

Cookbooks, Memories and Family Recipes: Greek Cypriot immigrants' cultural maintenance and adaptation in Melbourne

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This paper draws from a larger oral history project on the domestic food cultures of a group of Greek Cypriots residing in Melbourne between 1947 and 2003. It explores the ways in which food, and specifically recipes, reveal immigrants' processes of cultural maintenance and change. By analysing these immigrants' accounts I show how memories and practical knowledge from mothers, families and friends were important for immigrants' attempts to maintain their heritage and culture, not only in the food they ate, but also their relationships and personal identities. In line with this, I further argue that cookbooks and other popular media also provided important sources for innovation and cultural transmission. Sharing recipes amongst friends and family in Melbourne was a means for Greek Cypriot immigrants to communicate and negotiate relationships with others; in doing so they also reinforced and contributed to new knowledge about Cypriot identity.

In recent decades, food has been increasingly recognised as a means for understanding a variety of aspects of human experience, because it is essential to human existence and integral to how humans organise the social, economic, technological and even political aspects of their daily lives. As international immigration and food studies scholarship to date has shown, food and domestic food practices are central to the cultural expression and identity of various cultural groups, including immigrants settling in new homelands (Diner, 2002; Lysaght, 1998; Brown and Messell, 1984). For example Robert Theodoratus has used cookbooks to reveal Greek immigrants' culinary cultural change in the United States (Theodoratus, 1983:87–104). While there is an interest in the role of Greeks in the food and hospitality industries in Australia, scholars of Greeks and Cypriots in Australia have yet to focus on their domestic food practices as an area of cultural maintenance. This paper seeks to contribute to this area of scholarship, by focusing on the development of Greek Cypriot immigrants' food cultures in Melbourne between 1947 and 2003, through an analysis of their recipes. It is based on oral history research conducted

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with a small group of Greek Cypriots who arrived in Melbourne at various times between 1947 and the early 1980s, and some of their children, who now reside in the western, northern and north-eastern suburbs of Melbourne.¹

This research is not intended to represent all Cypriots living in Melbourne or their food cultures, but rather to explore how a small group of immigrants learned Cypriot recipes as a means of maintaining their Cypriot and cultural heritage. I argue that their senses of identity and cultural maintenance were an important part, but not sole motivator, for where, why and how they obtained their recipes. Immigrants not only used recipes to communicate information about how to prepare food to make it edible, but also as something that was culturally familiar, and as a means to negotiate social relations (Sackett, 1972:77–81; McCallum, 1950:235–257). These immigrants drew on a wide range of information to learn how to cook, based on memories of their mothers' cooking as well as community and family practical and oral instruction. However, they also drew on a range of printed and popular media not only in Melbourne, but also from an increasingly urbanising and modernising Cyprus during the 1960s and 1970s, which was also developing an identity through food in a booming tourist industry. In doing so, these sources helped immigrants to maintain their Cypriot culture and heritage. They enabled them to identify regional and Cypriot-Greek variations in cooking styles while simultaneously creating a more unified, or what Luce Giard calls a “de-regionalised”, sense of Cypriot cooking and recipes through sharing, suited to their new context in Melbourne (Giard, 1998:179).

Food scholars and nutritionists explain that tastes, cooking practices, and therefore recipes are most often drawn from personal, and often childhood, memories of mothers' cooking (Bosworth, 1991:95–102; Giard, 1998:183–189). Anthropologist David Sutton and Australian sociologist Michael Symons describe this process of learning to cook as “practical knowledge” learned through observation, apprenticeship, “practice makes perfect” and mastering cooking techniques which draw on desired images and tastes from the past (Sutton, 2001:125–140; Symons, 1982:25–26). Similarly many immigrants I interviewed based the dishes and recipes they used as adults in Melbourne on their memories of their mothers, grandmothers, aunts and sisters cooking while they were growing up. These were recipes they generally never wrote down, and which required little or no formal instruction and were learned through daily practice. They included simple recipes such as simple haricot or broad bean and vegetable dishes boiled and dressed with lemon juice and oil, or *yahni* (tomato based stew) and salads, based on locally grown and seasonal produce. Melbourne food writer Marcos Dymiotis, in his article on his memories of food in Cyprus, also explained his desire and attempts to replicate recipes based on the intense and vivid memories of the fragrance and tastes of the dishes his mother had made in

¹ These interviews were conducted in Melbourne between 2001 and 2003, as part of a larger research project for my PhD dissertation. For the purposes of this paper I refer to the participants by first name only in the text. For full details see Kalivas, 2007.

Cyprus (Dymiotis, 1996:114–115). Second-generation immigrants, like Elizabeth, also took for granted certain cooking practices and ingredients for dishes like *koupepia* (*dolmathes*), because that was how their mothers had always made them.

Personal experience and instruction in Cyprus, gained by helping their mothers and grandmothers prepare meals, like an informal apprenticeship, were central to immigrants' recipe learning, particularly for more complex dishes. Tony recalled that when he was young cooking was "like everything else, all the chores that you learn to do, whether it be needlework, embroidery [...] you learned it from your parents, and your grandparents". Tony's recipes for macaroni in chicken stock or for *koupepia* were based on memories of watching and helping his mother as a child. Cooking knowledge was also shared communally where young people learned by participating in group cooking sessions for special events like weddings, which acted as a form of informal apprenticeship much like that suggested by Sutton (Sutton, 2001:136–140). Tony, Jane and Georgina, all adults now living in Melbourne, all recalled how in their villages in Cyprus before the 1970s, women got together to cook *pastichio*, *koupepia* and sweets like *kourumbiethes*, when young girls and women learned and followed the instructions of the older women in charge. On occasions of village inter-marriage cooking knowledge could also be shared across different villages, as women shared cooking knowledge and new dishes, like *pastichio*, which Jane regarded as a city food.

Kinship relations with their own and their husbands' families also provided Cypriot women, particularly new brides, with important social networks and knowledge, which in turn could support or challenge traditional kinship structures. On the one hand migration could often separate daughters from their mothers and so from a major source of family cooking knowledge. In the absence of dowered property, newly married and engaged couples also often spent periods of time residing with the groom's family while they saved for their own house. This also meant that new brides were exposed to their husbands' mothers' recipes and styles of cooking. Sandra, for example, learned a variety of basic and more complex dishes from her mother-in-law while living with her husband's family, including a "Greek" soup called *entratha*, and casserole dishes like *kokkinisto* and *tava* she had not known her mother to make. Mothers-in-law also provided an important resource and back-up support for wives once they moved into their own kitchens, particularly if their own mothers were still living in Cyprus. Dimitra, for example, described how she called her mother-in-law on occasions when recipes for dishes like *koupepia* or *kieftethes* did not work, explaining that she was not too embarrassed to ask her mother-in-law for help. This helped establish and maintain important relationships between new family members, particularly by showing deference to the experience of her husband's previous carer.

However, this also meant that Cypriot immigrants started to share regional recipes with Cypriots from different parts of Cyprus, from Greece or even Turkey. This allowed them to identify regional differences between Cypriot cooking both within Cyprus but also compared to other Greek recipes. It also contributed to a form of standardising some Cypriot cooking practices, by sharing and adapting recipes in Melbourne. Elizabeth for example learned how to make a Greek rather than Cypriot version of *fassolatha* from her first mother-in-law, who was Greek. She explained that

“they do it more [like] a soup than the Cypriot way; we have it thicker with other vegetables”. Immigration to Melbourne also provided immigrants with opportunities to learn dishes they had not known in Cyprus, either due to poverty or because the availability of regional produce had not allowed it. Eleni for example only learned to make *flaounes* from a family friend in Melbourne, because in Cyprus her family had been too poor to make them. As more Cypriot immigrants came to Melbourne during the 1960s and 1970s, many joining family already in Melbourne, respondents increasingly learned new recipes from other Cypriots. Georgina for example learned to make *ravioles* (ravioli), bread and other foods from her sister-in-law who migrated to Melbourne shortly after the 1974 wars in Cyprus. This is similar to a process discussed by scholars of other diasporic communities, where cultural practices are revived or developed in a way they could not otherwise have been in their country of origin (Cohen, 1997:5). In doing so, cooking knowledge became a currency of conversation between established and new immigrants, and as a means of forming connections to Cyprus.

This kind of recipe sharing, and openness to variations in similar or other cultures, also helped immigrants create dialogues and understanding not only with Greek and Cypriot friends, but with friends or neighbours of Turkish and other ethnic origins. Recipes therefore acted as a means for negotiating social relations, while also helping them to identify differences in cultural cooking practices and therefore to articulate what they identified as Cypriot. Sharing food knowledge was an active part of their friendships, helping them to identify with each other even if, and while, they identified themselves as different. Eleni for example learned to make *pastichio* from a Greek friend with whom she shared a common Greek culture while Nazmiye, a Turkish Cypriot who migrated to Melbourne in the 1970s, learned and shared recipe variations for *dolma*, *pites*, *chourek* and eggplant dishes with both her Turkish and her Greek friends in Melbourne. As cooks who loved to cook and experiment with recipes many informants learned and adapted recipes from other non-Cypriots and Greeks, reinforcing, by way of contrast, immigrants’ understandings of the Cypriot- or Greek-ness of some of their recipes. Many learned to cook in Italian, Asian and Australian cooking styles that were a part of the gourmet boom of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s in Melbourne, including spaghetti Bolognese, pizza, stir-fries, fried rice and other previously unfamiliar dishes. Similarly, through their love and desire to cook sweets and cakes, many women picked up recipes for what they identified as Australian cake and sweet recipes through family, friends and work colleagues or obtained from magazines. It was in this sense that immigrants’ food cultures and cooking knowledge, in an ever more modernising world, were also informed and influenced by ideas about ethnic, national and cultural identity, through food as well as notions about health made popular through western pop culture and also through cookbooks (Cusack, 2000:207–225; Appadurai, 1988:3–4).

Various scholars, however, like David Sutton, highlight the paradox between the static nature of the written recipe books, and the oral and transitory nature of recipes that nostalgia and traditional cookbooks attempt to maintain. He explains that written recipes have a limited function in cooking because they cannot teach a person to cook in

the same way as experience and informal “apprenticeship” can, but rather serve as “memory-jogs” for existing knowledge learned elsewhere through experience (Sutton, 2001:134–135, 141–144). Various immigrants used cookbooks to learn to prepare a variety of Cypriot and non-Cypriot dishes, which helped to foster and promote their love of cooking. While some men in this study had learned to cook Cypriot recipes from mothers and other family members, their use of cookbooks and other sources seemed less prevalent, suggesting cookbooks were a gendered resource used largely by women. Elizabeth, Jane, Georgina and Sandra all explained their love of cooking and collecting recipe books and magazines, even if they did not use the recipes they collected. Sandra for example exclaimed “I’m a recipe-a-holic [...] I’m ashamed of it [laugh]”, suggesting that “one day I’d like to think I’ll get a chance to try them all out [...] but I love reading them. I read recipes like somebody reads a book”. These accounts suggest processes of enjoyment and experience through collecting and reading cookbooks as an alternative experience of enjoyment, voyeurism, or armchair tourism, rather than necessarily just a source of cooking knowledge (Bower, 2004:35–42).

Some, however, used cookbooks to help them define and maintain their Cypriot cuisine, picking and choosing recipes to their own tastes, often based on previous experience to help them discover, rediscover and learn to cook particular dishes they associated with their Cypriot culture. Many, like Elizabeth, Dimitra, Sandra, Eleni, Georgina and Jane drew on a variety of recipe books published in Australia and from overseas, but in doing so were also engaging with more modern, popularised and nationalised ideas of Cypriot cooking than the regional, seasonal and local recipes immigrants had recalled from Cyprus. These included books published in Cyprus during and since the 1960s and 1970s by cultural and government tourism bodies promoting Cypriot culture and cuisine to foreigners and the Cypriot diaspora. *Cooking From Cyprus, The Island of Aphrodite* by Nicholas Nicolaou (1979), *Kopiaste* by Amaranth Sitas (1974) and *Η Μαγειρική στην Κύπρο*, also published as *The Cypriots at Table*, by Marios Mourdjis (no date) had become more available to immigrants because cheaper air travel had increased travel and immigration between Cyprus and Melbourne during the 1970s and 1980s (Price, 2001:419). Books like that of Mourdjis, however, also published in English, reflected a more modernised image of Cypriot cuisine, with western dishes and catering styles, which reveal the editors’ attempts to cast Cypriot cuisine within western models. In doing so however they also failed to reflect the regional nature of the cooking practices and recipes they were based on (Welz, 2003:39–41; Ball, 2003:7–9). Mourdjis’ book for example included categories such as “Tea-party”, “Cocktails” and “Setting the table”, which Georgina stated were not Cypriot. However, informants still used these books either as a means to learn the recipes they recalled from Cyprus, or as a means to learn and maintain their Cypriot or Greek cooking traditions. And often identifying with other Greeks, these Greek Cypriots also used and adopted a range of Greek cookbooks which had become increasingly available in Melbourne since the late 1950s.² Niki, for example, used Sophia

² Advertisement for Nicholas Tselementes’ *Greek Cookery*, in English, in *Οικογένεια*, “The Family”, 1 April 1958:33.

Skoura's *The Greek Cookbook* (1967), which she bought in Melbourne, and Tess Mallos' *Greek Cookbook* (1976), the first Greek cookbook published in Australia, to cook traditional Greek foods for her Greek husband. Eleni, her mother, also used the Mallos text and Robin Howe's *Greek Cooking* (1972) to develop her Greek cooking when she had time after she retired. Books like Howe's and Skoura's also followed western culinary formats, suggesting they were also designed for a western audience (Ball, 2003:9). Elizabeth and Georgina also used the works of Greek cookbook writer and presenter, Vefa Alexiadou for a variety of different Greek and western recipes (Alexiadou, 1990). They also looked for and used recipes from the internet and pay television, which also allowed them to follow their passions for cooking more generally.

Most immigrants suggested, however, that cookbooks became transitory sources that they used to perfect a dish, as a starting point for ideas, or for details of ingredient quantities or cooking steps, because they preferred to use recipes they had developed themselves and come to remember. As Sutton and Goody argue for the importance of memory and experience in the adaptation and variation of personal and oral traditions, Cypriots still regarded their own experience and practical knowledge as paramount in creating and adapting their recipes, particularly to suit their own liking and taste (Sutton, 2001:134–135). As discussed above, different immigrants understood that while an idea or instruction may have come from their mothers' cooking, family advice or a magazine recipe, they still regarded as essential learning and knowing a recipe through actually cooking it, and through the repetitive process of experimenting with it. On one level, this meant making a dish they had seen someone else do elsewhere and perfecting it through trial and error, as Sandra explained was the way she perfected her recipe for *kokkinisto*. Similarly, while Eleni learned to make *pastichio* from her Greek friend, she developed her recipe herself "gradually, you know, you do it [...] the first time [it] mightn't come out perfect, but the second and the third and fourth time [...] you learn as you go". Developing or adapting one's own recipe in this way, and therefore personalising a recipe, helped shape these Cypriots' cultural identities because it represented a cook's innate sense of skill, as well as expressing their Cypriot identity by enabling them to cook Cypriot food well. Recipes and cooking therefore also provided cooks, and particularly women, with a sense of pride, pleasure and creativity, part of their Cypriot, individual and gendered identities (Avakian, 1997:8–9; Dubisch, 1986:205; Sutton, 2001:132).

Immigrants' recipes, and their knowledge of how to cook dishes, Cypriot or otherwise, involved a complex process of negotiating individuals' wants, tastes, and ideas about foods and dishes, gained from a variety of sources. These were also a part of their identities and gendered or social relations, and not just a means of creating Cypriot food. Recipes based on childhood memories were a part of fondly remembered tastes and techniques acquired in Cyprus and Melbourne; associated to their Cypriot heritage, but which in Cyprus had also been regional in nature. Sharing recipes amongst friends and family in Melbourne was a means of communication and negotiating relationships with others, but in doing so they also reinforced

and contributed to new knowledge about what was Cypriot and Cypriot relations. Cookbooks in many cases also flattened out and recast definitions of Cypriot cooking within discussions of national and ethnic food types. But as quick resources they allowed immigrants to adapt and inform their Cypriot and Greek cooking in new and personalised ways, particularly as a source of creativity and personal expression. In this way immigrants' recipe acquisition was a collaborative process informed by experience, relationships and information particular to their experiences in Melbourne, and reminiscent of, yet distinctive from, those they recalled from Cyprus.

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