

CHAPTER NINE

Feasts



*"One cannot think well, love well, sleep well,
if one has not dined well."*

- Virginia Woolf

When I wasn't beach-hopping, I was on gastronomic adventures. The smells! The aromas! Oh, the tastes! A seductive ballet of garlic, lemon, and oregano, mingling with the warm island breeze. Old-fashioned tavernas and seaside restaurants inviting me to taste freshly caught seafood sprinkled with fragrant herbs and local seasonal ingredients.

One evening, tucked somewhere deep into the heart of the town, I found a taverna, with no more than half a dozen outdoor tables, a mulberry tree, and a barely functional hole-in-the-wall kitchen. I was invited and led to a wobbling table by a woman with laugh-lines as deep as the Aegean, and hands calloused from years of kneading dough and stirring pots.

Before I could finish saying my “Kalispera” a basket of fresh bread and tyrokafteri⁷ was on the table.

“Start eating!” she insisted.

Plates began to appear in front of me, each more tempting than the last, and I hadn’t even ordered yet! A horiatiki⁸, the tomatoes so ripe they were practically bleeding sunshine; tzatziki⁹ – cool and tangy, begging to be scooped up by the warm pita that was lying next to it. Then came the moussaka, with its layers of eggplant and spiced meat topped with an “Oh-my-goodness-so-creamy-béchamel sauce!” But the real star? An entire fish, its skin crispy and charred from the grill, its flesh moist and flaky. I squeezed lemon over it; I swear I could taste the sea itself!

Every evening came with a different dish. Each bite was like rediscovering my roots. I mean... I grew up with all these Greek flavors; but here, they sang like I’d never heard them sing before. Was it the locally sourced ingredients that made the difference? The sea air? Or maybe the love and pride of the locals that made every dish special? Or the warmth that radiated from every person I encountered? Was it the chef who insisted on showing me his prized tomato plants growing in the back? The waiter who regaled me with tales of his Yiayia’s¹⁰ secret baklava¹¹ reci-

7 Tyrokafteri – spicy feta spread

8 Greek Salad

9 Dip made from Greek yogurt, garlic and cucumber.

10 Yiayia - Grandmother

11 A layered dessert made of filo pastry, filled with chopped walnuts, and sweetened with honey.

pe? Or the fellow diners who invited me to share a carafe of local wine, insisting that meals were meant to be shared?

“Come, have a meze¹² with us!” they called out, inviting me with a sweeping motion of the arm to join them at their table.

Every meal was a celebration, a homecoming, filled with laughter, delicious food, and the clinking of wine glasses. Meals were more than just eating; they were an invitation to be part of a larger community, to share in the joy and the simplicity of island living.

Sharing life with the people of Skiathos was a dive into a warm, welcoming sea of humanity. Each interaction, each smile, each shared moment was beginning to crack my city armor that I’d been wearing for so long.

There was Dafne, the fruitier, who insisted on pressing an extra peach into my hand each time I visited her stall. “For sweetness in life,” she’d say with a wink. I felt belonged even just buying a loaf of bread. The baker, Eleni, did not just sell me the koulouri¹³; she asked about my day, shared village gossip, and always sent me away with a hearty “Kali orexi!”¹⁴

On another warm afternoon, I took a seat at a cozy taverna, surrounded by cobblestones, cats, stone homes and a fire-red bougainvillea. An old man sat at the table next to me drinking water from an interesting small bottle

12 Meze - Appetizers

13 Koulouri – Traditional sesame bread ring

14 Kali Orexi – Enjoy your meal – Good appetite

-or so I thought it was water – and nipping on some olives, sliced tomato and feta. I ordered a hot dish of pastitsio, cheese saganaki¹⁵, Greek salad and... Coke – because, after all, I'm a born American!

I noticed the old man watching me and letting out a disapproving “ts-ts-ts.” He reached out to my table, took away my Coke and placed a tiny, tiny, tiny – I mean really tiny – glass in front of me, filling it with the clear liquid from the equally tiny, tiny, tiny bottle.

“Tsipouro!”¹⁶ he said, his voice rough and warm altogether. “Spitiko!”¹⁷ There was no arguing with this guy, but it was amusing in its own way.

“Drink!” He clinked my glass with a Yiamas!¹⁸

I took a sip and felt as if I took a sip of the sun in liquid form! I coughed, my eyes watering; the old man laughed.

“It burns, yes? But it's good. Clears the head, opens the heart.”

To my surprise, I took another daring sip of the fiery liquid.

The old man continued.

“You see that tree?” he pointed to an ancient olive tree, its trunk twisted and gnarled. “It's been here longer

15 Saganaki – Fried cheese appetizer

16 Tsipouro - Strong distilled spirit

17 Spitiko - Homemade

18 Yiamas - Cheers

than any of us. It's seen empires rise and fall, yet it still bears fruit each year. That's the secret to life, young one. Stay rooted, bend with the wind, but never forget to bear fruit. Life is that simple."

I was trying to make out the deeper meaning in his words.

He looked me in the eye, took another sip of tsipouro, and continued, "We humans make life complicated. We forget to appreciate the simple things, to live in the moment. To *Tora!*¹⁹ That's all we truly have."

I hesitated before replying, "But isn't it in our human nature to want more? To dream bigger, to strive for something greater?"

He chuckled, a low, gravelly sound that seemed to carry years of wisdom. "Dreams are good," he said, nodding. "But the danger is in living so much for tomorrow that you miss today. Tell me, what good are future dreams of happiness if you forget to be happy now?"

I stared at him. His words were like a gentle weight on my chest.

"It's hard to let go of that drive," I admitted. "It's what I've known my whole life. Always looking for that next step."

"That's the problem with your world," he said, leaning back in his chair. "You think stillness means failure. But here, we know that stillness is where the soul breathes."

19 To Tora - The now