

Greco-Roman New York Cheesecake

To Adara, Cato's cheesecake was still an absurdity. But Art would not accept her melopita. When she argued that it was better than Cato's recipe, Art said, "So make this one better. It takes a Greek to fix a Roman recipe."

This argument appealed to her.

She found a copy of Cato's book that had been translated into Modern Greek, or as she insisted, "the original Greek." But even in Greek the recipe was difficult to read. And how fortuitous that this edition skipped Cato's invectives against the Greeks and the Greek language.

"Metrokoites!" muttered Adara as she stared at the infuriating recipe. It was a word she did not use often, never publicly, because it was disrespectful to mothers. But after studying

Cato's recipe a little longer, she added a worse word that is disrespectful to goats.

Most New Yorkers might have thought the challenge was for her to make something as good as the traditional New York cheesecake. For Adara, the challenge was to be as good as her next-door neighbors' Sicilian cheesecake. But it quickly became clear that Cato wasn't competing.

He called it "placenta" and optimistically began, "Make placenta this way." Beyond this plain language almost nothing was clear. Emmer groats are soaked and mixed with "bread-wheat" flour to make a dough called "tracta." Then a cheese is made from curdling and draining sheep milk and mixing it with honey. So it was sweet? How much honey? Was this a dessert or a savory dish? Not a dessert, Adara decided. Not too much honey. Sicilians would have made it a dessert, but Romans? No. A savory side dish.

Time for the tracta—still not clear what it was. Cato said to roll it into sheets that were then dried in a basket. Metrokoites!

Oiled sheets of the tracta were to be layered with the sweet cheese over a base made of moistened flour set over oiled bay leaves. This was then covered with a heated crock, and cooked—over hot coals? "Be sure to cook it well and slowly." So is it grilled? Griddled? Broiled? Roasted? What would cooking it "well" be like? Isn't it all going to dry up? Still don't know what the tracta is.

She eventually realized that she could accomplish the whole process, soaking the emmer groats and all, by using a whole-wheat flour. After all, they were in America now. She mixed the flour with water and kneaded it with her bare hands until she had dough she could almost roll out. It was not very good

dough, neither soft nor elastic. She kneaded it some more. Then, since she was in America, she tried again with an electric mixer for another hour. It was still not workable, so she added two eggs. This Roman had forgotten the eggs.

Then, as instructed, she rolled it out, dried it on racks, laid out the sheets of dough with a layer of cheese between them, and put it in the oven. She baked it at a low heat hoping it would be easier on the dough, but it came out tough—a brittle, unpleasant crust. This was not cooked well.

Then she realized the key that would unlock the recipe. Cato, like most men, needed a little help. This is why she, not Mario, had been given the cheesecake recipe. How many cheesecakes had Cato baked? Did he know how to bake at all? Probably not. A Roman man could only be rescued by a Greek woman. Since she was nowhere near Cato's grave, there was no way to know how disturbed his ghost might have been by this conclusion.

This time, after drying the tracta for a few hours, she submerged it in boiling water, but only for two minutes. This was still not right. She tried rolling the tracta much more thinly, and then only boiling for one and a half minutes. Of course she used goat milk, not sheep, which had been an obvious Roman mistake. Romans always overlooked their goats and fawned over sheep, a dumber, less gregarious companion, easy to rule. Romans sought conquest, not community. Adara curdled goat milk and drained it.

Cato called for bay leaf but, of course, bay leaf is inedible. Fennel. This recipe, whether it knew it or not, cried out for fennel. Wild fennel with yellow blossoms had grown uninhibited on her rocky native island. She grabbed a few bulbs from the walk-in refrigerator and finely minced them, then

sautéed them, only for seconds, in hot olive oil. Then she poured anisette in the pan while it was hot and set it on fire. This mixture was blended into the cheese with a little freshly ground black pepper. She laid out a sheet of tracta and covered it with her cheese mixture, much lighter on honey than Cato's, then added two more layers. Cato said to place a final layer of tracta on top, which, of course, would dry out in baking. Instead, she grated on top a goat cheese that had been aged for six months.

Twenty minutes in a moderate oven was just enough to bake it together and melt the cheese. She carefully plucked oregano leaves from their stems and chopped the leaves from the ends of celery ribs. This mixture too was quickly tossed in hot oil and removed with a strainer in seconds, after the leaves had popped bright and crisp. She strained these bright emeralds and scattered them on the top of the cake. Cato said that the finished cake should be glazed in honey. Adara thought this was a terrible idea that would turn it into "a horrible sticky thing like some Turk might make." She looked at her confection like a painter deciding if a work is complete. It was. But Art, rather than admiring her work, wanted to add something. Adara feared it would be honey, but Art said, "What about the truffle oil?" It had to be a light touch, so Adara put the oil in an atomizer and misted the top for just the slightest scent.

Adara thought this cake was far too beautiful to be sliced. That night, she ordered twenty-four four-inch springform pans. She would make individual emerald-sparkling cakes—Cato's cheesecake, as their menu said, the oldest known recipe in the world. Art thought reviewers would like this deep sense of history. He also thought New Yorkers would like this deep sense of cheesecake. Niki and Adara thought

the little cakes were beautiful. Art thought there was a scent of truffles.

One final touch before opening the new restaurant: That lady, Ruth Arnstein, had to stop feeding pigeons out front. Adara thought pigeons were harbingers of bad fortune; Niki thought they would attract raccoons. Art didn't mind the pigeons but he thought Ruth was a bad look—this heavyset woman with the bun of dyed auburn hair and the large Zabar's bag standing in front of their establishment. First they sent out Niki who, with his pleasant smile, told Ruth she had to stop because she was attracting raccoons. As he went back inside, Ruth stood where she was, contemplating this. She had never seen a raccoon and assumed this must be some kind of Greek myth.

Then out came Art, a man who always looked like he meant business because, in reality, he did. Ruth was not afraid of Art, even though he was now her landlord. He had bought her building, halfway down the other side of Eighty-Sixth, from an old-time retiring landlord who, according to Art, had no vision. Given her marginal income, Art could never raise Ruth's rent. Though she thought the neighborhood was losing its charm, "filling up with a bunch of pishers," she was never going to leave, even though she distrusted her new neighbors—people who were not New Yorkers, coming in from that vast wilderness known as "out of town." According to Ruth, they were Republicans, ate too much mayonnaise on everything, and were secretly anti-Semites.

She had only left New York City once and never would again. She had visited a friend's summer home upstate as a teenager. While there, a twelve-year-old boy had been struck by lightning and killed. It was said that he was struck because

he was in an open field with no tall trees or buildings to draw the electricity away. That was when Ruth realized that Manhattan was the only safe place to be. She would just avoid neighborhood rooftop parties. She gained further evidence that “out-of-town” was unsafe when Leonard, her husband, was killed by a truck in a rental car on the Long Island Expressway. Leonard had been a wholesaler of asparagus and artichokes. Ruth never understood why anyone would wholesale only these two vegetables, but he had earned a satisfactory living for her and their daughter, Sarah. It did not take a huge income in the neighborhood to get by in those days and there was a whole community, a *landsleit*, Ruth used to call it, of middle-income people supporting each other there. After Leonard died, Ruth was safe because he had left enough money for her to live simply in a rent-stabilized apartment. Sarah had married a television producer and was well taken care of, so Ruth had nothing to fear from this Greek.

Art told Ruth that he did not want her feeding the birds in front of his restaurant. Before walking away she said, “I know you are all excited about this new thing you’re doing, but you are going to find that some birds are just here to stay.”