

GREEK CUISINE FROM THE MANI AREA

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"The food we eat can be our medicine"
Hippocrates







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MANI, magic & nature



The magic of the Mani - the combination of mountains, sea, sun & stone
This combination of contrasts awakens the senses to all who visit and,
even more so, for those of us who are fortunate enough to live here.

When you walk in the Mani, you experience its uniqueness. Its stone
towers, cobbled streets, stone walls, and churches give homage to this
place, the way of life here, and its history.

Rugged wild landscapes and soft gentle views blend harmoniously to
soothe you and leave you refreshed.

If you visit once, you will need to come again and again to re-experience
this unique combination.

You will want to stay and make your roots here, such is the magic of
Mani.

The colours and smells

The sound of the wind and the sea

The wild flowers

The breathtaking sunsets

The beautiful beaches

The rugged coves

The green of the trees, and the grey of the rocks

These are some of the reasons, why the Mani has become a favourite
haunt for thousands of visitors year after year.

Once visited, the Mani will remain forever in your heart as a sheltered
harbour for you to re-visit in your memories.

Life in Mani, during the years of isolation

By the end of the 60's and into the early 70s', the life in Mani was completely different than now. There were no road systems in place between its villages, commercial centres, and towns. Endless hours were spent walking over cobbled stones and, in the best cases, paved winding lanes.

The favoured method of transportation was by the local 'Vensina'. The 'vensina' were small petrol-engine boats, operating like today's ferries, and, weather permitting, passing by the coastal villages daily on their way to Kalamata.

For most passengers, this was a difficult and uncomfortable journey of more than 3 hours. The 'vensina' were small and had many stops before reaching their final destination. They were always packed with passengers, animals, and produce making the journey even more intolerable.

The residents from the mountain villages had to trek for many hours on cobbled lanes and paths to reach their nearest port. The privileged few rode on donkeys or mules - the eco-friendly transportation for those times.

All the villagers were like an extended family to each other, all sharing in times of joy, and sorrow. There were, of course, squabbles and feuds - but there was always someone to help out in times of need.

It was a village community in its truest sense.

The villages were built by the locals, using the local materials. They sculpted their local architecture through their passion and love for the area.

They built houses, castles, and churches. They made bridges, roads, threshing floors, cisterns and fountains. Many of the structures remain today, allowing us to stand and admire, with respect for their achievements.





The Mani Diet

The food in the Mani was, and still is, very simple. The main reason for this simplicity was the isolation of this area that was cut off from the commercial life of nearby cities. Transportation by sea was difficult and good roads were non-existent. As a result, residents from the area ate only the food which they could grow and cultivate locally.

On a positive note, the climate here is very mild, enabling the locals to live much of their lives outdoors, as they attempted to combat the harsh conditions of life at that time.

For all these reasons, housewives in the past prepared and cooked fresh, healthy, quick meals to feed their families. Necessity shaped the philosophy of the local people, one still held today:
"Eat to live; don't live to eat."

Most of the recipes you will find in this book are from "Yesterday". When our mothers and grandmothers were cooking we had the tastes of the whole world on our plates. A few recipes are "Today's" but they follow the principles of traditional Mani cookery, all using the gift God gave us here - olive oil. The nutritional value of olive oil is well established and has been recognised down the centuries. As early as the sixth century B.C. Solon wrote,

"The fruit of the olive tree is man's greatest blessing".

*For the more mature reader this book offers culinary memories from the past and for the younger generation a traditional healthy diet...
Enjoy and good luck!*



Wheat & Olive Oil

The foundation of Mani's culinary creations!



*Only when we look to the past, can we build
a strong foundation for our future.*

Wheat and oil were the main staples of the Mani cuisine, and of course their animals - goats, chickens, pigs, and calves. Not everyone owned a cow to milk, however, but everything they had was fresh and wholesome.

The local herbs: oregano, thyme, mint, sage, and mountain tea added their rich aromas and taste. They were God's bounty from the Taiyetos Mountains, and were all used in the Mani kitchen. Delicious honey from bees that fed on thyme and sage was also available with its wonderful taste that caresses your throat like a kiss.

With the flour and olive oil, the local housewives made bread in their garden ovens. Also, with the same ingredients, they made paxsimadi, lalangia, tiganopites, diples, noodles - the list is endless. The diples were for weddings and festivals, the lalangia was reminiscent of Christmas and Halloween, and at the end of liomazoma, (the olive picking season), they made tiganopites. Traditional ovens were surrounded by children waiting patiently holding salty cheese and sweet honey, drinking in aromas from the wood ovens -- wonderful flavours and unforgettable memories.

As for the meat, who doesn't remember the old chicken coops in each home? Who doesn't remember the squawk and the daily agony of the hens as they laid their eggs, or their alarm calls when the fox came visiting ready to steal and kill? Who doesn't remember the taste of egg and chicken soup and smelling that aroma throughout the neighbourhood? The red rooster, whose fantastic taste did not only come from the infrequency of which it was eaten but also, it was natural food free from preservatives. It had freely roamed the fields, and this made it so tasty on the plate.

The local pork was a meat that was never missing from any Mani family table. It was smoked, salted, and cooked with oranges, then served as a supplement to many a family meal in this area, all year around.

Beef was much rarer in the Mani diet, as the conditions here are difficult for breeding and feeding cattle. Those who didn't own cows planted wheat & barley in their fields and sold it to those who had cattle. It was difficult work but necessary for everyone's survival both animals and humans.



A magical place



Five years ago, various circumstances brought me to open a restaurant, "Yesterday & Today", which was outside the scope of my original goals.

There were already many restaurants in our village of Stoupa, Messinias.

In fact, the love of this area and its traditions, which I inherited from my father, caused me to change my goals.

My restaurant's elevated location, situated between the Taygetos mountains and close to the sea, is magical. The location gave me inspiration, so I decided to use its energy in our restaurant to create and express my own feelings and ideas, as well as to replicate many of the traditional recipes from the Mani. In our third year of business, I decided to take over the cooking and began talking to other local women about traditional Mani recipes. They spoke with such passion when they talked, that you could smell the cinnamon and cloves used in cooking cockerel, as well as the oregano and thyme used in lamb baked in the oven. Their words were intoxicating, and you couldn't help but become a fan of Greek cuisine just by listening to them.

Finally, not to forget Stoupa, this magical place, that has helped me with its wonderful spell to overcome many difficulties over recent years.

May its magic continue to touch many lives to come.

I wish to thank all my friends for their invaluable assistance, not only with this book, but with my restaurant. All of them have given invaluable help in so many ways in bringing me to where I am today.

