

Tales
of Cyprus
HOME TRUTHS

NUMBER

5

CONSTANTINOS EMMANUELLE

Home Truths

NUMBER FIVE

People lived off the land and home cooking reigned supreme.

It is true that my parent's generation was mostly farm owners and they grew and harvested a variety of organic foods such as fruit, wheat, legumes and a whole variety of vegetables. Cypriots were an inventive lot when it came to food and cooking. They could extract a dozen different recipes from the one single food product. Take for instance the humble grape. The villagers would use grape juice to make their own wine, but also deserts such as Soujouko, Palouze and Lyko. Goat's milk was used as a warm beverage but also to make cheese such as Haloumi and Anari.

Wheat was used of course to make flour for bread but it was also the basis of a hearty soup called Trahana. Survival in the village was largely based on harvesting crops and farming. Most villagers had livestock (goats, sheep, chicken, etc.) that provided them with eggs and milk all year round. Most houses also had a pantry full of preserved foods and a grain store that included large storage pots or vessels containing grains from previous seasons ensuring that even during the bleakest winters and summers, there were always the basic ingredients at hand.

Villagers would also barter or share food products with one another. My mother for instance, would bake bread for the village on certain days of the week in a homemade wood fire oven. Villagers would then either purchase a loaf or swap other food products in exchange for a loaf. This form of bartering system meant that your pantry was always well stocked. The only time village agriculture suffered of course was when the weather ruined the crops – just as it has for thousands of years.

My parent's generation had to endure the most primitive forms of storage for their food products. Olives for instance were collected in late summer and stored inside large pots full of salt. There was no electricity in most villages in Cyprus until the 1950s and 60s. Therefore, there was no refrigeration in the village or in other words, no frozen foods. This meant that meat had to be eaten on the same day as the slaughter and a meal containing meat was more or less reserved for special feast days or celebrations such as Christmas, Easter, or a village wedding. The food you ate was based on the seasonal crop at the time. Winter crops included leeks, squash, turnips and potatoes. Summer crops included tomatoes, beans, cucumbers, peppers, letters, zucchini and taro (kolokasi).

You have to appreciate that life in the traditional Cypriot village up until the 1950s and 60s had remained the same and remained unchanged for thousands of years? People essentially lived to eat and they ate what they planted in order to survive. The daily struggle to cultivate and harvest the fields around the village was rooted in this most basic and primitive human need to survive. As you can imagine life in the traditional village in Cyprus was never boring and people were generally always busy with sowing, planting, growing, harvesting, gathering, preserving, storing, cooking and of course, eating food. From cockcrow until sunset most villagers were out in the fields tending to their crops and livestock. No wonder they usually retired to bed earlier than their modern-day descendants. Compare your life to theirs. At daybreak, your ancestors ate a frugal breakfast of home-made cheese on home-made bread and washed it down

with a mug of warm milk straight from the teat of a family goat before riding a mule to the outskirts of town where they would work the land for about 10 hours a day. At daybreak, you might drive to your favourite café and order a skinny Cappuccino and poached eggs on toast before steering through traffic to go and sit at a desk in a big building for eight hours a day. At dusk your ancestors sat in a lantern-lit room in a mud-brick home that they built with their hands and engage in a conversation with other occupants in the room as they consume homemade delicacies. At dusk, you may lounge about on a large leather sofa in your concrete and brick house watching TV or flipping a screen on a device that you hold in your hand as you wait for the pizza man to arrive.

My parent's generation did not know about super-markets or processed food. They did not know about take-away meals, fast food, microwave ovens or refrigerators. What is truly remarkable is that even after many people left their villages in Cyprus after the second World War to travel and settle in a modern metropolis such as Melbourne, they continued to observe and practice the same village rituals as before. They planted and grew their own fruit and vegetables. My mother cooked everything from scratch and we always had home-cooked meals. Although they did succumb to using supermarkets for pre-packaged goods such as bread, milk, sugar, rice and flour...my parents rarely ate in cafes or restaurants and only pecked at take-away food if they were stranded away from home and had no choice.

As I type this tale on my MacBook Pro, warmed by the central heating in my modern home, I will occasionally turn away from my laptop to take a sip of my Gatorade and perhaps sink a Water Cracker into a tub of Sweet Chilli dip. Tomorrow I will promise myself – to shift a small mountain of soil in my back yard in a vain attempt to beautify my garden and perhaps lose a few of those pesky kilos that have invaded my mid-section.





C O N S T A N T I N O S

E M M A N U E L L E

conemmanuelle@nmit.edu.au

www.talesofcyprus.com
