

The Tsakonian eggplant of Leonidio is a PDO product from Arcadia—not Laconia, but the neighboring Tsakonia, where the ancient Doric dialect of Sparta is most clearly preserved. Leonidio is named for a Spartan king, and its people are the descendants of the ancient Laconians who retreated to the mountains. This salad is therefore more than a Peloponnesian neighbor: it is a taste of the ancient Laconian heritage that survived outside Laconia's borders.

The Tsakonian eggplant is long, pale, and tender, with a delicate, almost sweet flavor. The salad is made by roasting or grilling the eggplant, then mashing it with olive oil, lemon, garlic, and parsley.

[PHOTO: A bowl of smoky eggplant salad, with a view of the Leonidio plain and the Arcadian mountains]

Equipment: Charcoal grill or oven; colander; bowl; fork or potato masher.

Yield: 4 servings as a meze.

Ingredients:

- 2 Tsakonian eggplants (or 3 small, pale eggplants), about 800 g total
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
- 1 tsp fine sea salt

- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Prick the eggplants all over with a fork.

Method:

1. Grill over charcoal or roast at 220°C for 30–40 minutes, turning, until the skin is charred all over and the flesh collapses.
2. Cool slightly, then peel and discard the skin and the worst of the seeds.
3. Put the flesh in a colander and press out the excess water for 10 minutes.
4. Mash with the oil, lemon, garlic, parsley, salt, and pepper. Leave it a little chunky.
5. Taste and adjust lemon and salt.

Notes:

- Charring the skin is what gives the smoky flavor; do not oven-bake without grilling.
- Pressing out the water is essential, or the salad is soupy.
- It improves after an hour at room temperature.

To serve: With bread, as a meze, or alongside grilled fish.

Recipe 41: Tsakonian Eggplant with Sfela (Honorable Mention—Leonidio)

Historical Essay:

This dish brings the Tsakonian eggplant together with Laconian sfela—an honorable mention that unites the Doric heritage of Leonidio with the Laconian pantry. The eggplant is sliced, grilled, and layered with crumbled sfela, olive oil, and herbs, then baked until the cheese melts. It is the vegetable of the Doric heritage meeting the cheese of the Mani.

[PHOTO: A baking dish of eggplant and melted sfela, with the Mani towers in the background]

Equipment: Grill pan or charcoal grill; baking dish 20 × 30 cm; pastry brush.

Yield: 4 servings.

Ingredients:

- 2 Tsakonian eggplants, sliced 1 cm thick
- 200 g sfela, crumbled
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1 tomato, sliced (optional)
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Heat the oven to 180°C (160°C fan). Salt the eggplant slices lightly and leave 15 minutes, then pat dry.

Method:

1. Brush the slices with oil and grill 2–3 minutes per side, until marked and tender.

2. Layer half the eggplant in the dish, scatter with half the sfela, garlic, and oregano. Repeat.
3. Top with the tomato slices, if using, and drizzle with the remaining oil.
4. Bake 25 minutes, until the cheese melts and the top is golden.
5. Rest 5 minutes and serve.

Notes:

- Salting the eggplant draws out water and prevents sogginess.
- Do not add salt; sfela supplies it.
- The dish is good warm, not hot.

To serve: With bread and a glass of Laconian white.

Recipe 42: Katerina's Spartan Broth

Historical Essay:

This is my grandmother's dish, and it is the living descendant of the ancient melas zomos. The black broth of the syssitia was a pork-blood stew; Katerina's version uses beef, beef broth, carrots, and lemon. The lemon is the innovation of the modern Spartan kitchen—the acidity that brightens the broth and balances the richness of the meat. The carrots add sweetness and body. The onions, salt, pepper, and olive oil are the foundation.

Katerina cooked this broth in Sparta, where we went for the summers, and it is the taste of the syssitia transformed into a family dish—the ancient common mess made in a modern Spartan kitchen.

[PHOTO: A bowl of Katerina's Spartan broth, with beef, carrots, and lemon, on the family table in Sparta]

Equipment: Heavy lidded pot, 4–5 litre capacity; wooden spoon; ladle; fine grater for the lemon zest.

Yield: 6 servings.

Ingredients:

- 1 kg beef shin or chuck, cut into 5 cm chunks
- 2 litres beef broth
- 3 carrots, peeled and sliced into rounds
- 2 onions, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, sliced
- 2 bay leaves
- Juice of 1 lemon, plus the zest of half
- 4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tsp fine sea salt
- Freshly ground black pepper

Preparation: Pat the beef dry and season with half the salt.

Method:

1. Brown the beef in the oil in the pot over medium-high heat, in batches, 3–4 minutes per side. Set aside.
2. Add the onions and garlic and cook until soft, 6 minutes.
3. Return the beef to the pot, add the broth, carrots, and bay leaves, and bring to a boil.
4. Reduce the heat, cover, and simmer 1½–2 hours, until the beef is completely tender and pulls apart.
5. Discard the bay. Stir in the lemon juice and zest off the heat, and season with the remaining salt and pepper.
6. Rest 10 minutes before serving.

Notes:

- Add the lemon off the heat so it stays bright rather than bitter.
- The broth should be rich but not thick; add hot water if it reduces too far.
- It is better on the second day.

To serve: With bread, as the family did, and a glass of retsina.

Recipe 43: An Homage to My Grandmother's Spartan Broth

For Katerina Manousopoulos Gregoriou (1904–2000)

Born in Chicago. Raised in Zarafona and Sparta. Educated at the Hill School in Athens. Married to Elias Gregoriou of Goritsa. Taken to Alexandria for the cotton business. Returned to Greece. Raised her grandson in Athens. Went to Sparta and Tsintzina for the summers. Cooked this broth.

Historical Essay:

This recipe is not a reconstruction. It is a memory. Katerina was born in 1904 in Chicago, in the Greek immigrant community of the early twentieth century. Her father moved the family back to Sparta in 1912. She attended the Hill School in Athens. She married Elias, from Goritsa, and he took her to Alexandria for the cotton business. Then she came home, and she cooked this broth.

She lived until 2000. She saw the twentieth century from beginning to end—the last years of the Ottoman world, the Balkan Wars, the Asia Minor Catastrophe, the Second World War, the Greek Civil War, the military junta, the restoration of democracy, the entry into the European Union. And through all of it, she cooked.

When I eat this broth, I am eating my childhood—the summers in Sparta and on the mountain, the table of my grandparents. I am eating the syssitia and the Byzantine table and the kitchen of Zarafona and the Spartan home of my family. I am eating the continuity of a cuisine that has survived for two and a half thousand years.

This is for my grandmother.

[PHOTO: Portrait of Katerina Manousopoulos Gregoriou]

Method: Cook as in Recipe 42.

END OF SECTION FOUR.

SECTION FIVE: BEVERAGES OF LACONIA

Each entry is preceded by a historical essay and followed by a full-page photograph.

Wines of Laconia: Monemvasia and the Malvasia Legacy

Historical Essay:

The wine history of Laconia is inseparable from the history of Monemvasia. In the Middle Ages, the sweet wine of Monemvasia—known across Europe as Malvasia—was one of the most celebrated wines of the Mediterranean, exported from the rock-fortress port to Venice, Genoa, and the courts of Western Europe. The name "Malvasia" itself is a corruption of Monemvasia, and the wine was so famous that it gave its name to a whole family of grape varieties and wine styles across the Mediterranean world.

The modern revival of this ancient wine is the work of Monemvasia Winery, founded by Giorgos and Elli Tsimbidi. Giorgos grew up listening to his grandmother's stories of the legendary sweet wine that belonged to Monemvasia, and he became convinced that it deserved to be brought back to life. The couple spent thirteen years pursuing PDO status, which was finally granted on 23 July 2010—the 181st anniversary of Monemvasia's liberation from the Ottomans. Today the winery produces PDO Monemvasia-Malvasia, alongside PGI Laconia and PGI Peloponnese wines and varietal bottlings.

The terroir of the Malea peninsula—an extension of the Parnon range, with limestone and schist soils and altitudes reaching 500 metres—gives the wines their acidity and structure. The Tsimbidis farm about 30 acres organically, working with rare local varieties. Their daughters Marialena, Anastasia, and Artemis have now joined the business.

Beyond Monemvasia, Laconia has a broader wine identity. The PGI Laconia designation covers red, white, and rosé wines from the region, with permitted varieties including Kydonitsa, Mavroudi, Monemvasia, Roditis, Athiri, and Assyrtiko for whites, and Mavroudi, Agiorgitiko, Thrapsa, and Mandilaria for reds. Estate Theodorakakos, a family business in the heart of Laconia with roots going back to the early twentieth century, focuses on local varieties such as Kydonitsa and Mavroudi, farming organically and producing what they identify as Laconian regional wines. Their Kydonitsa, with aromas of ripe yellow apple, fresh lily, and guava, won a silver medal at the London Wine Competition.

[PHOTO: Vineyards on the Malea peninsula with the rock of Monemvasia in the distance]

Featured Producers:

- Monemvasia Winery (Tsimbidi): PDO Monemvasia-Malvasia, PGI Laconia, PGI Peloponnese, varietal wines.
- Estate Theodorakakos: Kydonitsa, Mavroudi, and other local varieties.

Sparta Beer: The Laconian Brewery

Historical Essay:

The craft beer revolution reached Sparta in the twenty-first century, and it arrived with a distinctly Laconian character. Sparta Beer is produced by the Laconian Brewery (Λακωνική Ζυθοποιία), based in Sparta, and it is the first fresh Laconian beer made with Greek malt and water from the springs of Taygetos. The beer is unfiltered and unpasteurized, with a full body, a malty flavor, and a moderate bitterness from European hops.

The brewery was founded by a young Spartan who returned to his mother's village in the Taygetos valley to open the first microbrewery in the city. The enterprise was part of a broader movement of young Greek brewers who, in the years of the economic crisis, turned to craft beer as a way of building something local and meaningful.

For the table of this book, Sparta Beer is the modern Laconian answer to the question of what to drink with the hearty dishes of the mountain and the Mani. It is made with the water of Taygetos, brewed in Sparta, and carries the name of the city that gave the world the word "laconic."

[PHOTO: A bottle of Sparta Beer against the Taygetos mountains]

Tsipouro of Laconia: The Theodorakakos Distillery

Historical Essay:

Tsipouro is the grape distillate of mainland Greece—the clear, fiery spirit made from the pomace of the wine press, distilled in copper stills and often flavored with anise or left plain. In Laconia, the tradition of tsipouro is bound to the wine estates, and the Theodorakakos family of Elaiopigi produces a tsipouro that is distinctively Laconian.

The Theodorakakos tsipouro without anise is made from the grapes of aromatic quality varieties cultivated in selected vineyard plots of Laconian land, distilled under controlled conditions by a family with generations of knowledge. It is the spirit of the Laconian table—served after the meal, alongside the lalangia and the diples, or offered to guests as a sign of hospitality.

[PHOTO: A bottle of tsipouro on a table with lalangia and diples]

Homemade Retsina: The Pine Resin of the Village Table

Historical Essay:

In the traditional village home and the village taverna, *retsina* is not a commercial product but a household one. It is made in the autumn, when the wine is new, by adding pine resin to the fermenting must—the resin of the Aleppo pine that grows on the slopes of Taygetos and Parnonas. The result is a wine with a strong, unmistakable flavor of pine resin, the taste of the barrel and the tree, a wine that is rough, aromatic, and entirely of the place.

This homemade *retsina* is everywhere in Laconia. It is poured from unlabeled bottles and from barrels in the corner of the taverna. It is the wine of the everyday table, the drink that accompanies the lentils and the rooster and the wild boar. It is not the refined commercial *retsina* of the city; it is the *retsina* of the village, with the resin's flavor so pronounced that it takes a newcomer by surprise. For those who grew up with it, it is the taste of home.

The resin was originally added as a preservative, in an age before airtight containers and sulfites, when wine had to survive the heat of the summer and the journey to the market. The pine resin sealed the wine against oxidation and gave it the flavor that became, over time, the flavor that people wanted. In the villages of Laconia, the practice never died out.

When I think of the village table—the table of Polydrosos, the table of my summers—I think of the homemade *retsina*. It is the drink that was poured with the bread and the cheese, the drink that accompanied the conversation after the meal, the drink that tasted of the pine trees and the barrel and the place.

[PHOTO: A barrel of *retsina* in a village taverna]

Ouzo and Commercial Retsina: A Note on the Absence of a Laconian Brand

Historical Essay:

Ouzo is the anise-flavored spirit of Greece, and commercial *retsina* is the resinated wine of the Greek table. Both are ubiquitous in tavernas across the country, and both are served in Laconia. But neither has a distinctive Laconian brand of the kind that Monemvasia has for wine or Sparta Beer has for beer.

The great ouzo producers are based in Lesbos (Plomari) and other islands and mainland regions, not in Laconia. Commercial *retsina*, likewise, is produced across Greece, with the most famous brands coming from Attica and Central Greece. In the tavernas of Gytheio and the Mani, the ouzo on the table is likely to be a national brand, and the commercial *retsina* is likely to come from outside the region.

This is not a deficiency in the Laconian table. It is a reminder that Laconia's drinking culture is rooted in wine and tsipouro—the products of its own vineyards and stills—rather than in the anise spirits of the islands. The ouzo and commercial retsina are present, but they are guests at the table, not hosts.

Closing Note of Section Five

The drinking culture of Laconia is rooted in wine—both the historic Malvasia of Monemvasia and the homemade retsina of the village table—and in tsipouro, the spirit of the Laconian still. Ouzo and commercial retsina are present in the tavernas, but they are guests at the table, not hosts. The hosts are the PDO Monemvasia-Malvasia, the Kydonitsa and Mavroudi of the Laconian vineyards, the homemade pine-resin retsina of the village barrel, the tsipouro of the Theodorakakos still, and the Sparta Beer of the Taygetos springs.

EPILOGUE: THE TABLE OF MY GRANDMOTHER

I began this book with a memory of Polydroso—the stone houses, the fir trees, the wind through the gorge, the road that was not paved and the electricity that came late. But the memory is set against another: Athens, where my grandparents raised me, and the return each summer to Sparta and to the mountain. I end the book with the kitchen in Sparta, the pot on the stove, the smell of beef and lemon and bay leaf filling the house.

Katerina was born in Chicago in 1904. Her father brought the family back to Sparta in 1912. She went to the Hill School in Athens, married Elias of Goritsa, followed him to Alexandria for the cotton business, and came home to raise her grandson. She lived until 2000. She saw the twentieth century from beginning to end, and through all of it, she cooked.

Her broth was not the black broth of the ancient syssitia. It was beef, not pork blood; lemon, not vinegar; carrots and onions and garlic and olive oil. But it was the same idea: a nourishing broth, a dish of the household, a taste of Sparta. When I eat it, I am eating the syssitia and the Byzantine table and the kitchen of Zarafona and the Spartan home of my family.

This book has traced that continuity through three layers of Laconia. The ancient layer, when the syssitia was the beating heart of Spartan life and the black broth was the taste of citizenship. The Byzantine layer, when Mystras was the capital of the Despotate of the Morea and the cuisine grew refined. The modern layer, when the villages of the Parnonas preserved the old ways, when the Mani refused every occupier, when Gytheio sent its fish to the tavernas of the waterfront, when the refugees of the Slavic invasions became the Tsakonians of Leonidio, speaking the oldest surviving form of Doric.

The bloodline of the Spartiates did not disappear. It retreated to Parnonas, to the Mani, to Monemvasia, to Mystras. It maintained itself in the mountain villages—Goritsa, Zarafona, Polydroso—where the roads were unpaved and the electricity came late. It maintained itself in the cuisine of preservation—syglino, paspalas, rusks—the food of a people who expected siege. It maintained itself in the table, in the broth, in the bread, in the wine.

And it maintained itself in the families. A man from Goritsa took a woman from Zarafona to Alexandria, and their grandson was raised in Athens and went to Sparta and Tsintzina for the summers. The history of Laconia is the history of my family, and the history of my family is the history of Laconia.

The Laconian table is a table of survival. It is the table of a people who held on—to their land, to their customs, to their speech, to their food—through invasion and occupation, through poverty and isolation, through the long centuries when the rest of the world forgot that Sparta had ever existed. It is the table of the mountain villages and the fortified Mani, of the rock of Monemvasia and the palaces of Mystras, of the waterfront of Gytheio and the orange groves of Sparta.

I have written this book so that the table will not be forgotten. The recipes are here. The history is here. The villages and the restaurants and the producers are here. The photographs are here. The table is set.

For Katerina Manousopoulos Gregoriou, 1904–2000, who was born in Chicago, raised in Zarafona and Sparta, educated at the Hill School in Athens, married Elias Gregoriou of Goritsa, followed him to Alexandria, came home, raised her grandson in Athens, went to Sparta and Tsintzina for the summers, and cooked this broth.

And for the villages of the Parnonas—Goritsa, Zarafona, Polydroso—and for all the villages that kept the table set.

THE LACONIAN TABLE

A Culinary History of Sparta, the Parnonas, and the Mani

By Pericles Gregoriou

THE END.