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**Annual Greek Pastry Sale Serves Up Flavorful History**

By **Judith Lerner**

Special to *iBerkshires*

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PITTSFIELD, Mass. — One of the pleasures of early spring is coming up on Saturday morning, April 4. The Greek Ladies Philoptochos (phil-OP-to-khos; friend of the poor) Society will present its delightfully choreographed, lavish Greek pastry sale in the social hall of St. George Greek Orthodox Church.

For nearly 40 years, members of the 125 or so families of the church community spend the weeks leading up to Easter baking more baklava than anyone can imagine — baklaVA, spaniKopita, tsouREki/Easter breads and many,

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many other Greek pastries, cakes and cookies from passed-down family recipes.

I have spent an afternoon watching the late Paul Parastatides of Paul's Restaurant weigh, measure, braid and bake 50 tsoureki in an hour in his restaurant ovens. He flavored his breads with an extract of cherry pits he would bring home from visits to Greece.

By the time of the sale, he had made more than 100 braided round breads and trays and trays of cookies.

When I asked him why he baked so much, he told me, "This is a donation. This is for our church."

While I sat on a high stool watching him, he gave me some melt-in-your-mouth cookies, koulouria (koo-LOO-djyuh) and kourambiethes (koo-ram-BAt-hiss or koo-rahm-bee-YEH-dhess), he had already baked.

On an evening later that week, I watched Corinne Keegan, professional baker extraordinaire, bake 300 Greek cookies, finikia and kourambiethes, in St. George's kitchen after she had finished her work day as a pastry chef.

She mixed the kourambiethes dough with her hands. Formed balls. Flattened the balls onto large baking trays lined with double sheets of paper towels to absorb the heating butter so it would not burn.

Meanwhile, she kept checking and shifting the four trays of finikia in the two ovens so they would bake evenly. After they baked, she dipped them in cooled honey-sugar syrup, rearranged them back onto the baking sheets, sprinkled the tops with chopped walnuts and cinnamon and left them to cool.

She laid the hot kourambiethes on a bed of confectioners sugar as they came out of the oven, sifting piles more sugar over the tops.

I went home with a butter-stained Greek cookie doggy bag.



**The annual Greek pastry sale brings lines of customers who don't leave even a crumb behind. Above, servers make up boxes at last year's sale.**



For that year's sale, Keegan additionally baked 150 spanakopita, 150 tiOpitas, 150 koulouria, 90 paxiMAt-hia, six trays of 144 pieces of chocolate baklava and 100 ah-lathakia (ah-la-DTHA-key-a) drizzled with chocolate.

"This is carrying on tradition that started so long ago," Keegan said of Philoptochos' delicious process of raising money for the society's charities.

The society raises money for and distributes it to international, national and local charities and individuals.

If you've never gone to this Greek pastry sale be warned: hard-core buyers line up about 8 a.m. Only as many purchasers as there are table volunteers are admitted. Only as a customer leaves is a new one let in. The room is busy but not chaotic. And the shoppers seem to move quickly even as some — like me — linger over their decisions.

The sale is an experience. Each customer gets paired with a volunteer: customer outside the room-size circle of tables, personal server behind the tables wearing plastic gloves and carrying your see-through snap-top box (es), a pastry list and a pencil.

Your personal volunteer helpfully fills boxes with exactly what you ask for down to that specific chunk of pasta flora, that exact square of ravaNI. Buy one slice or cookie, one box or 12, one tsoureki, round or braided, or a dozen, a portion of spanakopita, or a year's worth. People are picking this, picking that.

She or he will pleasantly answer questions, give opinions and make suggestions.

"How much do you want of this, sir?" volunteer Gigi Trahanas asked a few years ago.

"Just one. That one, please. Thank you," a tall man answered.

Gigi came around to the front of the table to give him his chosen hefty square of kolokithoPIta.

**WHAT:** Greek Ladies Philoptochos Society's annual Easter Greek pastry sale

**WHEN:** Saturday, April 4, 9 to 2

**WHERE:** St. George Greek Orthodox Church 73 Bradford St., between North and Center streets, Pittsfield; parking on-street and in funeral home parking lot across Bradford Street

"What did you buy?" a man waiting to pay asked another.

"Everything! Everything!" the first buyer answered, holding two large boxes.

Janet Gerner and her 10-year-old grandson, Patrick Gerner, get to the sale early every year. "I stand on line, no matter what the weather," she said. They carried a tray of spanakopita, six boxes of pastry and an Easter bread as they waited to pay.

The selection of pastries — at first over 25 kinds, all sizes and styles — will dwindle to half a dozen choices by 11:30.

Only a straggle of customers will study and choose from what is left.

Everything sells. Not a crumb, not a bread, remains.

At the end of the sale, often before noon, the kitchen, piled with huge boxes and trays of refills from last evening, is usually empty and clean. Men, women, children and teenagers will have stored the unused pastry boxes, shaken-off and folded the blue tablecloths, washed down the tables and restacked them against the walls.

Planning for the next year's sale will begins again in the fall. After so many years, any rough edges are gone. Organizers and bakers are efficient. By now, they know automatically what has to be done, when and, by whom.

### PASTRIES & PRONUNCIATIONS

Here are some of the pastries you may find at this year's Greek pastry sale at St. George Greek Orthodox Church this Saturday. But, these are only pastries I've seen and eaten there before. Every year there new pastries. Church members pass on family specialties and recipes to keep their traditions alive. Phyllo is the crunchy-crisp, nearly transparent dough many Greek pastries are made with.

**ahlaDTHAkia:** *pear-shaped orange-lemon shortbread cookies sometimes drizzled with chocolate*

**almond crescent cookies**

**apricot-almond phyllo pastries**

**baklaVA:** *chopped walnuts, almonds or pistachios layered between phyllo drenched in honey syrup, in many incarnations, including chocolate laced/drizzled/frosted*

**fiNIkia:** *brown, walnut butter cookies flavored with vanilla and orange juice, dipped in honey-sugar syrup then sprinkled with cinnamon and chopped walnuts, some stuffed with nuts or dates*

**floyeres (flow-YEH-ress):** *syrup-drenched, nut or custard or cheese-filled phyllo tubes like thin cigars*

**forMAkia:** *tiny jam tarts decorated with almond slices or chunks*

**galaktoBOUreko:** *custard-filled phyllo rolls or squares*

**gianotika (ya-NO-tee-ka) or giannoitiko (ya-NOI-tee-ko):** *honey-soaked spiced nut and shredded phyllo rolls*

**karithoPIta:** *honey and sugar syrup-drenched, spiced walnut cake*

**kaTAIfi:** *nut and shredded phyllo rolls*

**kolokithoPIta:** *pumpkin-filled phyllo squares drizzled with maple syrup, topped with pecan, like a Greek pumpkin pie. It can also be savory like spanakopita made with zucchini and feta cheese*

**koulouria (koo-LOO-djyuh):** *not very sweet Easter butter cookie twists, rings, wreaths, even bunnies, with or without a sprinkle of sesame seeds*

**kourabiedes (koo-ram-BA-thiss or koo-rahm-bee-YEH-dhess):** *flat, shaped, butter/confectioners*

**sugar/nut cookies** *piled with confectioners sugar, some round, some stars, some tiny angels — the Greek wedding cookie*

**melomaKArona:** *spiced lemon/honey-soaked oval spiced walnut butter cookies*

**moustokoulouria (moo-stow-koo-LOO-dya):** *cookies made with petimezi/grape molasses/puree*

**pasta flora:** *large jam-filled, lattice-topped short pastry squares sprinkled with almonds*

**paxiMAthia:** *buttery, double-baked, not very sweet sliced cookies like crumbly Greek biscotti*

**ravaNI:** *syrup soaked farina/semolina cake often flavored with orange and topped with coconut*

**spanaKOpita:** *savory spinach and feta phyllo squares or triangles*

**THIples (DTHEE-pless):** *walnut and cinnamon-sprinkled, syrup-dipped, deep-fried puffy, meltaway egg noodle-dough curls*

**tiROpita or tyROpita:** *savory feta cheese and egg phyllo pastries*

**TRIgona:** *large ground walnut, crushed zwieback and spice phyllo triangles*

**tsouREkia:** *large, round or oval braided Greek Easter bread*



Sophia Constantopoulos, longtime owner of Sophia's Restaurant in Lenox, said the secret to the tenderness of her thiples is to fry them in Crisco — which, she said, may smoke at a high heat. "Forty years ago I rolled them out by hand. Now I use a pasta machine" she said. Roll them quite thin, like wide noodles. You will need room to spread out to roll noodle dough.

1 1/2 cups honey

3 cups sugar

1 1/2 cup water

5 eggs

2 tablespoons ouzo

about 6 cups flour, enough to make a stiff dough

Crisco for frying

cinnamon for sprinkling

chopped walnuts for sprinkling

Combine honey, sugar and water in a pot. Bring to boil. Boil until syrup feels a bit tacky when cooled on a saucer. Set aside to cool.

Beat eggs in electric mixer for 20 minutes. Add ouzo. Beat hard. Beat flour in gradually with a wooden spoon, by hand, to make a hard dough.

Put 5 ounces dough in pasta machine at a time. Run it through first on 1; then on 3; then on 5. Cut dough into 3 inch wide pieces. Run each piece into machine one more time at 5.

For those without a pasta machine, roll dough very thin on a large, lightly floured surface, such as a kitchen table covered with a clean sheet,

Cut into 3 by 5 inch rectangles.

In a deep pot heat Crisco to medium hot heat. It may smoke. Place pot of cooled syrup beside stove.

Take a dinner fork in each hand. Drop one piece of dough at a time into oil. Press dough into oil and immediately roll up into a tube with the forks, one holding each short side of dough. Thiple will expand and puff up.

Dip each finished thiple into the cool syrup. Place on cake rack or other mesh surface. Sprinkle with walnuts and cinnamon. Allow to cool. makes about 32 tipples

### HELEN PAPAS' TRIGONA

Helen Papas sat at her kitchen table writing our this recipe as I waited. She demonstrated the exact way she butters and folds her phyllo sheets using a paper towel which I now have tucked away for future reference with my notes. These are elegant, crisp pastries and even though they are fairly large it's hard to share. The recipe may be cut in half or thirds.

6 1/4 cups sugar, divided

3 cups water

juice and rind of 1 lemon

1 cinnamon stick

6 eggs

4 zwieback, crushed to crumbs

1/4 teaspoons each ground cloves, nutmeg, allspice, powdered vanilla or vanilla extract

4 cups ground walnuts

1 to 2 pounds phyllo dough, kept under plastic wrap and damp towel

1 pound unsalted butter, melted

crushed walnuts for sprinkling



