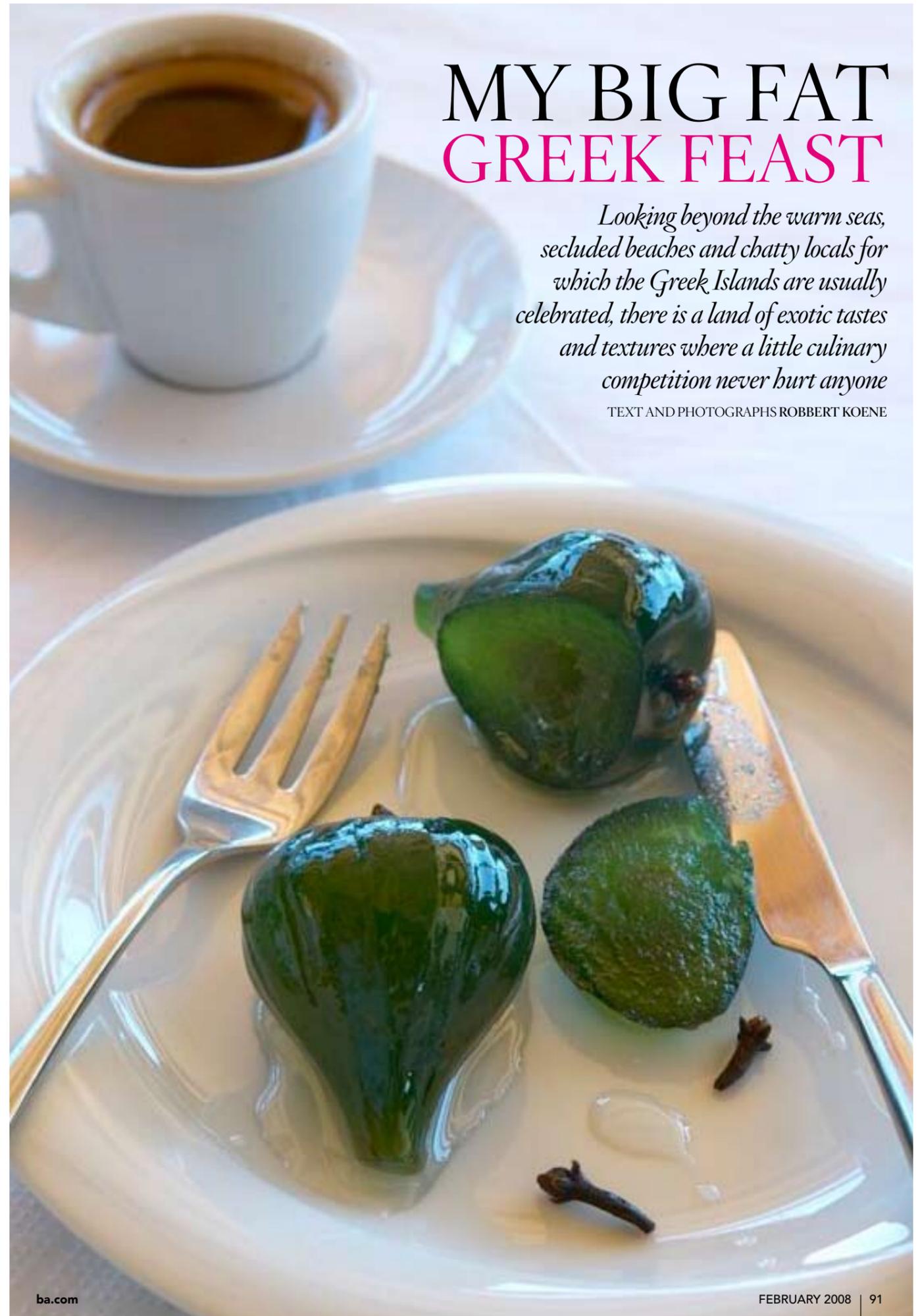




# MY BIG FAT GREEK FEAST

*Looking beyond the warm seas, secluded beaches and chatty locals for which the Greek Islands are usually celebrated, there is a land of exotic tastes and textures where a little culinary competition never hurt anyone*

TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS ROBERT KOENE





Savas's friends dished up freshly caught calamari, lamb liver and fried *melanzane* (eggplant) from their own garden

This was not our first time on a Greek island-hop. We were quite familiar with the Mediterranean, with sailing from beach to beach, sipping drinks on deck or sharing ouzo with the locals in small *kafenios* as goat bells rang in the distance. We had explored most of the 'touristy' things these blue-and-white islands had to offer, including foods that ranged from traditional Greek souvlaki to *kalamarakia*, made with freshly caught fish and fried at the local beach café.

What we didn't know was that we had only scratched the culinary surface, only nibbled on the vine leaf that is the dolmade of truly traditional Greek cuisine. But one night in a small restaurant on Ithaca in the Ionian Sea, ancient home of Odysseus, showed us how much we still had left to explore.

Ithaca is the cousin island of Kefalonia, the setting for the film, *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, and ancestral holiday home of our good friends, Savas and Anita Couvaras. The Couvaras home is in the small mountain village of Exoghi, to the north, with a spectacular view over Aphales Bay. There are no restaurants here, apart from a small *kafenio* that is hardly ever open. The attraction is a beautiful church and graveyard with the best view in the world. (Savas often jokes that when he's old, he just wants to sit there next to a hole amongst the beautiful gravestones, taking in the view until his last breath, after which we should just tip him in and cover him up.)

So we would eat at the many restaurants peppered along the coast at small harbour towns like Frikes and Kioni, and further inland, at the restaurants found in larger hubs like Stavros, the kind of town one goes to find a bakery, butcher or pharmacy. Penelope's, Spavento and Calypso are a few eateries that come to mind.

We had also visited Cemetery Beach where, in a makeshift shed, Savas's friends, Panaghi and Brigitte, dished up freshly caught calamari, lamb liver and fried *melanzane* (eggplant) from their own garden. Home-made feta, olives and tomatoes were staples on their ever-changing menu, and if we came too late at night it was 'Sorry, try again tomorrow, today it's finished.'

Don't get me wrong. The food we enjoyed at these places was fresh and succulent, delicious



**PREVIOUS SPREAD**

**LEFT** *Revithada* salad teases the taste buds with its sweet-and-salty blend of chickpeas and raisins

**RIGHT** Syrupy green figs are a good complement to the bitterness of strong Greek coffee

**THIS PAGE**

**ABOVE** Black *chalyvas* is traditionally only eaten over Easter

**BELOW** With a cherry on top: Greek yoghurt is suitable for both savoury and sweet dishes



ABOVE, FROM LEFT Delectable delicacies: fried halloumi with roast-tomato-and-caper salad; *tsipoura sto charti*, or bream fish cooked in baking paper; and *tserepa*, a slow-cooked chicken dish flavoured with a local variety of oregano called *sapsycho*

*Tserepa* refers to a kind of pot with a lid that allows the cook to put the coals on top. The pot is then buried underground

every time. When we ate *kalamarakia* and freshly baked bread from Stavros on the beautiful, white-pebbled Poli beach, we were more than satisfied with the quality of our fare.

Thirty minutes' drive from Exoghi, on the south side of the island, Vathi, is the capital of Ithaca. A charming town with many quaint little shops, this is the business centre of the island, the place to go to find a lawyer or an architect or to refuel or restock one's yacht in the bay. Vathi has its own little mountain village higher up, Peraghorí, where many *xeni* (outsiders) buy and settle in for the 'slow life'.

### DELICACY IN THE ROUGH

It was on our return from a visit to one of Vathi's beaches that we stopped at a new restaurant called Chani, situated where North and South Ithaca meet and where you can see the Ionian Sea off both the east and the west coast of the island. We discovered that the word *chani* means 'halfway house', and that this restaurant was once a small inn dating back to the 18th century. Travellers would stop here for coffee and *loukoumi* (Turkish delight) on their way to either end of the island while their horses quenched their thirst from great-grandfather Dimia Doriza's water tank.

As is often the case with old families in Greece, the Doriza family still owns the land today. In recent years Kostas Dimia Doriza, grandson of the Dimia, renovated the halfway house into a glorious restaurant, its walls decorated with pictures of his forefathers and of Kostas and his wife as small children, working the land.

The Dorizas were eager to share their knowledge of their family history and traditions. We discovered that they still make their own cheese from the milk of their sheep, serve olives and oil from their own groves, and best of all, serve meals authentic to the history of the island.

First was *tserepa*, a slow-cooked dish of chicken flavoured with *sapsycho*, a kind of oregano that only grows on the island. The

word *tserepa* actually refers to a kind of pot with a lid that allows the cook to put coals on top. The entire pot is then buried underground until the meal is cooked. It can be used to cook any meat but chicken is the most common.

Next up was *makaronatha lthiokia*, a pasta dish normally is made with veal and tomato sauce made in the Mediterranean style. *Makaras* is Greek for 'happy', and traditionally this hollow pasta was served at funerals to wish someone a happy journey into the afterlife.

The Dorizas were keen to let us taste their *riganatha*, a dish of bread soaked in red wine, olive oil and oregano (or *riagni*) that is either eaten alone or topped with feta, olives, tomatoes and salad. In some parts this dish is known as *zuppa*, which means 'to soak'. (The local dialect of Ithaca also uses the word to describe when a person has 'soaked up' too much wine.) *Riganatha* is traditionally made from a specially baked hard bread called *paksimathi*, although these days people often use old bread.

Chani's in-house chef, also named Kostas, serves *revithatha* – a warm, sweet-and-salty salad that combines chickpeas, raisins, rice, cinnamon and pecorino cheese – as his signature dish. It was superb, a combination of new tastes not often associated with Greece.

Kostas the Chef then served us *tsipoura sto charti*, which directly translated means 'bream cooked in paper'. And this is exactly what it was: bream – a popular, locally farmed fish – delicately wrapped in baking paper with onions

and tomatoes on top and seasoned with *rigani*, olive oil, salt and pepper. Mouthwatering.

For dessert we were treated to black *chalvas* and *thachtili*, traditional dishes that are usually only eaten on religious festivals – black *chalvas* at Easter, and *thachtili* at Christmas. Black *chalvas* is made from sugar, oil, water and semolina flour and gets its name from the dark colour the sugar goes when it is baked. *Thachtili* gets its name from its resemblance to 'small fingers' and made out of wine, olive oil and *simigthali*, a type of semolina flour. The batter is then fried and served with cinnamon, honey and sesame seeds. Just add coffee for a taste of heaven.

Pleased with our finds, we returned to our old hangouts to explore what else was being served that we didn't know about. At the *zacharo plastio* ('sugar shop') in Stavros we met Maria, who bakes *rovani*, an old Ithacan dessert dating back to Venetian period on Ithaca. This is the island's 'signature dessert' and is made entirely from staple foods such as rice, honey, oil and water. An acquired taste, yet delicious.

Back in Frikes, we mentioned the foods we'd discovered to Stathis, owner of Penelope's. Not to be outdone, his wife, Dina, invited us to taste her home-made *dolmades*, created using a top-secret recipe that has been in her family for generations. We delighted in this spontaneous display of rivalry. Such is life on a Greek island: full of surprises, rich in tradition – and always something tasty and new for the adventurous palate to discover. ●