

THE BREADS OF GREECE

By Katherine R. Boulukos

Arm breezes and easy, casual dining are all part of the relaxed approach to summer eating for any Greek or philhellene. The one constant—the one item that makes a meal a meal—is bread. Be it crusty, hard, topped with sesame seeds, filled with tiny raisins, or stuffed with tangy olives, some type of bread must be at the table. Particularly in the warm months, when meals may be light and quick to prepare, bread serves many a purpose: scooping up cheese and olives, accompanying a main course, or lending substance to a tasty summer salad.

“*Psomi*”, the Greek word for bread, literally means “morsel”, something special and delicious to eat. The ancient Greek word for bread, “*artos*”, means flavor. The breads prepared in Greece today date back to ancient times. They are flavored with a variety of herbs and spices including cardamom, sea salt, rosemary and olive oil. Many of the sweet breads have nuts, slivers of lemon or orange peel, and honey glazes.

BREAD SHAPES AND FLAVORS

Popular bread shapes include round (*kouloura*), braided (*plexouda*), long (*franzola*), or flat, envelope style (*pita*). Pita bread is ubiquitous in Greece, since it is the perfect accompaniment to tasty cool spreads like cucumber dip (*tzatziki*), tangy fish roe spread (*taramosalata*) or flavorsome eggplant spread (*melitzanosalata*). Pita dough is shaped into round circles, allowed to rise, and then baked for nine or ten minutes, at which point it puffs up and turns lightly brown. Best when served warm, it is cut into small triangular wedges.

Little salt sticks (*bastounakia*) are also great companions to assorted appetizers. These tasty bread sticks are typically seasoned generously with sea salt; some omit the salt and flavor them with ground pepper or caraway seeds.

Since olives are a key agricultural crop, pitted olives are used in many breads and muffins. Olive muffins (*eliopsomakia*) are popular in the summer. Some recipes call for mint, which imparts a special flavor.

Sesame seeds are also sprinkled liberally on many breads and rolls. Examples are sesame tea rolls (*psomakia me prozeme*), tasty twisted rolls, and orange sesame seed rolls (*psomakia me portokaliala*)—all great breakfast fare served with homemade jams or jellies.

Hard, whole wheat rusks called *paximadia* are eaten year-round. These are twice-baked: dough is shaped into long flat loaves and baked. When golden in color, they are removed from the oven and sliced through. The slices are then placed on cookie sheets and baked a second time until hard. These tasty rusks are typically dunked into coffee or wine. *Paximadia* are also traditionally served during a funeral at the memorial meal served after the burial. *Paximadia* prepared with sweet butter and white flour are more cookie-like than those made with whole wheat. All have a long shelf life.

HOLIDAY BREADS

Bread plays an important symbolic role during religious holidays throughout the year. Each region may have its own version of traditional holiday breads, but every one includes some form of these three breads: *Vasilopita* (New Year’s Bread); *Tsoureki* (Easter Bread); and

Christopsomo (Christmas Bread).

Vasilopita is made in honor of St. Basil (*Vasili*), whose nameday is celebrated on the first day of the year. There is a ceremony attached to cutting this bread: a lucky coin is hidden inside and whoever wins it carries good luck all year. The first piece is cut for St. Basil. The next piece is cut for the eldest in the family, and the remaining pieces cut in order of age and status in the family. This bread is sweet and has a cakelike texture.

Tsoureki (also known as *Lambro-psomo*, or “bright light”) is shaped into a braided, round twist and adorned with red Easter eggs. It has the unique flavor of *mahlepi*, a spice made from the seeds of the fruit of the mahlepi bush. The seeds must be finely ground. In some areas, *masticha* flavoring is used instead. This flavor comes from sap drawn from the mastichodenro bush, which grows primarily on the island of Chios. In some parts of Greece the basic *tsoureki* recipe, which is sweet and buttery, is also used for the *vasilopeta* bread, omitting, of course, the decorative red eggs on top and substituting sesame seeds for decoration. Some home cooks and bakeries prepare the bread all year long, usually braiding the dough lengthwise, and calling it simply *tsoureki*.

At Christmas time, *Christopsomo* (Christ’s bread) is prepared. This is another sweet yeast bread, here flavored with *masticha* and baked with slivered blanched almonds, white raisins, and grated lemon peel. Light and airy, speckled with nuts and fruit peel, it may also include diced dried figs that have been soaked to soften prior to baking.

BREADS FOR ALL OCCASIONS

Greeks are known to be superstitious, and one bread is specially made when one loses something. This is St. Farnourio's Bread, named to honor St. Farnourio, the "finder of lost things". The home cook prepares such a bread with the hope that doing so will prompt the lost item to turn up!

Special breads are baked for other occasions too, including the birth of a baby, the baptism of a newborn, and weddings. Sweet, decorative breads are adorned with special designs to commemorate the occasion. Unfortunately, these breads are generally not made in the United States, but it is possible for a visitor to one of Greece's small villages or islands to find such celebratory breads.

In traveling through the country side, one might taste a special corn bread, called *bobota*. Many islanders, in particular, are not fond of this bread because it brings back

painful memories of World War II; it was then a staple food, eaten to survive. *Bobota* is a simple bread made of cornmeal, honey and water and baked in a square pan. When cool, a warm sweet syrup is poured over it. A variation is to sprinkle powdered sugar rather than syrup.

Of the regional breads, one of the most popular is lattice tart or *gyristaria* from Cyprus. The dough is flavored with cinnamon and *masticha*, and shaped into a lattice design, somewhat resembling a pretzel. In the Mani region of the Peloponnese, the favored bread is called *lalangia*. Here the bread dough is fried until crispy and sprinkled either with grated cheese or honey. It can be eaten warm or cool.

Regardless of season or region, sweet bread rings, *kouloures*, are popular. Prepared at home or sold by a street vendor, *kouloures* are shaped into long ropes and twisted into circles. They are set aside to

rise and baked until golden. Sesame seeds may be sprinkled on top prior to baking.

To a Greek, bread is an important part of daily life. Whether it's a sesame stick, a chunk of crusty white bread, or a *paximade*, salty or sweet, some form of bread is taken throughout the day. So enjoy and "*kali orexi*"—good appetite!

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