

Paper for the New Zealand Symposium of Gastronomy, Napier, November 2018

Submitted by: Gail Pittaway

Principal Academic Staff Member

School of Media Arts

Waikato Institute of Technology,

(Wintec)

Hamilton

New Zealand.

‘The Hellenic Mile’- Greek culinary influence on Wellington, New Zealand

In 2013 I participated in a symposium run by a group of Greece-based anthropologists and archaeologists, held in a remote village in Crete, and named The Symposium of Greek Gastronomy, with the theme of ‘The diaspora of Greek culinary influence’. I was already attending a creative writing conference in the UK around this time and all that was required of me was to offer a paper and find my way to Chania, in northern Crete on a certain day, and the rest of my accommodation, travel to the village of Malia, the conference registration and food and those for other presenters would be covered by an EU grant awarded to the convenors. My choice of paper, arising from personal experience of living in Wellington for nearly 20 years, in Newtown, an inner-city suburb with many migrant families, was easy; the Greek culinary influence on Wellington’s food suppliers, cafés and restaurants. As a secondary teacher, some of my students were the daughters of fish and chip shop owners, a few of whom, in Newtown, proudly sold jars of stuffed vine leaves and tins of olives. There were a few Greek restaurants in the 1980’s when I lived there, but my research opened up a new awareness of how significant this influence had been.

New Zealand received Greek immigrants in their largest numbers in the middle of the Twentieth Century in the general diasporas of Greeks before and after war. From 1918 to 1939 there was a slow period of chain migration, by which people from the same families or township follow other neighbours and relatives to another destination. This has been a significant pattern (Swarbrick, 2012). The majority of later Greek immigrants to New Zealand settled in Wellington, the capital and then the most cosmopolitan of the small nation’s cities. A major form of employment for those who made it to this shore was in the food and hospitality industry. Again Wellington, with its many rocky headlands, small pebbled beaches and well-established fishing fleets was an appealing location and Wellington became known of as the ‘Greek Capital ‘of New Zealand (Greek history in New Zealand, 2012).

In a unique book tracing the many Greek establishments that grew up in the central thoroughfares of Wellington, 'the Hellenic Mile', author Zisis (Bruce) Blades (Blades, 1995) himself the son of such an immigrant family, records food establishments run by Greek families from as early as 1885, a fishmonger shop, and 1903, an 'Oyster Saloon' (an eating establishment specializing in sea food, also very popular in Australia at this time (p. 12, 13). In two of the central streets of Wellington alone, Cuba Street and Lambton Quay, nearly half of the businesses from 1890-1980 were run by Greek families, more than by any other immigrant group. Furthermore, 80% of these businesses were food related- cafes, bakeries, milk bars, fish mongers, fish supply shops or butchers.

1949-1961 was the greatest period of Greek migration to NZ for two reasons; the economic and political unrest in Greece at that time, and the shortage of a labour force in NZ because of loss of lives or able bodies after the casualties of World War II (Blades, p.12). During the war strong connections had been formed between NZ and Greece, on many levels, from political and military to personal, perhaps none more so than during the Battle of Crete in 1941, where 'kiwi' soldiers fought to defend Greeks in battles not far from the village in which the Greek Symposium of gastronomy was held in 2013; Rethymnon, Heraklion, Maleme and Galatos in particular. Many wounded NZ or ANZAC soldiers were rescued or protected by local villagers at great risk –nursed to health and then sent over the mountains to rejoin their regiments. There were indeed reprisals for these brave civilians.

Much of my research occurred in the Alexander Turnbull Library where smaller monographs, photographs and local histories are held. Here I found several New Zealand accounts of the Cretan campaign. One of those New Zealand soldiers, Ken Little, is quoted in a small memoir in 'Crete 1941 Eyewitnessed' (Hadjipateras, 1989):

'In actual fact, Crete has never ended for me. I remember those people with deep affection and gratitude. We exchange cards, letters and photographs. As a people they gave so willingly and without thought of themselves (p.290).

I was particularly enthused by the work of another descendent of Greek immigrants, Maria Verivaki, who had collected interviews in a book called 'Stories of Greek Journeys; Greek Migration and settlement' (Verivaki & Petris, 1990) which documents interviews with Greek migrants to New Zealand. I later found that this was part of her Master's thesis in languages from Victoria University. It includes one tale of how a New Zealand soldier, Anthony Madden, was helped by a young girl as he lay wounded in the hills of Crete. Years later Mr. Madden revisited Crete, tracked down the young girl, now married, called Zahoula Kondoyiannaki and with three growing children. In gratitude for their wartime kindness to him, Madden and his wife invited any members of her extended family to come to New Zealand to live and work, under his sponsorship; an offer of reciprocal kindness which was accepted by Zahoula, (Verivaki & Petris, 1990, p. 76). Her husband had been ill and there was no work for her to do in Greece, so in 1963, the couple, with their three children arrived in Wellington to make a new life. At first they moved to be near the Madden family who farmed sheep in a small remote rural community called Waipukurau about 2 ½ hours by train from Wellington. In an effort to bridge the strangeness of this new

adventure Mr. Madden asked his local shop keeper to find Greek-styled food to make his guests welcome. I can only surmise what that might have meant in this austere post-war culinary climate, dominated by a meat and potatoes diet; tomatoes, cucumber, hard cheese, perhaps a jar of olives from Australia?

Another story documented by Maria Verivaki, is that of Stathi Yiavasis, who came at the invitation of his relatives and was put into the food business from the moment he arrived in NZ around 1925 which was perhaps a typical experience for many such immigrants;

‘Instead of sending me to high school (it wasn’t compulsory at the time) my relatives decided to put me to work immediately. They helped bring me over here, I didn’t complain. I didn’t see the sun during the first six months of my life in New Zealand because I worked from early in the morning till late at night in my uncle’s shop. I lived upstairs and worked downstairs’ (Verivaki & Petris, 1990, pp. 39,40).

He goes on to explain how, despite not having run restaurants or been involved in food businesses in their homeland, many Greeks still ended up in such employment in the new country:

‘We didn’t have a skill or trade, but we could cook, so that’s what we did. All the Greeks would bring out their relatives and put them to work in their own businesses. We all stuck together; we helped each other out.’ (– 39,40).

Stathi Yiavasis went on to buy his own business, a fish and chip shop in Molesworth St, Thorndon which he operated for 37 years and which was a favourite of the politicians and civil servants who work and live in that district. (The Beehive, New Zealand’s parliament building, is just across the road.)

Owning one’s own business was a dream that could be achieved in the new country; as another Greek businessman reported in ‘the Hellenic Mile’:

‘Long hours, standing all day, working with running water and not for huge profits. But rather than go and work for someone else you were your own boss! And you could save! Because you worked so hard you did not have time to spend it! ((Blades, 1995, p. 32)

Even those who were well qualified in professions or skilled trades in the old country found themselves working on contract in the primary industries, such as timber (McGill, 1982). After working out what were usually two year contracts, they often moved back to the city, usually Wellington, as often as not into a family business in some aspect of food delivery; cafes, restaurants, fast food which was becoming very popular from the British styled fish and chip shops, and, during the war, the new American food discovery, the milk bar. So why did so many continue to move into the food business? My theory is that where language might be a problem in the English-speaking colony, the language of food- appreciation, preparation, presentation and transaction is international.

To now reflect on culinary matters; after World War II there was a concentration upon re- establishing the country as a producer of primary goods with an emphasis on dairy products of milk and a very bland

cheddar cheese. Mutton was farmed and butchered usually as leg roasts, predominantly for the British market but was also readily available for Sunday roasts, mince, chops or barbecue. As an island nation, too, fish has always been plentiful in New Zealand and Italians and Greeks have been leaders in catching and cooking it.

With the dominant culture and therefore the food culture being British, then, many immigrants adjusted to the simpler culinary demands of the populace by establishing fish and chip shops. Most traditional Greek necessities were unknown, for example, olive oil could only be purchased in pharmacies, as could rose water and orange flower water, but gradually these Greek owned shops provided a locality for importing traditional Greek delicacies and staples, at first to fellow immigrants, but eventually to an expanding clientele. Gradually jars of olives, pickles, tins of olive oil, and delicacies such as feta cheese, taramasalata and dolmades made their way onto the kiwi table, most likely via Australian importers.

Vegetables such as courgettes or zucchini, capsicums or peppers, aubergine, eggplant, artichoke and many varieties of beans or peas dried or mashed were unknown in mainstream shops. However, every home had a large area of garden, and in New Zealand's moist, temperate climate, the more adventurous home gardeners experimented with many of these crops. New Zealand's customs officers cannot have been as strict as they are today, for many seeds of these plants appeared both officially and unofficially in the next decades.

To finish the story of the Kondoyiannaki family, the place they first settled in NZ was so remote for them and so far removed from their Greek community that they eventually moved closer to Wellington, perhaps even more attractive an option after the construction of a Greek orthodox church in the centre of the city (Verivaki & Petris, 1990). There they would have met up with other migrants – Greeks who had already relocated once, to Rumania, an influx of 267 young women from Crete, 'drafted' as domestic workers in 1962, and then in the 1970's Greeks from the civil war in Cyprus. By 1982, in a population of just over 2,500,000 in the whole of New Zealand, 5,000 people identified themselves as Greek in the general census, and of those, 4,000 lived or worked in Wellington (McGill, 1982).

By 1927 a Pan Hellenic Association had been formed, with approximately 75 members (Blades, 1995, p. 13) followed by an Apollon Greek Association of Rumanian Greeks after World War II, to cope with growing numbers of Greek migrants, and both are still based in and around the Greek Orthodox Church complex in Wellington; the first one converted from existing wooden buildings, in the 1940's. A newer reinforced concrete building was completed in 1971, on the slopes of Wellington's Mount Victoria in Hania Street, the area in which many Greek families have made their home. Hania and Wellington have been sister cities since 1981 and the 40th anniversary of the Battle of Crete. This Byzantine-modelled church has adjacent buildings for community events and the all-important Greek language school has been run since 1937, teaching Greek language to the NZ born generations (Greek history in New Zealand, 2012). Here, too families and friends meet at the regular round of meetings; religious, social and sporting. Greek language is taught on Mondays Tuesdays and Thursdays, from 3.30 to 5pm, in several sites around the city and there is also a Greek language school in Christchurch in the South Island which has the second largest Greek population. On Sundays there is Sunday School and the church has

also been the centre for Greek dancing, and sports teams – soccer, or football and netball for the girls (McGill, 1982, p. 96).

Over time the celebrations of the Greek community have become a part of the already cosmopolitan city's events calendar (Blades, 1995, p. 13) in particular the Paniyiri or Greek food festival which usually runs on a weekend in February, at which Wellingtonians, Greek and non-Greek, visitors and tourists can taste souvlaki, calamari, pita bread, loukoumades, baklava, as well as drink ouzo and Greek coffee, or purchase imported Greek goods (Greek Orthodox community in New Zealand, 2012).

Many of the offspring of those original food industry workers did not stay in the family business. Education was important, and the next generation moved on into professions such as law, teaching, the civil service, as did the authors of the books celebrating their forbears, Verivaki and Blades. Like the son of Stathi, upward mobility became desirable:

'We certainly helped out in the shop, but we were never expected to. Mum and Dad didn't try to keep us there ... Their priority lay in educating us' (Verivaki & Petris, 1990, p. 39).

Gradually as assimilation and education changed for these families, the food industry had been a way of grabbing a foothold on this new soil – a place to work hard and show results. Food was not the focus but a vehicle and their Greek cuisine had not ever dominated the menus of their bars, cafes and shops, in the way that the Asian and Italian fast food shops would dominate in the 1980's and American burger bars in the 1990's. However, NZ's most enduring and influential food writer, Alison Holst who has produced at least one cookery book each year for over 3 decades, included the following recipes in her Best of Alison Holst collection in 1990;

Greek salad, taramasalata, use of garlic, eggplant dip, moussaka, various filo pastry recipes, and fish and chicken pan fried, grilled or barbecued, with variations of sesame seed, lemon and oreganum along with lamb dishes; roasted with rosemary, honey and lemon, and also kebabs (Holst, 1990).

More than anyone, her approval of this cuisine has meant that few summers in New Zealand pass without Greek salad served with lamb kebabs, and filo pastries are still popular particularly as savouries. There are now fast food shops selling a variety of Mediterranean food stuffs, such as kebabs, souvlaki, in most towns in New Zealand, alongside fish, chips and burgers. There are still specialty shops in Wellington, Christchurch and Auckland, serving the community many delicacies imported from Greece, while in other parts of the country there are Greek shelves in most delicatessen shops and supermarkets.

In Wellington the influence is still evident at Paniyiri or the Greek food festival. The following interview with Stella Bares, the founder of Paniyiri which has been running for fifty years was reported in a community newspaper which is delivered free to all households in the city, in February of 2013: (Capital times: Insider's guide; Stella Bares, 2013)

I will leave her to say the last words.

Do you have problems getting ingredients in New Zealand?

Not anymore, but when we first arrived yes it was difficult. For instance for many years you couldn't buy capsicums anywhere in Wellington. Some Greek immigrants brought a few seeds with them in their pockets and these were distributed within the Greek community. Greeks are great gardeners. They love their glasshouses. In Greece every house has a lemon tree, a vine and a fig tree. My grandmother used to say the sign of a happy housewife was if the husband had a good lemon tree.'

Many households with gardens, particularly in the North Island of New Zealand have at least one of these three trees nowadays. If Mrs. Kondoyiannaki arrived in Waipukurau today she would only miss her church and language, but not her food.

My paper was duly presented at the Symposium of Greek Gastronomy, in July 2013, but by typical New Zealand coincidence, one of the few other English-speaking presenters and participants at the small gathering high in the mountains of Crete was Maria Verivaki, my main source of material. She had in fact been a student at the school I taught in for 10 years, though was not my student. Then after completing her Masters had reversed migration and returned to live Greece, in adulthood. She now lives in Chania and writes a food blog, in English and Greek about Greek food, seasonal eating and changes and pressures of Greek life (<http://www.organicallycooked.com/>). The convenor of the symposium, Mariana Kavroulaki is still hosting these wonderful events (<https://greekgastronomy.wordpress.com/>). The website sums up many of the characteristics she still maintains:

“The Symposia encourage cross-cultural and interdisciplinary dialogue and welcome people from a variety of backgrounds. However, despite their serious purpose, they have slightly informal character.

As you can imagine, such gatherings can be marvellously enjoyable. Spectacular meals prepared by women and men from local communities are an important component of them.”

Blades, Z. (1995). The Hellenic Mile. In Z. Blades, *The Hellenic Mile* (pp. 19,20). Wellington.

Capital times: Insider's guide; Stella Bares. (2013, February 20). Retrieved May 30, 2013, from Capital times: <http://www.capitaltimes.co.nz/Insiders-Guide-Stella-Bares>

Greek history in New Zealand. (2012, March). Retrieved February 7, 2013, from The greek orthodox community of New Zealand: <http://www.greek.org.nz/>

- Greek Orthodox community in New Zealand*. (2012, January 11). Retrieved March 7, 2013 , from greek orthodox community in New Zealand: <http://www.greek.org.nz/>
- Greeks, the hellenistic community*. (2012, November 9). Retrieved January 30, 2013, from Te Ara government: URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/greeks-the-hellenic-community>
- Hadjipateras. (1989). Crete 1941 Eyewitnessed. In C. Hadjipateras, *Crete 1941 eyewitnessed* (p. 319). Heraklion, Crete: Efstathiadis Group.
- Hill, M., Cook, G., & Hilliam, N. (2010). To the ends of the earth. In M. Hill, G. Cook, & N. Hilliam, *To the ends of the earth* (p. 378). Nelson: The copy press.
- Holst, A. (1990). The best of Alison Holst. In A. Holst, *The best of Alison Holst*. Auckland: New Holland.
- Howe, K. (2012, November 9). *ideas-of-maori-origins*. Retrieved June 12, 2013, from <http://teara.govt.nz/en>: <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/ideas-of-maori-origins>
- McGill, D. (1982). The Other New Zealanders. In D. McGill, *The Other New Zealanders*. Wellington, NZ: Mallinson, Rendel.
- Royal, C. T. (2013, March 27). *Whenua - how the land was shaped*. Retrieved April 20, 2013, from Te Ara encyclopedia of New Zealand: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/whenua-how-the-land-was-shaped>
- Swarbrick, N. (2012, November 9). *Greeks, the hellenistic community*. Retrieved January 30, 2013, from Te Ara government: URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/greeks-the-hellenic-community>
- Verivaki, M., & Petris, J. (1990). Stories of greek journeys. In M. p. Verivaki, *Stories of Greek Journeys*. Wellington, NZ: Petone Settlers Museum.