mysterious pleasures | diane gleason

Mediterranean Food

THE DRIVER KNEW IT was hard to hear with the windows down so he leaned sideways to make his point and spoke slowly in Italian. “It is my older daughter who is the real cook. She even makes dinner with l’avocado.” This daughter had moved to Amsterdam and was now training at a large hotel to prepare—his hand left the wheel to gesture—international food. “She makes something different every night. I would describe her as quite professional.” From the passenger seat his wife nodded agreement and they resumed their conversation in Sicilian dialect.

Rather than continue my praise of their younger daughter, Valentina, who cooked alongside them at their small, local hotel, I sat back with the luxury of eyes narrowing in the island sun. Valentina’s food was no match for the international restaurant scene of her older sister in Amsterdam, and her table did not include voluptuous delights such as avocado. Her meals were small town, north coast Sicilian, absent of surprise and removed from the lure of the global. She had a sober style, silken with tomato. Untouched by diversity of influence, it emerged from pride of place and remained linked to the twin anchors of Mediterranean cooking—austerity and repetition.

Though it inspires the world, Mediterranean cooking leaves its secrets at home. The tradition animates people everywhere with images of color and freshness, but mutes its arguments for limits and predictability. Its famous culinary markers, such as using olive oil and eating sun-ripened fruit, help shape a popular narrative of what it means to eat well, and publicity on the possible benefits of including red wine in the diet has certainly found an audience among the people I know. Dishes adapted from the Mediterranean continue to multiply on restaurant menus, magazine articles, cooking shows, and travel tours—the creative infrastructure of global-style cooking.

Less frequently mentioned is the Mediterranean inclination toward limits and predictability. These customs can also inspire, though they lack the dazzle of promised Mediterranean abundance. Perhaps that is why Valentina’s parents, people in the hotel trade, were so proud their older daughter had graduated from a Sicilian kitchen onto the world stage of an Amsterdam hotel. Its culinary variety has higher currency, at least on the surface. But for me, Valentina’s meals threw global cooking into relief, with a reminder that the austerity at the root of Mediterranean cooking underpins what the original fuss was all about.

I stayed at the family’s hotel as a Sicilian prelude to a weeklong vacation in Rome. The town was arid and still, but my hosts—whose cousins in Chicago had encouraged the visit—were lively guides. They brought me to their fish market, a shallow grotto facing inland from the rocky shore, indifferent to the blazing canopy of blue surrounding it. Next day we drove towards Palermo, passing the Corvo winery, with its expanse of greenery and patterns of shade. From my bedroom windows the mother showed me an island visible in the distance only at certain hours. And on Sunday they enlisted Valentina and her boyfriend to drop their exam preparations and get me on the road to Cefalu.

Most times during this visit I ate at the hotel where Valentina cooked with grace and cunning, and never discussed a menu. Her parents took the occasional kitchen turn but focused their energies on planning for an upcoming wedding reception that would require special foods and elaborate presentation. But the daily meals continued as usual with each course served meatless, sequentially, and bright on the plate. The routine of the airy dining room reminded me how little
time it can take to adapt to a Mediterranean rhythm. I thought back to a neighbor in Chicago who had recently realized his dream of vacationing with family and friends at a rented house in the Tuscan hills. Everyone was so happy eating the young housekeeper’s food, he said, attempting to describe her pasta and the way she cooked the chicken. Then, after a pause, he added, “Well, I guess it was pretty much the same thing every night.” I heard a similar story from a young man at my office who was leaving for Athens to bring his girlfriend to meet his extended family. I asked him if his aunt’s cooking would have changed much from the time he was a little boy who visited her every year. His dropped his head sideways and asked, “Are you kidding?”

I like to think of Campo dei Fiori as a reassuring Mediterranean landmark. This open-air marketplace in Rome, whose panorama of vegetables and fruit stirs the imagination, is iconic in the world of global food and travel. But the leveling perspective of that world frames the market’s image in its own likeness, suggesting a Roman culinary lushness that might be misleading. An array of peppers and figs becomes kaleidoscopic in that thrilling setting and, to the appetite conditioned to seek variety, makes an argument for everything possible in the kitchen.

Yet the vendors sorting through those boxes at Campo dei Fiori are selling eggplant to repeat customers who cook eggplant all the time. Plus, each customer probably cooks it the same way all the time, with variations evolving gradually. Global cooking sweeps up these variations as a base for improvisation, often delivering more seductive results. But a global dinner—the creative touch of avocado in Amsterdam—sits in contrast to some of the contained routines of Italy and Greece. It may excel in technique—with shockingly delicious results—but possibly lack the traditional Mediterranean capacity to refresh. As delight and surprise become the norm, and a reaction expected of the eater, weariness can overtake the table. Two friends of mine who frequent performance restaurants sometimes recount their adventures in the tone of people who have been stuck in traffic, inadvertently revealing that many aspects of life involve a tradeoff.

I discovered the term “Mediterranean Cooking” at the time I first tasted it. I was a university student in Rome,
startled by how prescribed and delectable each meal seemed to be. When I saw the book of that title by Elizabeth David on the shelf of The Lion Bookshop on Via dei Greci, I bought it, skimmed it that afternoon, and knew I would always keep it. That was in spring of 1972. I still refer to the little Penguin, with its cover photo of the woman in the kerchief sitting behind shoots of garlic, when I want to summon a moment that felt precious even on the spot. Culinary Rome was unfolding for me and suddenly here was a portal to its broader context. I couldn’t wait to get back to my dorm room and see if other people ate grapes tossed with maraschino. Such glee in finding a paperback has little equivalent now, with the world so full of voices explaining everything. But back then, I loved this chance of tutoring and could guess from the author’s confident tone that there were unifying concepts behind the Mediterranean tradition that made eating in Rome so satisfying.

“It is honest cooking, too,” the book insists, “none of the sham Grande Cuisine of the International Palace Hotel.”

Quickly the author dismisses the extravagant and begins to catalogue how “the Latin genius flashes from the kitchen pans.” The traditional dishes Elizabeth David and others helped popularize so ignited the spirit of cooks that by the late 1970s, Mediterranean food became known as nothing to fear, something to try, and certainly a healthful choice. In my experience, though, Italian and Greek cooks do not give anyone choices. They practice seasonal cooking, which is dictatorial not picturesque, and have little interest in what anyone else eats. Culinary variety, the province of travel and media, is met with indifference. But back home in Chicago, variety is systemic and urges jolly participation. Transit posters featuring restaurant items from GrubHub and other menu-ordering networks promise rotating culinary delight, something of an exhausting state for the quotidian. Each evening I ride home on the Brown Line elevated train, jammed in with crowds of younger workers who, stop by stop, order takeout via cell or spar with unseen partners on the dinner decision.

“Do you want to order Thai?”
“Don’t get barbecued ribs. Isn’t she vegetarian?”
“Well, we could always do Italian.”

As the frisson of restlessness fills the air, and particularly if I don’t have a seat so I can read, my mind will sometimes wander back to Valentina and her parents. In fondness I extend to them the deft gift of Elizabeth David and wonder how she might have noted their spaghetti with clams or the spinach with lemon or the father’s pizza with breadcrumbs. She would have found some phrase to cite their exact rightness. The great dishes of the Mediterranean — foods the world remembers — come from the tables of people who perfect them in particular time and place, then keep repeating them in season. Rather than looking outward, the Mediterranean cook shutters the window. Global cooking, with its creative surges and discerning eye, will never fully replace this tradition, for variety never stirs the memory. It simply opens the future, taunting us to ask for more.

Several years ago a colleague returned from vacation in her native Greece. People circled round her cubicle, granting a deference given the tanned and rested, and in eager welcome asked what she had to eat on the tiny island. Lifting both hands to craft her moment, she described a glorious type of fish pulled from the sea each summer day and grilled whole over charcoal. Everyone wanted to know more.

“Well, what else did you have?”

At that, she looked puzzled, as though she might need to repeat her story. I wanted to hear how she would respond, but both lines on her phone started ringing and the long workday began.

NOTES
2. Ibid.