Macedonian cuisine creating cultural pride, media and tourist businesses

By Stephanie Georgieff

Throughout her tumultuous history, Macedonia's people have learned to be incredibly resilient and creative in order to survive. The fall of the Yugoslav Republic may have not been as much of a bloody conflict in Macedonia as in other more northern areas, but the economic challenges were probably greater. With the heads of the banks and currency in Serbia, and no solid economic base, Macedonians had to once again adapt to difficult circumstances. While the government is working to bring industry and investment for things like automobile manufacturing, there is another segment of the economy that is blossoming all on its own.

I rarely watch television when I am in the United States, but while traveling abroad, I often learn a lot about a culture by observing local programming. In addition to getting some practice with the language, it is interesting to see what the natives enjoy outside the homogenous global cable offerings. While I was staying with my cousins in Prilep this past autumn, the neighbors often came to the flat for a morning coffee and to watch the public access channel before going to work. In addition to news and arts segments, a daily program called "The Taste of Tradition" intrigued me. Hosted by singer and cookbook author Adriyana Alachki. I watched intently and my cousin Valentina brought me the aptly titled Macedonian Traditional Cookbook from her bookcase. From that moment forward, I was hooked on both the show, as well as the beautifully compiled collection of recipes from all regions of Macedonia

What I found especially unique about the Taste of Tradition program was that Alachki honored the Baba's of Macedonia when she wanted to present a dish on the television segment. Alachki dressed in national costume, respectfully interviewing the women as they prepared century old dishes in the traditional manner of their ancestors. Very few modern kitchen gadgets were employed while the women prepared the featured item. Tears came to my eyes as I watched different Baba's stir, fold and roll out pastry dough like my Grandmother used to do in her kitchen. Some of the women's hands were gnarled and shaking with age, and yet they produced flakey filo dough for Burek and Zelnik the Old World way. Each program was finished by a shared meal with the guests and Alachki at the famous Hotel Manastir (The Hotel Monastery) in the Ethno Village near the Berovo mountain region. Adriyana Alachki is a world-renowned award-winning musician, and performs traditional music at the Village on a regular basis. Both Hotel Manastir and the Ethno Village are on the Taste of Macedonia Tour in May with Sophia Services.



Adriyana and guest on Tradition of Taste Public Access Program, Macedonia

I had the honor of interviewing Ms. Alachki in Skopje in between her performances and television taping. She is exactly as she presents on camera, dignified, cordial and a walking encyclopedia on traditional Macedonian culture and cuisine. Her cookbook is often presented to visiting dignitaries by the Macedonian government, because of its artistic and cultural value. Throughout her program, the cookbook and in person, Ms. Alachki conveys her gifts are from the heart. The cookbook is in Macedonian and English, and at the risk of rankling some ire of the Macedonian diaspora, is better than any church or organization's cookbook that I have ever seen. Covering everything from appetizers to desserts, there are pictures of the homeland with charming stories of the foodways of Macedonia. This work of art needs to be in every Macedonian's home as a living testament to our heritage, not to mention an endless selection of delicious recipes for any occasion. Potluck contests you will win with this collection!

The following weekend, I took my cousins Valentina and Vladko out for a lovely afternoon luncheon to one of Trip Advisor's top three Balkan Destinations. Nestled near both Bitola and the Pellister Mountain Park Reserve is Villa Dihovo. This charming Villa has visitors from all over the world. Built from the ground up by owner Pece Zhivokovska with marble, stone, oak and local pinewood, it has the look of vintage hand crafted Macedonian architecture. But Villa Dihovo has all modern amenities. Pece's family owns the largest vineyard in Macedonia and produces award winning organic wines and beers. The villa has a kitchen garden where guests can pick their own supper, and have the staff prepare dishes to their own specifications. Cooking lessons are available, and many outdoor experiences await those who wish to hike, bike or fish in the pristine mountains. Villa Dihovo is booked month's in advance, but has the policy that guests only pay what they think it is worth. To date, every patron has been happy and very generous in his or her end of stay remuneration. Pece cracked open a bottle of his Merlot for my cousins and we feasted on Sarma, Kofta, fresh Shopska Salat and thick creamy local sheep's mild cheeses and yogurts. Since it was harvest time, his family and staff was busy at work making peach jam and Ayuvar on the out door wood stove. Villa Dihovo has been so successful that Zhivokovska has purchased a sister villa to meet the demand. Business groups, families and wedding parties from around the area and the world are finding the hospitality, wine and regional cuisine irresistible, meaning if you want to visit Villa Dihovo, you have to get your reservations in early. For those of you who are joining me on the Taste of Macedonia tour May 11th through the 24th we will be experiencing Villa Dihovo and the Pelister Park as well.



Villa Dihovo, near Bitola Macedonia



Sitting Room with handmade furniture and traditional decor, Villa Dihovo

What I was observing through initiatives like Taste of Tradition, the Ethno Village and Villa Dihovo was the essence of who the Macedonians are as a people. Given a very difficult and seemingly impossible situation in the early 1990's, the food and hospitality sector of the economy is now booming. The people I met and interviewed were warm, proud of their culture and helping to invigorate their local economies, often without the assistance of the government. I hope you can join me in May, and if not, don't miss out on these gastronomical jewels of our proud heritage the next time you are in Macedonia.



Shopsa Salad from the Villa Dihovo Kitchen Garden, near Bitola Macedonia

Deadline for Taste of Macedonia Registration is March 25th
http://www.sophiaservices.ca/

Villa Dihovo: www.villadihovo.com

Adriyana Alachki: www.adrijanaalacki.mk
Taste of Tradition is on Facebook and Youtube.

Ethno Village: www.arvati-etnoselo.com



Ethno Village near the Berovo Mountain Region



Adriyana Alachki in Traditional Costume at Ethno Village in Macedonia

Sophia Services
Sarnia Guiton
www.sophiaservices.ca
ph 604-740-0676 | sarnia@sophiaservices.ca | fax 604-885-6170