

Bougatsa is a Greek breakfast worth waking for

This custard-filled treat, which dates back to the time of the Byzantine Empire, is a delicious slice of Athens life

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Most Greeks have coffee and cigarettes for breakfast,” says my guide Katerina Lolou, who is taking me on a food tour around Athens. “What about Greek yoghurt with honey?” I enquire. She finds the very notion hilarious; “we will think of ten other things before considering yoghurt for breakfast,” she says. And one of those things is *bougatsa*, a filo pastry stuffed with mildly sweet semolina custard that I grew obsessed with during my week-long Greek holiday.

Before visiting Greece, I was only aware of *spanakopita*, the spinach and feta stuffed filo pie that is perhaps one of the most well-known Greek foods. But I discovered very quickly that the Greeks have taken the art of stuffed filo pastry pies to another level. We begin the tour at Creme Royale, a bakery-cafe on Athinas, one of the streets that leads off the central Mona-

stiraki Square. Its display case is filled with freshly baked pies like *spanakopita*, *kotopita* (chicken and cheese pie), and savoury *bougatsa* with minced meat filling. The night before, I had tried a slice of *galaktoboureko*, another custard-filled filo pie doused with sugar syrup. It was delicious, of course, but a bit too sweet for my taste. What I’m most keen to sample is the traditional *bougatsa me crema*.

The origin of *bougatsa* goes back to the Byzantine Empire, which shaped the culture, identity, and food of the Eastern Roman Empire. In 330 AD, the emperor Constantine moved his capital from Rome to the ancient Greek city of Byzantium (or Byzantium) and renamed it Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul). The Ottoman Turks took Constantinople in the 15th century, bringing with them their *pogatsa* or pie filled with cheese. It eventually evolved into a thinly rolled filo pastry with assorted fillings. When Greek refugees from Turkey arrived in Greece in the 1920s, they brought this centuries-old pie baking tradition to the northern parts of the country, particularly to cities like Thessaloniki and Serres, and later across Greece. Today, *bougatsa* is not just a breakfast but a piece of living history. You’ll find it in humble bakeries and upscale cafés alike, eaten by students rushing to class and retirees lingering



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over rich, velvety Greek coffee—each bite a reminder of its layered past.

“The name *bougatsa* comes from *pogatsa*, which in turn comes from the ancient Roman word for what we know today as focaccia,” says Katerina. She then goes on to explain how the *bougatsa* is

made. Essentially, there are two parts to it — the creamy semolina custard filling and the filo (or phyllo) pastry sheets. Filo, which comes from the Greek word for thin sheet, is an unleavened dough made with flour, water, and oil, and involves much rolling and stretching to make a sheet so



thin that one can almost see through it. The custard filling is made by boiling together milk, sugar, semolina, and vanilla, then simmering until it has thickened. Butter and eggs are then blended in, along with a dash of orange zest. A baking tray is layered with five filo sheets, each brushed with melted butter. The custard is poured over, sealed in with another five buttered filo sheets, and baked until golden. “Many bakeries use premade filo

sheets but a few still hand-roll really thin ones every day to make their *bougatsa*. It’s a time-consuming process and takes a lot of skill,” says Katerina.

On my last morning in Athens, just before I leave to catch the metro to the airport, I step out from my hotel into Psirri Square. This popular spot is crammed with noisy bars and restaurants from noon until late night, but is mercifully quiet in the morning. Most of the eateries are shut this early in the day, but Bougatsadiko Psirri at the corner of the square has been open since 7 a.m. Inside the glass display case, assorted fresh-out-of-the-oven stuffed pies tempt me, but I have eyes only for the sweet *bougatsa*. The smiling lady behind the counter cuts a large slice for me to take away. “Powdered sugar and cinnamon,” she asks. I nod yes, and she sprinkles a generous bit of both. I bring it back to my hotel room, push the button on the Nespresso machine, and head out on the balcony to enjoy my last *bougatsa* breakfast with a hot espresso. It’s still warm, the crunchy filo covering contrasting with the soft custard filling and the cinnamon adding an earthy sweetness. Of all the tasty treats I scarfed in Greece — and there were many — it’s this flaky pie that I will miss the most.

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