Sharing Through Thought and Food: The Vision of Monk Epiphanios of Mylopotamos of Mount Athos

One brisk early morning in October 2011, my fellow classmates and I arrived in the central Macedonian city of Thessaloniki, Greece, traveling from Bra, Italy, the birthplace of the international Slow Food movement and home to the University of Gastronomic Sciences, where our small group of twenty-five students was engaged in an intense year-long food culture and communications master’s program. Although jet-lagged, a bit weary, and disoriented, I made sure to save my last energy reserves and appetite for a much anticipated dinner scheduled that evening with Monk Epiphanios of Mylopotamos of Mount Athos, as I find the stories of his life as a master chef and the recipes in his cookbook, *The Cuisine of the Holy Mountain Athos*, most intriguing. Monk Epiphanios entered the monastery of Mylopotamos in 1990, and quickly developed a passion for cooking, assuming the role of the monastery’s chef, planting a vineyard, and constructing a winery. He further advanced his gastronomic pursuits by unifying his personal culinary technique with the beliefs of his teachers and monastic elders. Monk Epiphanios carries on the longstanding tradition of gracing the table with delicious, healthy meals. I am a registered dietitian, so naturally I was curious to examine why the monks of Mylopotamos have remained protected from illnesses, such as cancer, cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer’s, and Parkinson’s disease, for more than a thousand years. I could not think of a better way to examine firsthand this distinct area’s rich food culture and cuisine than to dine with Monk Epiphanios.

The Daily Life of a Monk of Mylopotamos

At Mount Athos, the monastic diet, work, and rituals have remained unchanged for centuries, and the monks attribute their longevity and excellent health to their extremely private, pristine way of life. Mount Athos is arguably one of the most inaccessible and secluded places on Earth. It is the only place that has continued to preserve the ancient Byzantine time and lifestyle. Their day starts at sunset, not at midnight, and it has remained this way since the fall of the eastern Roman Empire to the Ottomans Turks in 1453. Mylopotamos is one of the many monasteries resting precariously on the Mediterranean seawall cliffs of Mount Athos, yet it has remained firm and protected for over five hundred and fifty years, withstanding numerous religious wars, violence, and political attacks.

Although diet is strictly prescribed by Greek Orthodox doctrine, the monastic cuisine at Holy Mount Athos is simple yet satisfying, without indulgence or precariousness. The monks prepare their cuisine using the same ingredients and methods as their ancestors. Wild greens, spinach and leeks, fava beans and other legumes, and seafood of all varieties are seasoned with onions, garlic, and over forty native herbs. Wheat and barley are the primary cereals. Cooked foods are always prepared over a wood fire in frying pans, kettles, and saucepans. Stone fruits, such as peaches, cherries, and apricots, are enjoyed fresh when in season and used in sweets and to make preserves in the colder months.

The monks follow an orderly eating schedule, sitting down together to nourish themselves only two times per day for ten minutes, during which biblical scripture is read and reflected upon. According to Greek Orthodox doctrine, two hundred days throughout the year are spent fasting or following a heavily restricted diet. On these days, olive oil consumption is prohibited. Meat is rarely eaten, and drinking wine is an integral part of their lifestyle, even at nine o’clock in the morning. The holy monks of Mount Athos do not rely on
external sources for food and drink. They meticulously tend to their gardens, wineries, and olive groves, working all day and into the night. All the while, they never cease praying, constantly reciting the Jesus prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, the sinner.”

Frescoes completely saturated in gilded gold, royal blue, and burgundy, the traditional brilliant colors of Byzantine-style artwork, depict ancient scripture on every wall of the dining room in Mylopotamos. Biblical stories, such as the text of the Apocalypse in which the Angel holds an open book, offering it as a gift to those who wish to embody the words of God, vividly animate and come alive. This dining area provides a place to reflect while eating at simple yet elegant marble tables and sitting on wooden benches. The room is dimly lit and soothing, and soft voices are used while eating. Consuming a simple meal creates a peaceful, calm tone and an inclination toward honesty and tolerance.

The goal of this mealtime experience is to nurture the soul, and to talk in simple gestures and the fewest words to resolve “ancient enigmas and doubts of fellow eating companions. The table here is not only physically experienced but spiritually as well. After the food a psalm is sung and after the drink a hymn.” Religious outsiders visiting the monastery on pilgrimage are welcomed to participate in the feast ritual called agapae. They depart the dinner table both physically and spiritually satiated through ritualistic and culinary healing. When the meal is complete, Monk Epiphanios asks forgiveness of the pilgrims for the mistakes he made during meal preparation, even the most insignificant, demonstrating a sincere and deep humility.

A Special Occasion with Monk Epiphanios

Our dining experience with the master chef was quite an extraordinary learning opportunity. A monk rarely, if ever, leaves Mount Athos, yet he kindly volunteered his time and energy because, at heart, he is an educator who wanted to share his life work with our group of gastronomic students. There are two logistical reasons why Monk Epiphanios made his own pilgrimage of sorts and traveled one hour from Mylopotamos to Thessaloniki through undeveloped terrain in order to cook for us at Deltario restaurant. First, Mount Athos has very stringent admission requirements, limiting entry to very few male visitors per year. It is necessary to limit entrance in order to preserve Byzantine life, and protect its seclusion and raison d’être. Secondly, women are absolutely prohibited in the monasteries of Mount Athos. According to monastic law, they are a distraction from purity.

We arrived at Deltario restaurant at about half past eight and were seated close together at long tables in the intimate candlelit dining room. There was an instant camaraderie among classmates. Convivial conversation remained relaxed and tame as anise-infused ouzo and a large assortment of meze appeared, including fava beans with caramelized onions, roasted peppers stuffed with garlic and nuts, pickled greens with potatoes, sun-dried octopus with shredded cabbage, and soft, white bread. Then, two local seafood entrees were shared family-style. Haddock, a white, flaky fish with a refreshing lemon sauce, was paired with a crisp white wine, and a robust red wine came alongside octopus baked in a savory tomato sauce. For dessert, Monk Epiphanios prepared semolina with candied orange and cherries, which was accompanied by concentrated, sweet wine. All of the vegetables, bread, and wine served were products of Mylopotamos and a result of the monks’ hard labor. At the end of this wonderfully crafted dinner, the master chef spoke very humbly, using tones as delicate as the dishes served, about the special meal he prepared for us. He sincerely hoped that we had been inspired by this unique culinary experience and, as he does at the monastery, he asked us our forgiveness for any imperfections.

The recipes for the traditional dishes that Monk Epiphanios generously prepared for my classmates and me that evening are present in his unique cookbook, The Cuisine of the Holy Mountain Athos, which unlocks the mysteries that surround this remarkably healthy diet. Very few Mount Athos monks ever publish their recipes and stories. His cookbook encompasses centuries of Greek Orthodox culinary tradition, and contains more than a hundred recipes collected and refined by the leaders of the monastery kitchens. It also outlines the history of monastic cuisine at Mount Athos, and explains the methodical application of the prescribed Greek Orthodox dietary doctrine. And, a meaningful, relevant psalm and story is included with each recipe. Through their impeccable culinary service, the master chefs nourish and take care of their fellow monks. Monk Epiphanios’s The Cuisine of the Holy Mountain Athos is historically significant because it is a creative manual of sorts, as it demonstrates a living example of a model diet that has sustained a group of people, extending their lives and keeping them healthy beyond the normal rates of well-being, for more than a thousand years.

Possible Links to Longevity

During our meal, I could not help but observe Monk Epiphanios. He is a tall, gargantuan man with a long salt-and-
pepper beard and wears a conservative floor-length black robe. He is not slender by any means. Given his portly build, I found it difficult to believe that he is an exceptionally healthy human being. However, the Harvard School of Public Health promotes the Mediterranean-style diet as one of the healthiest ways of eating. And, on November 17, 2010, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognized the Mediterranean-style diet as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Italy, Spain, Greece, and Morocco, thus reinforcing it not only as a fundamental part of those countries’ history and background, but also as a significant contribution to world culture. The monks of Mount Athos exemplify this healthy eating approach, as they eat mostly fresh fruits and vegetables, use herbs instead of salt, olive oil in place of butter, and consume seafood instead of red meat.

Between 1994 and 2007, a study of the health and dietary habits of fifteen hundred monks from the Mediterranean region was conducted. The results were astonishing. None of the monks developed lung or bowel cancer, and only eleven suffered from prostate cancer, a fraction of the international rate. Not only are they healthy eaters, the monks drink wine in moderation, and get plenty of exercise from their daily routines by working the land and other manual labor, all of which have been shown to decrease the rate of developing cardiovascular disease.

In his cookbook, Monk Epiphanios supports historical claims made by monks for centuries: the benefits associated with their Mediterranean eating approach and active lifestyle lower their rates of cancer, heart disease, Parkinson’s, and Alzheimer’s. Greek Orthodox monasteries provide an invaluable unique opportunity for medical research, and by using proper methods, one could produce sound and justifiable evidence to further support these claims. However, the possibility of conducting scientific research on Holy Mount Athos is highly improbable due to strict entry requirements designed to preserve the ancient Byzantine way of life. Unfortunately, a solid and verifiable body of evidence to prove the efficacy of the Mediterranean, monastic diet will most likely never emerge, and the question will remain unanswered as to whether or not the health benefits developed and utilized in monasteries are transferable to the general population. However, there is an agreement among medical providers that a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and seafood is nutritious and promotes longevity.

A Reflection

Each individual monk embodies a dichotomous unity. “The monk is apart from everything and everyone and united with everything and everyone.” Although they live in solitude and seclusion, they are not alone. They spend every day of their lives together, working, eating, and praying, in efforts to thrive and survive within a singularly religious organization built to serve God and mankind. Their unity enhances their emotional well-being, strengthens personal spirituality with brotherly support, and upholds a prescribed dietary regimen, all of which keep them exceptionally healthy.

Recently Jonathan Safran Foer wrote in his article “How Not To Be Alone”: “everyone is always in need of something that another person can give, be it undivided attention, a kind word or deep empathy. There is no better use of a life than to be attentive to such needs.” I would like to add to his statement the importance of togetherness in relation to life span. I believe there is little need for doctors in the monastery because they take such good care of one another. They exemplify the importance of living in solidarity with healthy, like-minded peers. Their humanness and emotional intelligence have not been diminished by modern-day technology so they are able to live deeply sensitive, empathetic lives in unison with each other and with the land to which they are inseparably connected.

Slow Food’s international mission is “to counter the rise of fast food and fast life, the disappearance of local food traditions and people’s dwindling interest in the food they eat, where it comes from, how it tastes and how our food choices affect the rest of the world.” My classmates and I bonded for an entire year together as Slow Food students, the majority of which we spent side by side growing, preparing, and eating food. In a way, we were each conducting our own personal research investigations, determining what we could learn from each other’s distinct food culture. Among the twenty-five of us, we represented fourteen countries. And those of us from America each came from a different state. Although we all agreed on the importance of sustainability and preservation of “good, clean and fair” food, during our time together we offered our individual food perspectives, and shared stories, opinions, and knowledge based on personal experiences. Our year together strengthened our knowledge of international cuisine, and like the monks, enabled us to form valuable friendships and companionship that may help us live long, enriched lives.

As I dined with my friends in Thessaloniki, so far away from my home in the United States, I realized how connected I am to the world. I felt strong and grounded. I felt loved. Gastronomy is an encompassing term that not only involves consumption, but also cultural exchange through thought and practice. Maybe I too will live longer because I could feel that my friends at the dinner table, people who are so
culturally different from me, are actually exactly the same as me. We care about every aspect of the food cycle: the growth, nurturing, harvest, preparation, and consumption. They reflect who I am and what I care about. Like us, this food life cycle is umbilically tied to who the monks are and intertwined with how they conduct their lives. In the end, we are all connected to each other, even with secluded monks of Holy Mount Athos. And it is at the dinner table that we all conduct the simple task of eating while simultaneously and subconsciously uniting under a uniquely human, unassuming banner. Just like the food we consume, we live and then we perish.

Master Chef Monk Epiphanios generously shared his thoughts and food with us so we could examine the traditions of Greek Orthodox cuisine. More importantly, he provided the opportunity to emulate his compassion for all humankind through acts of culinary service. I was deeply moved by Monk Epiphanios’s generosity and continue to use my own personally inscribed copy of his cookbook, *The Cuisine of the Holy Mountain Athos*, to unite with friends and family while giving thanks by offering healthy monastic meals. I emulate his thoughtful and kind disposition through my own personal yet worldly perspective of what it means to care through food, thought, and tradition. For that I am truly grateful.

**NOTES**


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.


10. Ibid., 12.


