

# My Greek Father's Simple, Comforting Bowl of Chickpeas and Spinach

[nytimes.com/2022/11/01/magazine/revithia-me-spanaki.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/11/01/magazine/revithia-me-spanaki.html)

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Not long before he died, my father, a doctor, announced that he would write a cookbook of Greek food. The news came as a shock. In England, where he'd spent most of his life, he had shown very little interest in cooking. In Greece, where he was born and where he returned to live much later, he was now fanatical about it. Research began. Tavernas were scouted and recipes recorded. One summer when I visited him, we went together to a restaurant on the island of Paros. There he had discovered fava, a pea or bean purée, yellow and buttery, that he thought was the best he'd ever had. He felt it deserving of a page in his book. I watched him photograph the dish from above, his shirt damp with midafternoon sweat, the cotton pulled tight against his belly, the fava set against a plain white tablecloth.

My father died in 2005, when I was 21 and muddling through that smudge between childhood and becoming an adult. As with our relationship, his cookbook remained a sketch of what it might have become: a collection of notes and pictures, now lost, that I experienced more as an atmosphere than a formal set of instructions. When I was growing up, my father was my entryway to Greek culture, but he was a poor, uninterested translator. He didn't speak Greek to me when I was young, which I later considered deliberately mean; he rarely insisted on eating Greek food. That he had developed this belated interest always puzzled me.

Sometimes I wonder if the book was his way of reaching out, of passing on what he knew or loved of his culture. He did not leave behind a diary. I do not have any of his letters. What better way to reconnect with him and introduce him to my own young children, whom he never met, than through an attempt at recreating the dishes he once sought feverishly to create himself? My favorite of his recorded recipes, then as now, is *revithia me spanaki*, chickpeas with spinach, the kind of traditional dish the Greek food writer Vefa Alexiadou has described as “deceptively simple, straightforward and memorable.”

Revithia me spanaki takes 12 hours to prepare, according to some cooks (you must soak the chickpeas), and another hour or so to stew. It's a simmered comfort food, good as a main and fine on the side. In the winter it's warming; in the summer it can be eaten cold. It might be described, in contemporary parlance, as a superfood salad. As with other Greek legume dishes, it involves very few ingredients: olive oil, chickpeas, spinach, white onions, a tomato sauce and fresh, finely chopped dill, which is widely used in Greek cooking. Professional pictures of revithia me spanaki sometimes show the chickpeas still fully formed and the spinach still recognizable as leaves — though it's my experience that everything dissolves into a mess of tasty little clumps.

Lately I've found that the process of cooking revithia me spanaki helps me locate my father in memory. It revives both place and mood. In go the ingredients and out come the visions: of my father and his two brothers, both of whom stayed in Athens, fidgeting with worry beads; of my grandmother sitting in her kitchen at a linoleum-topped table; of electric blinds whirring shut in the afternoon and the subsequent warm, sleepy gloom; of a red sauce bubbling on the stove. It's the dill that does this, I think. It's the dill, absent from other dishes my wife and I typically cook, that transports me back to that place, and that redefines memories that, over 17 years, have blurred at the edges.

My son recently turned 6 and now asks about my father often. "Was he fat?" he asked once, a question no friend ever voiced. I've discovered that old photographs satisfy some of his queries — "See for yourself, he wasn't thin" — but not all. That's where the cooking comes in. Now when my son asks what my father was like, what he loved, what I remember of him, I can show him. "Here," I'll say, and lay a dish of chickpeas and spinach on the table. And though my son was at first unsure of those little clumps, now we understand what it means to eat them together. He may continue to ask questions about his grandfather, but from now on I can give answers that are more distinct. When we share the dish, a bit of our heritage spills over from me to him, as it might have spilled from my father had he lived longer.

If my son were to ask why my father began work on a cookbook, I would have no answer. Sometimes I think he hoped the project might reunite him with the recipes he left behind when he was sent to Britain as a teenager, as though they could bring him closer to a place, or people, he worried he had forgotten, or that had forgotten him, and subsequently closer to himself. It was, I think, an act of rekindling memory, and of rekindling self.

Now I wonder if for him to have displayed interest in his heritage sooner would have been to admit to a pining, a decades-long homesickness, and I begin to feel sadness for his period of exile, for what he was forced to give up: a life lived in the country of his birth. What can I do about that? Not much. Though the duty to know him better, to pass him on, remains — I feel that more strongly now than ever.

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