

Macedonia: Recipes and Stories from the Balkan

Katerina Nitsou

Oliver Fitzgerald, Photographer

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Katerina Nitsou's *Macedonia* is a vibrant introduction to a Balkan culture and cuisine that is "modest, simple, and honest."

Though there is a present-day country of North Macedonia, Nitsou's work identifies Macedonia as a larger region that covers the kingdom of Alexander the Great astride the Balkan Peninsula. It was later overlaid with fragmented borders fixed by eras of ethnic and political conquest. Nitsou describes the culture as unique in its blend of Mediterranean, Eastern Orthodox, and Ottoman influences, and grounded in strong connections to farming and foraging.

Meat was often a luxury ingredient in Macedonia, reserved for holidays or for selling in local markets, so these recipes center on vegetables and grains. Peppers are a special favorite; they show up roasted, stuffed, tucked into soups and stews, and blended with eggplants into Ajvar, a popular dip and condiment. Beans also feature into many recipes, including Tavche Gravche, the white bean stew that is Macedonia's national dish. Other flavors thrum throughout this "rustic and unassuming" cuisine, including lemon, cinnamon, mint, and garlic, which is used as a cure-all by Nitsou's relatives: "they amped it up any chance they could."

Birthdays, name days, and religious holidays call for serving more elaborate foods. Chapters on breads and satko (sweets) showcase the beautiful pull-apart braids of Pogacha, which is served at weddings, as well as savory and sweet coiled pastries stuffed with spiced feta and ricotta, and syrup-drenched baklava and Ravanija cake.

The clear recipes are introduced with bits of family and cultural background. Most are accompanied by instructive color photographs of the finished dish, while endearing photographs of Nitsou's family members, and others of Macedonian landmarks and its mountainous, sun-dappled landscape, are welcome additions to this personal interpretation of a distinctive culture.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (July / August 2021)

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