

MY FIRST GREAT MEAL

# Get Her to the Greek

A YOUNG ENGLISH GIRL'S EPIPHANY ON A  
GREEK ISLAND OPENS A WINDOW TO A  
WORLD OF FOOD BEYOND THE BLAND  
OFFERINGS OF OLD BLIGHTY

*By Serena Bass*



“I gazed in wonder at the layers of phyllo and pistachios, the pool of leaking honey.” IRIS ZUARES

When I was 12 years old, I went on a cruise with my ancient father and my wicked stepmother, who actually did have a wart on her nose. We were visiting Mediterranean ports and islands and, once off the boat, it

was expected that I stay not just within sight but virtually welded to their sides. They would look askance and their cautionary voices would trail off as they considered the very idea of what could befall an innocent

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NOMAD EDITIONS REAL EATS

English girl with pink cheeks and lank brown hair. I suspected their fears were complete nonsense but sighed and inwardly seethed.

We had visited Cyprus, Beirut, Istanbul, and a port in the Black Sea but never eaten food other than that prepared by the chef on board. At our first meal on the high seas, while looking at the menu, I had heard my

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stepmother say, "Thank God we don't have to eat any foreign muck! We won't get sick on this trip at least." I didn't have an opinion either way but, as is the fate of children, this nasty thought entered my mind: We might as well have not left England, since the menu was that of a provincial hotel offering egg mayonnaise, coronation chicken, shepherd's pie and trifle. Quite astonishing, really, as one could be scraping up the last of the apple pie and custard and be able to look up and see the infinitely exotic domes of the Blue Mosque.

### **Making a Break for It**

So, on the island of Lesbos, unexpectedly, a couple my stepmother knew vaguely from the boat suggested I accompany them on a walk to the top of a wooded mountain. I was encouraged to go off with them and in truth was desperate to get away but frowned with worry as to why my father and stepmother would let me. Did they want me out of their lives altogether? (Therapy never solved this conundrum.)

My new friends were talkative; the flora, fauna, and customs of the island were explained to me, but then they started to flag and decided to sit for a bit and why didn't I just go on by myself to the top. By myself? Couldn't they almost smell the white slave traders waiting around the next bend? Well, that thought came and went in two seconds, and like a greyhound out of the trap, I was gone.

The sandy path became more narrow and rocky and the sounds of the town faded away. No more honking horns, no more radios, no more shouts from the dock; eventually there was nothing but a natural silence. The sap-filled wind bent the branches of the trees, which were heavy with pinecones. The path tapered out, and I climbed through scrub to the summit. I sat on a rock looking out high over the white houses tumbled along the bay; the sea shimmered, and the only movement was from the occasional car winding along the coast road. I breathed in the smell of the pine trees again and again till I was dizzy with the

freedom of it all and, for the first time in my life, exalted in being totally alone.

It took quite a while before my feet could be summoned to walk back down. I was expecting trouble but met nothing but inquiring smiles. Should we go down and have a little bite before returning to the ship? There was a flash of fear. Foreign food. Food eaten actually *on* foreign soil!

## Bye Bye to Pie

I chose to come down on the side of my new (human) friends, plus my new emotional friends, freedom and independence. Good grief, I thought, bye bye to the apple pie and custard, let's get on with something new.

We sat at a little table in the square, and I asked for lemonade. Then came the question: "Would you like a kebab and a pastry?"

My heart raced and I said, "Yes please."

The lemonade arrived and was fascinating to me. It was *not* the carbonated, clear bottle I had been expecting with protruding straw. It was set down in a tall glass and was a translucent pale yellow, not fizzy at all, and

bobbing with ice. To cap it off, there was a sprig of mint tucked down between the ice and the glass. I took a sip and registered roses, which fact was beyond my comprehension but made me narrow my eyes with enquiry and suddenly I wanted to question why, and discover what, and learn how.

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I took a bite of the kabob and smiled, realizing it was the Greek version of meat and two veg. Sexy lumps of glistening lamb threaded with crisp white onion charred black at the edges and red peppers, as sweet as sugar. I picked a leaf from the sprigs of fresh oregano, which were scattered casually on top. I don't think I had ever eaten an herb other than parsley and chives in an egg salad sandwich. I had no idea one leaf could set your mouth on fire with its peppery greenness and effectively blow the top of your head off with possibilities.

Then came the pastry, which was, *naturellement*, a piece of baklava. I gazed in wonder at the layers of phyllo sandwiched with pistachios, and the pool of leaking honey. I fell utterly in love with the absolute foreign-ness of it and the sticky, flakey, impossible-to-eat-nicely-ness of it.

It was as if, in that sunny square, I had looked into that ball around the cat's neck in *Men in Black*. A universe of food was there, just waiting for me to discover it.

We returned to the boat. I was outwardly

composed but inwardly mulling over my newfound knowledge that food could be so interesting. I tucked that idea into an inside pocket in my mind and kept it close to my heart. It was four years before I actually cooked something myself, and it happened to be for the man who would be my first husband. So that was a good start.

*Comments or questions? Write to Serena at [sbass 'at' nomadeditions.com](mailto:sbass@nomadeditions.com)*

## Baklava Tarts

### FILLING INGREDIENTS

This makes twice the amount you will need, but it freezes well.

- 1/2 cup blanched, slivered almonds
- 1/2 cup walnuts or pecans
- 1/2 cup shelled pistachios
- 1 lemon, zested
- 3 tablespoons dark brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- Two 3-inch cinnamon sticks freshly ground (1 teaspoon ground cinnamon)

- 2 teaspoons allspice berries, freshly ground (1 teaspoon ground allspice)
- 1/2 teaspoon fleur de sel (salt crystals) or just sea salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon rosewater (optional if you can't find it, but fabulous if you can)
- 2 boxes mini phyllo shells (15 in each)

### SYRUP 🍯

- 2/3 cup water
- 2/3 cup floral honey
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 1/2 teaspoon hot pepper flakes
- 3 strips of orange zest
- 1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1. Position a rack in the middle of the oven and preheat to 350 degrees F.
2. Put all the filling ingredients in a food processor and pulse to a rough, granular mix. Set aside.

3. Put all the syrup ingredients in a small saucepan. Bring to a boil then reduce the heat and simmer until thickened slightly, about 8-10 minutes.
4. Take two muffin pans, and set a phyllo shell in each of the muffin cups (you will have 6 shells left over). Fill with one teaspoon of nut mixture and bake for 10 minutes. (Don't put the shells on a sheet pan as they will burn.)
5. Pour 1 teaspoon of the syrup in each cup, set aside for 10 minutes so the syrup soaks in, then pour in another scant teaspoon of syrup. Refrigerate overnight.
6. Serve the baklava tarts cool, not cold, and with whipped heavy cream.