



THE ROAD HOME

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THE PLACES FROM THE ROAD

Two Days in Athens

Ten years in, we went back to the source. From a sesame koulouri at dawn to a supplier lunch in a 1920s grocer's down by the port, this is the road home.

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BACK IN GREECE, IN THE SHADOW OF THE ROCK

Athens is a little rough around the edges, and on the up. A city built on the history of the ancient gods, still carrying the scars of a hard economic stretch. The centre is trendy and edgy now, graffiti thick on the walls, the kind you would find in Shoreditch. A concrete jungle, then a glimpse of the Parthenon, the chiselled stone of the ancient world right against it. In between it all there is an old beauty, and a food and drink scene having a real revival, the units that sat empty for years finding new life.

We woke that morning genuinely excited, because we were about to meet some great people. Explore the city, the food, the drink, meet the suppliers, and absorb as much as we could, before hosting our own micro-producers' lunch a couple of days later.

THE MORNING



MOKKA · THE IBRIK SET INTO HOT SAND, EST. 1923

A normal Greek morning starts with a cigarette, a coffee, and if you are lucky a slice of bread with butter and honey. That was not for us. First stop was Artemis, out front of Takis, which just means Takis' bakery. He and his brother took it over from their father, a cornerstone of the neighbourhood. The koulouri is drier, a lot more sesame, something between a loaf and a cookie, with a tahini nuttiness that keeps you going back. The other standout is the tyropita, pure nostalgia: my school packed lunch was peanut butter and jelly, and I would swap it for a classmate's cheese pie every time.

Pastries eaten and Freddo cappuccinos drunk, we took the long way to the market, up around the foothills of the Parthenon. Evripidou Street is Athens' answer to the Spice Bazaar, less show and more purpose, herbs and spices and olives, the

smell changing every few doors. It runs into Varvakios, the big central hall, meat and fish under one roof.

Then a slow-down at Mokka, named for the old port in Yemen that shipped coffee to the world. Walk in and it is a temple of coffee, brass grinders working huge volumes of beans, the roast a shade darker than a UK one. One man works the ibrik, the copper pot set into hot sand for a gentle even heat. You know it is ready when it climbs and bubbles to the top. It arrived perfect, and does not need the sugar.

MIDDAY



PRIGKIPAS · PORK NECK, SKEWERS AND THE ROSÉ RETSINA

Still morning, and next was my favourite, bougatsa, at Makedonikon on the edge of Exarchia. A family bakery, father and son. We arrived at 11:30 and you could tell they had been up since the small hours, because granddad was already tucking into a Mythos. Here they open the pastry and dust the sugar inside. To my mind only the custard one earns the name bougatsa; the rest are tyropita, spanakopita, kreatopita.

A couple of blocks up, Prigkipas is a well-thought-through souvlaki shop, a hole in the wall that took the unit next door and turned the basement into a wine cellar. It is where we had rosé retsina for the first time. On souvlaki I am a

traditionalist: pork neck, charcoal, salt, oregano, a squeeze of lemon. This is the sort of place I love sharing with Alex. We both appreciate the same stuff, the food, the people, the care in the menus and the chairs and the decor. Head and shoulders above everywhere else.

One of our values is kefi, finding the joy in the everyday. It is right there in front of you here.

From there we walked up to the foothills of the Acropolis, not for food but to take stock, to rest with full bellies in the heat of the day. So much of how we do food comes straight from this, from what I grew up eating. The menu has been built for sharing from the start, because that is the culture I grew up in, where the food is simply put in the middle for everyone.

THE NIGHT

We ate dinner at Ouzeri Lesvos, one of the most characterful rooms in the city, with Nicholas from Roots, a friend and London supplier who makes Greek spirits. His advice: there are no rules. It is a circle, the more ouzo or tsipouro you drink the hungrier you get, so you eat a little more, and round it goes. Two highlights, the bakaliaros pastourma, salt fish cured with fenugreek, garlic and paprika, and red mullet under grated tomato seared down. It left us wanting more, so we ordered more.

Then to Bar in Front of the Bar. When the founders were doing up their bar they set a pop-up out front while the work went on inside, and it worked so well they kept it. Signage all tongue in cheek, slogans like "we serve humans here." I had a banana piña colada that tasted exactly like it sounds but ten times better, the kind of thing you would imagine at Willy Wonka's, or in Greece, crafted by the god of wine himself. The Athens bars see each other as peers, a cluster of the world's best in one city, lifting each other up. Bars here are an extension of the living room, unlike anywhere else in the world.



OIDIKON, PIRAEUS, FOUNDED 1920 · TEN SUPPLIERS, THEIR PRODUCE COOKED AND SERVED BACK TO THEM

THE LUNCH · OIDIKON

Day Two started early. We were up with the morning and back to Varvakios first, the last bits of the shop, the freshest Cretan veg, and the prawns off the ice that would go into Aleppo butter a few hours later. Then the rush across town to Piraeus, to Oidikon, where the whole Athens chapter was waiting to close. There was no better room to close it in. Oidikon sits on a corner in Piraeus, the old port that carries you out to the rest of Greece and the islands, and it looks like it has barely changed since the 1920s. Half supermarket, half restaurant: years ago you came to a place like this, filled your own bottles, took it home, or sat in and stayed a while. A cornerstone of the neighbourhood. Upstairs, a kitchen small and mighty, four gas stoves, a fridge from the 1920s still running, a resident musician.

The idea was simple and a bit cheeky. Take the produce these people have spent their lives making and, forgive the word, bastardise it, cook it the way we cook, and hand it back on a plate they would never have made themselves. Almost everything on the table came from someone sitting at it. Manousos's Galomyzithra and Staka butter, Chelmos's feta, Nineli's kataifi, Kontogiannis's raisins, Moutevelis's sausage, Corné's tsourekis, the prawns from the market that morning, Kokotos and Mylonas poured alongside the Kamara macerations.

The food world is a lonely one. Everyone works on their own, making one product as good as it can be, year after year. Many sell to Brother Marcus but never see where it ends up. This was a chance to give something back, and to show them what happens to the thing they have poured decades into. The highlight was cooking with Apostolos, the

owner, hovering over my shoulder like a vulture, asking the whole time. Why do you use this. How are you using our Staka butter from Crete. Nothing was wasted.

When it was done they took us to the basement, a guitar and a glass of wine and the resident musician playing Zorba the Greek among the barrels. Then Stefanos vanished for forty-five minutes: Apostolos had put him in the car and driven him round Piraeus, on the phone the whole way, lining people up door to door so he could pull in, hear the story, collect a sample, and move on. That is Maltby & Greek in one journey. He came back with kaimaki ice cream, made with lotus root for that chewy pull, a flavour that for any Greek is childhood. We arrived as strangers and left as friends. That is the whole of the road home in one room. Then we packed our things, got in a taxi, and started the long road home.



The Editor's Cut

The places that did not make the film, and the ones we go back to. We know Athens well; this is the short version of what we love.

THE BARS

Playful, surprising cocktails, and the best places deliberately hard to find. Half the fun is tracking them down.

The Clumsies. The most awarded bar in the city and a decade on the World's 50 Best list. Coffee by day, serious cocktails by night. Ask about the Aegean Negroni.

Barro Negro. Athens' first tequila and mezcal bar in Monastiraki, a hundred-plus agave Negros and a team who know their Go for the tasting.

Baba Au Rum. A neighbourhood rum bar quietly among the world's best for years. Round the corner from The Clumsies.

Line. The Clumsies' grown-up sister in Kato Petralona, a former art gallery, everything made from scratch. Worth the trip out.

Taratsa. The rooftop, and the sunset spot. Get there for 17:30 as the Acropolis turns gold. Arrive as tourists, leave feeling like locals.

THE NEO-TAVERNAS

Where Athens makes its case as a top food city. Do these and you will mark it down as a serious foodie destination.

Manári. One of Ari Vezené's places. Go for the off-menu kokoretsi and the bone broth pasta. The tomato dish is to die for.

Akra. The kitchen lines the walls. The tables sit in the middle, and the chefs serve you. A bakery on the mezzanine. Knockout brunch.

Pharaoh. Probably my favourite. Design, music, food and hospitality coming together, all the more striking for being in Exarchia. Open fire, hi-fi sound.

Linou Soumpasis. Part candle shop, part restaurant. Stainless steel against terrazzo, open kitchens, bright light. Right in the middle of the action.