

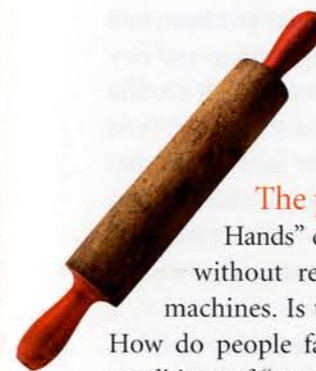
Hands *that* Remember

“With her sight now gone completely, Yiayia mourns the days when the kitchen was hers. She cries as she recounts a list of the dishes she used to make. Her hands are grasped together, solacing one another as if they are having an agonizing memory of their own. But even with her sight gone completely, occasionally a dish miraculously appears from the kitchen — pastitsio or domates me avga, prepared by the hands that remember.”

— From “Yiayia’s Hands,” by Terri Kapsalis

By Michael Hernandez
and David Sutton

An Ethnographic Approach to Everyday Cooking



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: PHOTODISC

The passage from Terri Kapsalis’s “Yiayia’s Hands” captures an image of “traditional” cooking, without recipes, cookbooks, Cuisinarts, or bread machines. Is this image a relic of grandmother’s past? How do people face the task of everyday cooking under conditions of “modernity,” and what might this mean for the kind of embodied knowledge that Kapsalis describes?

These questions have formed the basis for an ongoing research project on everyday cooking. While several recent books give firsthand ethnographic accounts of “the making of a professional chef,” there exists a huge gap in our ethnographic knowledge about everyday cooking by ordinary people, trying a new recipe they saw in a magazine or trying to get a healthy meal on the table after work. Our larger

project has begun to address this gap, using interviews and filming people preparing meals in their homes, shopping, talking about these processes and about their “philosophies” of cooking. We have been intrigued by recent thinking on “embodied memory” and memory storage, that is, the extent to which cooking techniques can be seen as explicit mental “blueprints.” In other words, what might it mean to speak of cooking memory as residing not in our heads, but in our hands? And in what ways do cooking utensils, the kitchen environment, and the ingredients themselves make cooking seem “automatic,” like playing a piano or riding a bicycle, as opposed to like a scientific experiment with each step carefully specified and measured? How have recent times — modernization — changed



Cutting leeks for the filling of the *prasopita*



Measuring olive oil by sight



Measuring vinegar in the palm of right hand



Separating the yolk

PRASOPITA (LEEK PIE) WITH FRESH PHYLLO DOUGH

Filling

The leek filling was started first so that the leeks could cook while the rest of the dish components were being constructed. Georgia began with three medium-size whole leeks. After she rinsed the leeks, she cut them into small C-shaped pieces about 1 inch to 1 1/2 inches wide. These were then placed into a pot, along with olive oil, to be cooked and reduced.

Phyllo Dough

While the leeks were cooking and reducing, Georgia started the process of making the phyllo for the *prasopita*. She began by pouring a large amount of bleached flour into a large bowl. At first we believed that Georgia was measuring the flour by sight, but rather, she folded the bag and measured the amount of flour by the size and weight of the remaining flour in the bag.

After placing the desired amount of flour in the bowl, Georgia used the back of her hand to create a hole for subsequent ingredients. She made several passes through the center to create the right depth to contain the liquid ingredients.

Michael: The Greek oil [sold in the United States], is it different than back home?

Georgia: Yes, you can smell the Greek oil. The virgin oil you get at home...has a smell and taste....You can smell the olives. Not like here.

At no point in the process did she employ measuring spoons or cups. The ingredients themselves became "tools" and performed the role of "measuring" other ingredients. The use of ingredients as a tool can be seen as part of the structuring of the cooking environment itself as a mnemonic, or memory-jog, which we have documented in other cooking practices. For example, cooking implements in much of Greece are hung on the wall, in plain sight, rather than in a cupboard or under a counter, reminding the cook of their potential for use.

It is not the environment but the body that becomes a measuring tool, much more directly than in the gauge of her three fingers. While American cooks use their hands in some cases to

people's relationship to the various kinds of cooking tools, ranging from their sense organs (the nose, the tongue) to pots and pans, knives, even bread machines, with which they structure their kitchen environment?

The tools of cooking are diverse. But perhaps they can be divided into techniques, which extend the body into the environment, and technologies, which deskill human bodies and make humans simply their operators. Consider, for instance, the difference between the knife, which requires practical intelligence and bodily engagement, and the bread machine, which requires only that one assemble ingredients and push buttons. Perhaps the deskilling of the body — the replacement of techniques with technologies — is one of the outcomes of modernization and urban life. To what extent has cooking knowledge, handed down and modified over generations within families and communities (mostly by women), been replaced by processed foods, foods that "taste like homemade,"

and what are the implications of such changes for people's experience of cooking? Finally, we wonder how the objectification of "tradition" itself as an aspect of modern life affects people's everyday cooking practices, as they self-consciously choose to embrace or reject modern recipes, cooking styles, techniques, and gadgets.

These are some of the questions that we feel can be answered only through careful ethnography — ethnography

just as attentive to social context as it is to cooking technique. Here we present one case study of an urban middle-class Greek woman, Georgia Vourneli, who lives in the country's second largest city, Thessaloniki. We present Georgia's case because in some ways it fits very well with the notion of modernity's reification of tradition, that is, turning tradition into a timeless object rather than a living, changing process. But at the same time in more subtle, embodied respects, her story defied our expectations of contemporary loss of cooking knowledge.

GEORGIA VOURNELI

Georgia Vourneli prefers to identify herself as a Greek housewife and a mother of two sons. She was born in a small town and migrated to the city of Thessaloniki when she was 17. She has been married for 28 years. When she identifies herself as a housewife, she does so primarily in terms of professional occupation. Georgia's relationship to Greek tradition is like her relationship to Greek modernity, a hybrid one. She works out at a private gym twice a day, owns her own car

(for her a potent symbol of personal independence), and has a Western European-based sense of fashion and style, including hair that's permed and dyed blond.

Georgia is an avid participant in material consumption, spending her time shopping at local fashion shops and at the Wal-Mart in Thessaloniki. According to her son Leo Vournelis (as he now spells his name), she has a large collection of "modern" kitchen utensils and appliances. Even

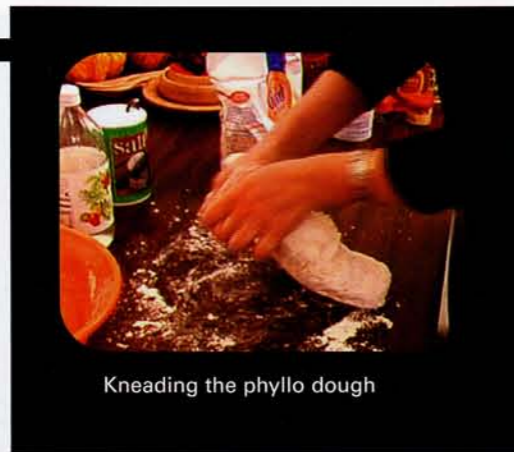


Georgia Vourneli

PHOTOS THIS PAGE AND ALL SUBSEQUENT PAGES: MICHAEL HERNANDEZ



Measuring water



Kneading the phyllo dough



Rolling the phyllo

Georgia placed the following ingredients in the hole in the flour: olive oil, vinegar, salt, egg yolk, and water. In this recipe all but two ingredients — vinegar and an egg — were measured by sight. Drawing her fingers together and pulling up slightly to create a cup of her right hand, with her thumb bent to form the outer edge of the cup, she poured the vinegar into her hand to measure the correct amount. She allowed the vinegar to drizzle over the ingredient-holding area as well as the rest of the bowl. When it came to adding the egg yolk, Georgia used her left hand as a strainer to separate the white from the yolk. The egg white was strained into another bowl and discarded. She then added the yolk to the hole in the center of the flour.

measure dry ingredients, particularly spices, cooks we spoke with expressed varying degrees of surprise or disgust at the idea of using one's hands to measure "wet" ingredients. Perhaps American concern for hygiene — a key aspect of modernity — militates against the potential mixing of the self and the ingredients implied in measuring egg yolks or vinegar with one's hands. By contrast, in some non-Western societies there is a willingness to get one's hands dirty, to mix one's substance with that of the food one is preparing, as a reflection of a community with strong interpersonal ties and a disdain for Western-style privacy. Barbadian author and cook Austin Clarke captures this distinction in *Pig Tails 'n Breadfruit*:

So, we are talking about cooking food with feeling. Feeling is stretched to include "feeling-up" the food: touching the fish; pulling out the entrails of a chicken with your fingers; peeling potatoes and slicing them with a knife while holding them in your hand — not using a gadget that ensures precision of cut and duplication of each slice.

It is interesting that Georgia's embrace of middle-class modern values — health club, Wal-Mart — does not extend to this embodied aspect of the cooking she had learned from her grandmother. This perhaps could be seen to reflect the valorization of tradition in contemporary Greece, which was certainly reflected in Georgia's nationalist discourse. But it could also simply be part of a more embodied

After placing the ingredients into the center, Georgia began to blend the mixture, with her fingers working in a pinching movement at the top center of the bowl. The mixing pattern started with a light grab into the mixture and then a quick withdrawal. This continued until the combination began to clump.

In the second stage of mixing, the dough was worked as follows: grab, lift, and twist. The final stage of the mixture is the punch. Georgia placed her hands into a loose fist and punched the dough lightly.

When the mixture began to string, Georgia placed the dough on the table and began a kneading process. Taking the top of the dough, that is, the edge of the dough farthest away from her, she folded the edge under, and thrust down her palm and pushed away to the right.

At the end of the thrust, she rotated the batch a quarter-turn to the left. She worked the dough until it formed a long, round cylinder, using water throughout the kneading process to regulate the dryness so that the dough did not break apart or become too wet and too sticky to be rolled.

memory of technique that, as habit, is less easily shed. The contradictions, however, are nowhere better expressed than in the profusion of modern cooking implements that Georgia owns but never uses.

Both kneading and rolling the dough involve elaborate sequences of actions in which the entire body is not only generating forces (e.g., flattening the dough, turning the dough, varying the rolling angle) but also carefully sensing and reacting to how these actions affect the dough (e.g., adding more water when the dough feels dry). Luce Giard, in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (vol. 2), aptly describes the rhythmic processes involved in many aspects of cooking, "Whether it is done with a tool (chopping an onion with a small knife) or with the bare hand (kneading bread dough), the technical gestures call for an entire mobilization of the body, translated by the moving of the hand, of the arm, sometimes of the entire body swinging in cadence to the rhythm of successive efforts demanded by the task at hand."

The process was repeated. The dough was worked completely so that it was smooth in appearance and thickness, which Georgia continually checked by running her hands along the length of the worked dough until her fingers no longer vibrated with variations in the dough's thickness. She cut the dough into equal-size pieces by measuring the amount in the palm of her right hand. The remaining dough was then placed to the side.

Georgia then prepared to roll out the dough by creating a work area. She used her right hand to scoop out a small amount of flour and sift it onto the table, forming a round flour workspace. She placed one palm-size dough piece in the center of the flour. Leo handed her a rolling pin that was tapered slightly at each end. He explained that it was similar to his mother's and that he purchased it in the United States

Michael: You talk about not having the right tool all the time. First, where do you get your tools?

Georgia: I got my tools from my mother's home place. In the village where she had a carpenter make for her a rolling pin and table that was low. Mother would sit with her legs under the table and roll phyllo.

Using the palms of her hands she began to roll the pin over the dough. The first few times, she rolled the pin quickly and in short strokes directly in front and away from her. Then, she rolled the pin forward and to the right and the strokes became slower and longer. The dough was flattened to about three times the circumference of the original palm size. Once it reached this size, she rotated the flattened dough a quarter-turn to the left. This was repeated until the dough was 12 to 18 inches in diameter.

The second rolling phase then began. In this phase, Georgia took the dough edge closest to her and folded it forward over the rolling pin. She then rolled the pin away from her, drawing the phyllo over itself as she pressed down.

The forward motion flattened the dough and kept it in place on the roller.

By this time, the top edge of the dough was on the rolling pin facing up. Georgia flipped the rolling pin quickly forward and the top edge of the phyllo was flicked forward and then unrolled. This flicking motion allows the phyllo to move away from its original position to accommodate its increase in size. She then rotated the dough a quarter-turn to the left and repeated the steps until the dough was thin.

Michael: How do you know when the phyllo is done?

Georgia: When it happens, not worry, I can tell.

Michael: It is the thinness...

Georgia: Not worry, I know. If I had my own roller, the dough would be better.

Michael: How do you know if the phyllo is thin enough?

Georgia: You can tell. You can feel that it is right.



Placing the dough in the baking pan



Filing the first layer of *prasopita* with leeks



Completed *prasopita*

Georgia complains that she does not have her own rolling pin. And yet the rolling pin she uses is the same “traditional” type as the one she has at home. A conventional, “modern” rolling pin (i.e., the ultra-smooth model with low-friction ball bearings and a larger, heavier dowel) is eschewed in this case for a smooth stick, which allows one to feel every nuance of the rolling action and its effect on the elasticity of the dough. In contrast, the modern rolling pin construction disconnects the cook from the dough because the implement is designed to produce uniform strokes. The traditional rolling pin allows Georgia once again to “feel” when the dough is right (without being able to verbalize the process), since this type of roller is a simple extension of the hands, not a tool meant to achieve the rolling process with minimal human effort.

When it came to traditional meals, Georgia did not use the standard measuring forms found in most cookbooks. Rather, she extended her senses, as well as her body, as a tool of measurement to reproduce tradition and history. The concept of measuring did appear when Georgia prepared a dish that she considered special or that she made with historically significant ingredients. Georgia also used measuring implements in dishes that were complex due to the large number of ingredients. However, the measurements themselves were not consistently accurate and it appeared that the use of the measuring devices in itself provided the feeling of specialness and gave importance to the complexity of the dish. For example, in preparing Christmas cookies for the same dinner, she followed a recipe. “Things have to be just right,” she said. “If you put more in the food [traditional everyday dishes] or a little this or that it’s OK, but these [the special cookies] have to be right.” In fact, the recipe called for a cup, but the cup she

After the first layer of the phyllo was finished, Georgia lightly poured olive oil in a swirling pattern in the bottom of a baking pan. She then took a pastry brush and brushed the oil evenly in the pan. She placed the phyllo over the pan and worked it into the pan gently.

The phyllo took the form of the pan and was covered again with olive oil. Brushing the oil evenly over the surface, Georgia then spooned small piles of the leek filling on the dough.

After the area was filled, she smoothed the filling evenly on the bottom. The phyllo and filling steps were repeated two more times. The final step was to place a fourth layer of phyllo on top of the dish. The fourth phyllo layer was cut to the edge of the pan and then folded over itself, forming an edge around the top to create a completed pie. The pie was then cut into 15 pieces (five up and three across), placed into the oven, and baked.

used was not a measuring cup but rather a large coffee cup. So it was not the precision of the measurement, but rather the motion and the thought of using measurement that marked the making of something special.

While our analysis here is based on one individual’s practices, we suggest that this sort of culinary biography of ordinary cooking is useful in grounding questions about

the impact of modern life on our foodways. In Georgia Vourneli’s case, countervailing pressures may lead to the embrace of symbols of modernity in some cases (Wal-Mart, Cuisinarts), and of symbols of tradition in others (“authentic” ingredients, “traditional” recipes). We would argue, however, that the more embodied aspects of cooking that we have described are not part of a self-conscious modern strategy to valorize the traditional, but are the product of habit memory fostered by familial transmission.

This raises the issue of transmission as a key aspect of understanding contemporary cooking knowledge, a topic for further research. Preliminarily, there seem to be distinct differences in transmission patterns between Greeks and Americans. Some of the American cooks in our study lament the loss of familial transmission: “My greatest disappointment was not teaching my daughter how to cook, but she never took an interest and I never made her,” notes Jane Adams, a university professor and Carbondale native. Other American cooks are self-taught, or have taken classes on cooking. In Georgia’s case, by contrast, familial transmission and embodied apprenticeship remain the norm, and along with them an accompanying disdain for measurement, precision, and knowledge that can be objectified into recipes.

In his research on the Greek island of Kalymnos, David Sutton found similar disdain for written recipes across

class differences. As one woman put it, experience is the only teacher when it comes to cooking. And a middle-class Athenian woman who took pride in her cooking scoffed at the idea of cookbooks. When asked where she had gained her cooking knowledge, she replied with barely veiled contempt, “from my mother and grandmother, of course!”

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Michael Hernandez is a Ph.D. student in anthropology at Southern Illinois University. His research focus is on material culture, food, and memory. Hernandez’s doctoral research explores the use of cooking tools and the body (hands), culinary instructions, and storytelling as a means of transmitting cultural knowledge in the production of foods. His current research project on food and memory focuses on the relation of food, food ways, and material culture in the transmitting of culture and family history both to younger generations within a family and to the general population.

David Sutton is an associate professor of anthropology at Southern Illinois University. For the past 12 years he has been conducting research on the Greek island of Kalymnos in the eastern Aegean Sea. He recently published Remembrance of Repasts: An Anthropology of Food and Memory, which considers the capacity to store the past in our meals — in the smell of olive oil or the taste of a fresh-cut fig. It also looks at the implications of globalization and commodification of foods for our sensory memories. His earlier book, Memories Cast in Stone, is an ethnography of Kalymnian historical consciousness, or the relevance of the past in people’s everyday lives.

FOR FURTHER READING

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