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## No feeling for food

### **Abstract**

There is a saying that a bony hen makes a good broth and this was the hope Katina and Eleni clung to as they stood in the steaming laundry plucking chickens. But Vassili's bargain birds looked so much worse without their feathers, it seemed a vain hope that these runty creatures would yield anything edible. 'We could try an avgholemono,' said Katina when she saw the despairing look on Eleni's face. 'My God, Katina, we would need a bigger miracle than the marriage at Cana.' She picked up a chicken by its neck. The goosy flesh swung limp and pallid. 'Let's simmer them for a couple of hours to see what kind of a broth they'll make.'

ZENY GILES

## No Feeling For Food

From a work-in-progress. The setting is a Sydney suburb in 1936.

There is a saying that a bony hen makes a good broth and this was the hope Katina and Eleni clung to as they stood in the steaming laundry plucking chickens. But Vassili's bargain birds looked so much worse without their feathers, it seemed a vain hope that these runty creatures would yield anything edible.

'We could try an *avgholemono*,' said Katina when she saw the despairing look on Eleni's face.

'My God, Katina, we would need a bigger miracle than the marriage at Cana.' She picked up a chicken by its neck. The goosy flesh swung limp and pallid.

'Let's simmer them for a couple of hours to see what kind of a broth they'll make.'

The women were exhausted. They'd been plucking since Vassili had slaughtered the fifteen birds that morning. He had waited till the children were out of the way. Eleni had insisted on that. She had also insisted he dispose of the remaining nine with a friend of his who kept hens.

Katina put four of the birds into one of the big saucepans. 'They're so small. I'll put an extra one in and set them to boil. At least we'll know what we're dealing with.'

'Look how swollen my ankles are,' Eleni said to her sister. 'Vassili has no idea the work there is in plucking. Nor does Father. I don't suppose either of them have ever plucked a chicken in their lives.'

'At least they do the slaughtering.'

'That's over in ten minutes, Katina. Look at us. Hands raw from the water and don't tell me your back isn't aching? And you'll be a lot more tired before we've finished this lot. It's the same with making babies,' she went on. 'A few minutes work on their part and we're left carrying the load.'

Katina smiled. She had never heard Eleni speak like this before. 'Well let's hope we're not going to be stuck here week after week plucking chooks. That would be worse than being pregnant.'

'You're fortunate to have escaped so long, Katina. By the time I'd been married ten months I had a baby to care for.'

'I suppose I am lucky.'

'There's nothing wrong between you and Yianni?'

Katina didn't know what to say. Perhaps when they had finished this work and the betrothal party was out of the way, it would be easier then to tell her sister.

Eleni kept on testing the broth. 'There's no strength in it at all. What kind of soup is this going to make?'

‘You know it’s bad luck to keep lifting the lid. Why don’t you go and rest for an hour? It’s going to be a long day, Eleni, and there’ll be no peace once the children are home.’

Katina had set out the ingredients for *kourambyedhes* on the big table. They were Andreas’ favourites and it wouldn’t hurt to have some extras even though the *simbetheri* were responsible for the sweets. Much as she had lectured Eleni, she could not refrain from leaving her work at the table to check again on the broth. Was she imagining it? The liquid looked richer. Certainly little seeds of fat were forming. By the time Eleni was up and had looked again, the broth had changed colour.

*Panaghia mou*, Katina,’ she said when she had tasted it. ‘The old timers have made an excellent broth. There’s so much here, I’ll make some *avgholemono* for us tonight.’

But when they lifted one of the birds out of the steaming liquid, the flesh had darkened to an unappetising grey-brown. ‘The rest of the chickens will need to be *kokkinisto*’, said Katina. ‘At least the *salsa* will hide the colour of the flesh. And if the broth is good, the *kokkinisto* will be tasty too.’

Katina began chopping up the chickens into portions, frying them in butter and placing them in a big saucepan with tomato paste and seasoning. By the time Eleni set out to bring Philipos from school, they had two big saucepans. One ready with broth, the other with the slowly stewing *kokkinisto*.

‘And while you’re away,’ said Katina. ‘I’m going to set another five chickens stewing.’ She had just fried the last of the pieces and was collecting the last of the juice in the pan, when Andreas came in.

‘What a surprise’, she said to him, pouring the dark red liquid into the saucepan then turning to give him a kiss. ‘You can bring the *nifi* and all the guests, Andreas. Your sisters have managed to transform tired old chooks into a gourmet dish.’

‘Katina, I’ve got to talk to you.’

‘Two weeks I’ve been sitting here looking for things to do and you come two days before the betrothal. I’ll tell you what.’ She took him over to the table where she had the unshelled almonds. ‘You can crack some nuts for me.’

He picked up the nut cracker, then put it down again. ‘I’m glad you’re here by yourself, Katina. There’s something I have to tell you.’

But Katina was too busy to notice his agitation. ‘Just a minute, Andreas,’ and she ran back to the stove. ‘Sometimes the chicken catches at the bottom of the saucepan and burns.’ She lifted the lid and stirred the mixture with a long spoon. Then she sipped a little to check the seasoning. He was standing next to her now in the kitchen. ‘Mmm, it’s good. Just taste this, Andreas.’

He took the spoon and flung it onto the bench. The rich gravy splattered on the terrazo. ‘Will you listen to me?’ he said, shaking her. ‘There isn’t going to be a party.’

Katina looked at him blankly.

‘I can’t go on with this engagement. I don’t want to go on.’

‘The invitations, the *mezedhes*, the sweets.’ She said the words as if reminding herself of a shopping list. Then she pointed to the two big pots simmering on the stove and her voice grew shrill. ‘Andreas, what about the chickens?’

‘To hell with the chickens. I can’t go on.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘It seemed what everybody wanted. Father was pleased. Eleni was pleased. but I cant go on with it.’

Katina had to sit down. Her words were as limp as her body. ‘They’re going to be so angry Andreas.’

‘I’m not going to wreck my life because of some invitations and a few chickens.’

‘What about Father?’ She looked hard at Andreas, making him meet her eyes. ‘You know how much it will upset him.’

‘He’s an old man, Katina.’

‘You told me how much it meant to Father to see us all settled before he died.’ This was an accusation; a statement of her own resentment but even as she said the words she forced them to change direction. ‘And you were right Andreas. Look how happy he is to have me married.’

‘And are you happy Katina? No, don’t turn away.’

‘If I wasn’t so far from the family, I’d be happy. It won’t be like that for you Andreas. You’ll be here in Sydney.’

‘I don’t love Filia.’

‘And what has love to do with a *proxenia*?’ She couldn’t resist giving him back his own words.

‘I can’t go on with the betrothal now. I saw her last night and I promised her I wouldn’t go ahead.’

Her brother was talking in riddles. ‘Why should Filia want the betrothal called off?’

‘Not Filia. Another girl. I love another girl.’

‘You love another girl and you agreed to the *proxenia* with Filia?’

‘If you could meet her, Katina. If you could speak to Joyce, you’d know why I can’t give her up.’

‘This girl’s an *Afstraleza*?’

‘I tried to do what they expected but I can’t Katina. I told Joyce last night that I’m going to marry her. I know they’re not going to understand.’

‘Have you said anything to Filia?’

‘I’m going to see her now. Will you speak to Eleni and Father for me?’

‘No, Andreas. You’ve got to tell them yourself.’

She could see the fear in his eyes. He got up and walked towards the door. Then on an impulse he came back and sat down facing her. ‘If you could meet her, Katie, you’d see what a wonderful girl she is.’

Katina was growing more and more impatient. ‘How on earth could this girl come here?’

‘She might visit you in Queensland. You could teach her things. She’s eager to learn, Katina. Some of the Greek meals — the simplest ones to start with.’

‘For God’s sake Andreas, are you mad?’ How could her brother be so stupid, so unrealistic? ‘You haven’t begun to see what it’s going to mean for all of us.’

\* \* \* \* \*

Manoli Papadopoulos roared his rage throughout the house.

Eleni who was making *avgholemono* when she found out, was so startled she forgot to add the broth slowly to the beaten egg and the mixture curdled.

Vassili was tight-lipped until he saw the soup. ‘Why in the name of God didn’t your brother decide last week that he wanted to break the engagement. Never in my life have I eaten a curdled soup and I don’t intend to start now. He got up and left the house. Eleni ran crying to the bedroom.’

Katina told the children to play outside while she went to her father.

‘Ah Katina, Katina,’ he said to her. He was sitting in an armchair in the lounge room and had refused to eat all day. ‘At least my daughters have not given me such pain. At least I have lived to see you both settled with good providers.’

Katina winced, remembering her resolve.

‘This brother of yours, the only son who should have been my joy. This son will kill me.’

Katina tried to reason with him. ‘Isn’t it better that the break should happen before the prayers and the exchanging of the rings? If he has doubts then it is best he should speak now.’

‘The devil take his doubts! Why didn’t he speak a month ago — before the meetings with the girl’s family, before the marketing and the cooking. Now the shame, the waste.’

Manoli stood up and leaned against Katina. ‘I want my bed. Take me to my bed. And don’t bring me anything to eat, Daughter. I have finished with eating.’ Then with a sudden burst of energy he shouted, ‘Tell your brother to keep out of my sight. I don’t want to see him ever again.’

#### ONE YEAR LATER

Andreas had said that the only thing he wanted was to be reconciled with his father. Nothing else mattered. Joyce’s coarse expressions, her smoking, her extravagance, her inability to do the washing without getting the coloureds running into the whites. All these he would put up with as long as he was brought back to the bosom of the family.

But it was only a week later, exactly a week after the meeting of reconciliation that there was an argument between the young couple, so serious, it threatened to break up the marriage.

Joyce had no feeling for food. He knew that. It was no wonder. Beryl’s meals were impossible to eat — her roasts tough and covered with gravy, the vegetables

boiled lifeless. So the girl had had no training. Or Beryl would buy cooked meats from the shop, not noticing the cardboard dryness of the corned beef or the rubbery taste of the ready-cut sandwich ham. And neither Joyce nor her mother had any idea how to make a good salad. They'd use dry lettuce leaves and tasteless tomatoes, sour wrinkled cucumbers and over-sweet corn and beetroot from a tin. He took Joyce to the greengrocer's trying to point out the beauty of a fresh lettuce, tomatoes which smelt like tomatoes, cucumbers so freshly cut they didn't need peeling. He showed her how to cook vegetables with the barest amount of water and only long enough to heighten the colour of the greens, leaving the cauli, the beans, the peas, crispy and full of flavour. He went with her to the butcher's and pointed out the best cuts of meat. He showed her how to pan-fry at high temperatures to seal in the juices. She didn't seem able to follow any of this, so now, since she had been suffering with morning sickness, he had taken over the evening meal to save her being upset by the smell of the cooking. It was a grand gesture and it seemed to please her. It pleased him too because in fifteen minutes he could manage to serve up steak and chips and a delicious salad with an oil and lemon dressing. He missed the Greek recipes but he intended to consult with Eleni to find out how he might add them to the menu. For the present, his scheme was working very well.

Andreas was particularly fussy when buying meat. He usually settled on middle-cut rump or sirloin if he could be sure it wouldn't be tough. Fillet steak he avoided because it was just too expensive and tended to be lacking in flavour. But yesterday the butcher had told him that he had a piece of scotch fillet that combined tenderness and taste. 'The general customer wouldn't appreciate it but I knew this was the meat for you, Mr. Papadopoulos. One word of advice, though', the butcher added. 'Rare is my advice, medium-rare at the most or the fillet will be wasted.'

All the next day, Andreas had been thinking about dinner. He'd already decided on new potatoes in their skins, a Greek salad and some fried tomatoes, not in the pan with the steak but cooked afterwards in the juices. He would put the potatoes on as soon as he got home, would make the salad and then, in the last three minutes would pan-fry the fillet steak in butter. He had changed his mind about the tomatoes. He would simply pour the juice of the meat and the browned butter straight onto the steak and the little potatoes. Andreas had purposely not eaten lunch so he would have a worthy *orexi* for this meal.

As soon as he stepped into the foyer of their building, he knew there was something wrong. It was like the smell of boarding houses; the heavy farty smell of overcooked cabbage mixing with an acrid burning. He ran to the door of their flat, fearing what he would find and there was Joyce, in one of her dresses with a waist, wearing high heels and stockings. The table was carefully set with a good tablecloth and a bowl of flowers in the middle. Her face was flushed. 'I've done it all Andy. You only have to sit down for me to serve it up to you.'

She didn't notice his shocked face, his rush to the kitchen. 'Joyce,' he said, still hoping. 'You've at least left the steak for me to cook haven't you?'

'Nothing,' she said breathless. 'There's nothing for you to do. You sit down and I'll serve it up as if you're in a restaurant. It's all ready, I've even dished it out.'

From the oven she took the two plates. The limp cauliflower, the ugly lump of mashed potato he could have borne but he could not look at what she had done to that prime piece of scotch fillet. It lay, charred and shrunken in the plate and right before his eyes, she poured a thick orange-brown sauce over the meat, explaining, 'Gravox, so the meat will be juicy, the way you like it.'

Andreas could not speak. He made a tortured sign of the cross as he gasped, '*Christe mou*', Then he began slowly to beat his head against the wall.

For some minutes Joyce could not take in what was happening. Then, it was as if her whole proud body was convulsed. She stumbled, kicking off a shoe and fell back hard into one of the lounge chairs. Her head jolted, her legs were thrown apart, the belt around her waist burst and her placket, held together with a safety pin, came apart. With this last indignity, she sagged into the chair and began to sob as if she would never be comforted.

No feeling man could have ignored the sound of her weeping. He went to her. He tried to take her in his arms but she would not let him. She was gulping for air, so desperate was her distress. 'I wanted to surprise you. I only wanted to surprise you.'

He patted her hair, he stroked her back, he brought her water then brandy to drink. Slowly her sobbing began to ease. For a moment it crossed his mind that there was only one way to end her suffering. He must take the plate from where she left it near the stove and he must eat the limp cauliflower, the grey potato, the charred meat in its sea of Gravox. But that feat of love was beyond him. The best he could do was to undress her, sponge her face and hands with a warm flannel and let her cry herself to sleep in his arms in the bed.

## *Avgholemono (Egg and Lemon Soup)*

*My mother would make Avgholemono for us when we had colds and sore throats. She believed it was therapeutic: the lemon soothing the throat and the egg and chicken stock giving a boost to our protein intake.*

*I also associate this soup with the fear of not reaching my mother's standard in the kitchen. At no time was her rigour tighter than in the making of avgholemono. I was ordered to help but the danger of making the soup curdle was so great that I took that fear with me when I began to cook the soup myself. I trembled as I beat the whites, as I added the yolks, and particularly when the lemon was added. Now I know that none of these early stages contributes to the possibility of the soup curdling. The danger lies when the hot broth meets the egg and lemon mixture. This is the time when there might be a separation of the ingredients and the desired creaminess lost. The soup is still edible but loses the smooth consistency which works so well with the tartness of the lemon. I still approach the preparation of avgholemono with caution but that does not stop me making it, especially for ailing children, grandchildren and friends.*

*The best story I've heard about avgholemono occurred when one of my Greek friends revealed to her mother, who was in the process of making avgholemono, that she intended to marry a man who was not a Greek Australian. The mother was so thrown by the news of a possible mixed marriage she failed to stir steadily and the soup curdled.*

*The broth for the Easter avgholemono called mayerista, is traditionally made from the intestine of the Easter lamb but in our family we kept to chicken broth. When I was growing up, chickens were bought in pairs and slaughtered in the backyard. I don't think it's just nostalgia that makes me believe that those chickens and their accompanying giblets produced a much tastier avgholemono than the broth from frozen chooks or even some of the free-range varieties we buy today.*

### *INGREDIENTS*

*1 chicken (a mature bird makes a better broth but the flesh may be tough)  
approximately 5 to 6 cups of broth  
half cup of short-grain rice  
salt and pepper to taste  
3 eggs, yolks and whites separated  
juice of 1 good-sized lemon. 2 lemons for increased tartness*

### *METHOD*

*1. Boil chicken well to make a strong broth, removing any brown scum that appears during the cooking. Take chicken from pot.*

2. *Add rice and salt to the broth. Bring to the boil again and simmer until the rice is well cooked (approx 20 minutes).*
3. *In a deep mixing bowl, beat egg whites until they are stiff.*
4. *Add yolks and beat until creamy.*
5. *Gradually beat in the lemon juice.*
6. *Now, the tricky bit: preferably with some assistance, take care to keep beating the mixture in the bowl while the helper ladles small quantities of the hot ricey broth into the bowl.*
7. *When the bowl is almost full, return the warm egg and lemon mixture into the saucepan, making sure to stir steadily.*
8. *Add salt and pepper to taste.*

*Serve with crusty bread, olives and fetta cheese.*

*Left-over soup needs to be heated gradually and stirred. Do not bring to the boil.*