

A Good Easter Dinner Could Be Greek To You

The perennial question facing me each spring is what to fix for Easter dinner. Although I'm not a religious person, any excuse for a feast works for me, particularly one celebrating the end of winter.

I grew up in a largely Protestant society, so I generally celebrate spring on the Protestant/Catholic Easter Sunday. Over the years, however, I've made traditional spring feasts from Russia, Spain, Ireland, England and even India.

This year, the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant/Catholic Easters happen to fall on the same date — April 4. So it seemed a perfect occasion to celebrate the turning of the season with a Greek Easter meal.

Additionally, the Christian Easter is most likely derived from the ancient Greek festival of Dionysia and the Roman festival of Liberalia. As the Christian faith spread north, it found spring festivals in the native faiths of the Gaels, Celts and Goths, and absorbed them as well. In fact, these festivals share a place with Holi, a Hindu spring festival, the Sikh harvest festival of Baisakhi, May Day and the various celebrations of the spring equinox. And almost all of these festivals share a tradition of holiday feasting.

After the long dark winter, at last food starts to become plentiful again. Asparagus sprouts (the Greeks and Romans adored asparagus), and further north, rhubarb appears. Wild mushrooms are in season, the first baby greens arrive, and herbs send out fresh shoots. Furthermore, it's the birthing season, with many species' gestation periods timed to take advantage of the warming weather — including sheep. In Greece, this means spring lamb.

Spring lambs typically weigh 10 to 15 pounds when prepared for cooking, and in Greece they are often spit-roasted whole. Eggs also are an Easter tradition, as many cultures regard eggs as a symbol of rebirth and renewal. For example, the egg is a symbol of Christ's resurrection. While in the West we have Easter egg hunts, in the Eastern Orthodox tradition, eggs are often religiously linked to the Easter feast, frequently in conjunction with bread, another symbol of rebirth. The Greeks are also fond of lemons, a late winter/early spring fruit.

So I incorporate some of these into my Greek Easter meal. I begin with tsoureki, a sweet Greek bread that not only makes a wonderful breakfast bread but also a nice dessert when paired with cheese and fruit. Next comes chicken soup thickened with avgolemono, a mixture of egg and lemon juice. Lamb goes without saying, and without access to genuine spring lamb or the equipment for spit-roasting, a leg is the obvious choice. The aspara-



gus topped with dilled garlic mayonnaise may not be traditional, but it is decidedly Greek at heart.

Whether you celebrate Christ's rebirth or the spirit of Dionysia, both ancient traditions provide a good answer to what to put on the Easter table.

Tsoureki Paschalino (Easter Bread)

The red eggs symbolize the blood of Christ. Traditionally, the dye is made from the skins of yellow onions (yes, the brown skins produce genuinely red eggs). Because the recipe calls for the skins of a dozen or so onions, I settled for Easter egg dye. If the eggs are dyed raw, they'll be edible when the bread is done. You can skip the dyed eggs entirely, but I love their festive appearance. The loaves are usually shaped, rather than made in loaf pans, and make a great bread for Easter breakfast.

Makes 2 loaves
6 to 7 cups all-purpose flour
1/4 cup sugar
1 package instant yeast
1 teaspoon salt
Zest of 2 large oranges
1/4 teaspoon nutmeg
1/4 teaspoon cinnamon
1 cup whole milk, warmed to room temperature
1 stick (1/2 cup) unsalted butter, melted

3 large eggs, beaten slightly
2 tablespoons fresh orange juice
1 teaspoon vanilla
1 medium egg, lightly beaten with 1 tablespoon water added

In a large mixing bowl, thoroughly combine 6 cups flour, sugar, yeast, salt, zest, nutmeg and cinnamon.

In another large bowl or the bowl of a stand mixer, combine milk, butter, eggs, orange juice and vanilla. Add flour mixture and combine well using a large spoon or the paddle attachment on the stand mixer.

If mixing by hand, scoop dough out onto a well-floured surface and knead for at least 15 minutes.

If using a stand mixer, swap to the dough hook. Knead for at least 10 minutes at medium speed, adding more flour as needed to keep the dough from be-

coming too sticky, although it will be somewhat tacky if kneaded in a mixer. Scoop dough onto a lightly floured surface.

Form dough into a ball by folding edges into the center, turning over and forcing into a ball shape using your palms and fingers to shape.

Clean and dry the largest bowl, then spray lightly with cooking spray. Place dough, seam-side down, in bowl and spray top lightly with oil. Cover bowl with plastic wrap and let rise until doubled in bulk — 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

Once the dough has risen, punch it down and scoop onto a lightly floured surface. Knead by hand for 3 to 5 minutes. Divide in half, cover and let rest for 15 minutes.

Shape half the dough into a rope 24 inches long, fold in half and braid. Repeat with remaining dough. If you wish, place red-dyed, uncooked egg in center of the fold before braiding. They'll end up perfectly hard-cooked but difficult to peel.

Place the loaves on a greased cookie sheet or baking pan, spritz lightly with oil, and cover with plastic. Let rise until doubled in bulk, 1 1/2 to 2 hours. Thirty to 45 minutes before dough has completely risen, heat oven to 350 degrees.

Make an egg wash using 1 beaten egg and 1 tablespoon of water. Brush loaf with the wash. Bake for 30 minutes until golden brown. You can tell the bread is done in the center by tapping the top of the loaf. If it sounds hollow, the loaf is finished. Cool on a rack.

Kotosoupa Avgolemono (Chicken And Rice Soup With Egg And Lemon)

This soup is a common feature at Greek Easters as well as other feasts. Avgolemono is a traditional sauce made of lemon and egg. It requires some attention to make because the acid in the lemons can make the eggs curdle, as can the heat of the soup. So limber up your whisking arm before you begin, and prepare for some of the best chicken soup you've ever eaten.

Serves 6 as a soup course
4 lemons
4 cups chicken stock or broth
1 teaspoon dried oregano
Salt and pepper to taste
2 boneless, skinless chicken thighs, cut into 1-inch dice

1 large carrot, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch rounds

1/2 celery stalk, cut into 1/4-inch lengths

1/4 cup long- or medium-grain rice

1 large egg

2 tablespoons minced fresh mint

Zest and juice 1 lemon. Then combine in a soup pot with chicken stock, oregano and salt and pepper to taste. Bring to a medium simmer and add diced chicken. Cook for 20 minutes, but do not boil. Remove chicken from stock and reserve.

Increase heat to a vigorous simmer. Add carrots and celery to stock and cook 10 minutes. Add rice and cook another 15 minutes. Remove from heat and allow to cool for about 10 minutes.

Whip egg in a small bowl then beat in the juice of 1 lemon. Gradually beat in 2 cups of soup liquid, being careful not to overheat and curdle the eggs. (It's a good idea to use an electric mixer.) Return soup to medium-low heat and vigorously whisk in egg mixture. Continue cooking — being careful not to boil — until soup is somewhat thickened and creamy. Stir in mint and serve immediately with remaining 2 lemons cut into wedges.

The soup can be kept refrigerated for a day or two and then reheated gradually, again taking great care not to boil.

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