

# When We Gather: Greek Feast with the Kafkalas Family

[Jenn Hall](#) [17 January](#)



*“I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston, that I might offer up my prayers to the goddess; and also because I wanted to see in what manner they would celebrate the festival...” – The Republic, Plato*

In certain families, during particular meals, one senses the presence of ancestral spirits. It’s an echo rendered in texture and spice, in dialogue and flavor. Traditional recipes are a form of communion between past and present.

When Nick and Carol Kafkalas gather with their two sons for dinner in their white-tiled New Jersey home – a nightly ritual even now that Anthony and Nick Jr. are in their twenties – there are constants. One finds good salty feta, dressed in olive oil. Kalamata olives, briny and dark like aubergines, move easily from meze to meal. When dinner plays out over courses, there might be *tiropetes* (cheese pies) and *keftedes* (meatballs) dipped in tzatziki sauce.

Come winter, mom and “head chef” Carol also makes her yiayia Maria’s lentils, an “acquired taste.” Or so Carol claims. To this first-time sampler, her

grandmother's hearty dish of sauteed lentils seasoned with garlic, paprika, vinegar, and crushed tomatoes is nothing short of delicious. "This is something that traditionally my grandmother always used to force us to eat on New Year's Day," Carol laughs. "She felt like it would keep you healthy and strong throughout the year."



Carol carries on the cooking traditions passed on to her by her yiayia and great aunt Callie. Evident, too, is the influence of her father, Marmaras. A gourmet chef, he cooked in upscale places like the Waldorf Astoria in Manhattan. "He would take over the kitchen and show me things, saying "This is my secret," she remembers.

Her kitchen – and it is very much hers, though Nick Sr. serves as sous chef – is a place where Greek and Greek-American classics reign supreme. Everything circles back to techniques gleaned over the shoulders of elders. Most indicative of the lineage are glasses of the family's own *raki*. Smooth-yet-potent, the clear, grape-based spirit is gorgeous mixed with ice and savored slowly across a meal.

As family favorite Penn State lets a Rose Bowl win escape its grasp on a January Monday, the family sips, laughs nonetheless, and feasts.

Raki calls for food, they explain. It craves it. “Seafood and salty foods,” Nick Jr. says. “Sharp cheeses.” Older brother Anthony prefers grilled octopus, of which he is something of a connoisseur. As savory small bites are served, the wisdom in the pairing grows apparent. Gently perfumed by grapes, the raki’s sweet softness opens up into a low burn that cuts across sharp and saline flavors. I load more feta onto my plate.



The drink’s pride of place in the family makes sense: both parents trace long bootlegging histories through their respective lines. Nick Sr.’s father used to make nine illicit gallons at a clip over a Pittsburgh weekend, selling eight and keeping one to sip. As a child, Nick would watch him tend the still. “He would make a batch about once a month, and there were people who knew he made it and would come buy a share,” he explains.

American born, Carol spent her formative years from five through 15 living full time in the ancient port city of Piraeus, which hugs the Mediterranean southwest of Athens and landed first-line status in Plato's *Republic*. There, her father and grandfather Constantine crafted raki for pleasure and "sport."

Carol and Nick Sr. were both raised sipping the spirit alongside elders, a mark of pride. "The thing about Greek heritage...at the dinner table as a child, you are allowed to have raki," Carol explains. "I remember my grandfather and his brother stomping on grapes up on the mountains and making wine, and then turning whatever was leftover into raki."

When their fathers both passed in 1999, the couple decided to rekindle the tradition, blind testing early recipes during dinners with friends. Over the course of more than a dozen years, they perfected their approach in the back shed and basement, testing the end product on guests who joked that they should become bootleggers, unsuspecting. The end result is a modern twist on the spirit.



“We break from tradition by doing it the right way,” Nick Sr. says with a laugh. In homegrown renditions, raki is a byproduct of the winemaking process, produced with what remains after its production, like grape skins and twigs. Sometimes it is flavored with anise, sometimes not. Nick and Carol came to prefer a spirit crafted in small stills from the first press of the grapes, lending a cleaner taste.

Their elders are surely smiling down now. The Kafkalas family is the first to make craft raki commercially in the U.S., both with and without anise, under the moniker [Lazy Eye Distillery](#). They market their raki as “rakii;” the extra “i” differentiating it from the Turkish spirit of the same name. Like dinner, the business is a collective enterprise. Both sons work for the company, and decisions are made around the table. “It goes back generations and generations,” Carol explains of the family bond. “Most Greeks distill – it’s second nature, it’s an art, and it’s a pastime. We caught the fever.”

As we dig into a feast of stuffed peppers and tomatoes, Greek salad, and moussaka, the brothers describe the table as a center point for the family. It encapsulates the Greek word *philotimos*, they say, which evades English translation but centers on hospitality, warmth, and caring.



Here's a way to think about it. You know how every neighborhood has that one house that serves as a home base for all of the local kids? This is that house. The brothers' friends still show up for dinner, even now. That they can savor a small glass of family-made craft-distilled raki is just a bonus.

The most prevalent spirit here is one of welcoming.

*Makes 26 meatballs*

*Recipe by Carol Kafkalas*

*Total Cooking Time: 1 hour*

*Active Cooking Time: 15 minutes*

**Cook's Note:** If you're feeling decadent, you can fry your keftedes in olive oil. If you do, cook in batches for 10 minutes or so, turning to ensure even browning.

1 pound ground meat (half pork, half beef)

1/4 cup bread crumbs

1 small onion, finely chopped  
1/4 cup milk  
1 large egg  
1 teaspoon chopped fresh parsley  
1 teaspoon salt  
1 teaspoon pepper

Preheat oven to 375°F.

Mix together all ingredients and form into meatballs the size of golf balls.

Bake for 45 minutes to an hour, turning frequently to brown evenly. Before serving, season with salt and pepper. Serve with tzatziki sauce.

*Makes 1 1/2 cups*

*Recipe by Carol Kafkalas*

*Total Cooking Time: 25 minutes*

*Active Cooking Time: 10 minutes*

1 tablespoon salt  
2 Persian cucumbers, grated  
1 cup Greek yogurt  
2 cloves garlic, minced  
Juice of half a lemon  
1 tablespoon fresh mint  
Salt or pepper to taste

Salt the grated cucumber and leave in a colander for 15 minutes. Rinse and drain.

Add cucumbers to yogurt, and then mix in the rest of the ingredients, seasoning to taste.

*Serves 10 to 12*

*Recipe by Carol Kafkalas*

*Total Cooking Time: 3 1/2 hours*

*Active Cooking Time: 2 hours*

**Cook's Note:** Moussaka is a delicious labor of love. The trick to Carol's is to thinly slice the eggplant and potato. When fried in olive oil and layered in the final dish, they lend a luxurious texture. Your biggest challenge will be not eating all of the eggplant as you cook!

3 medium eggplants (about two pounds), thinly sliced into 1/4" slices

1 3/4 cups extra virgin olive oil + more as needed

1 pound ground meat (half pork, half beef)

1 medium onion, chopped

1 large clove garlic, minced

1 large tomato, chopped

1 teaspoon cinnamon

2 large potatoes, thinly sliced into 1/4" slices

6 tablespoons butter

6 tablespoons flour

3 cups milk, room temperature

1/2 teaspoon nutmeg

Salt and pepper, to taste

Preheat oven to 375°F.

### ***Cook the eggplant***

Heat 1/4 cup of olive oil on medium in large skillet. Allow oil to heat completely, and then fry the eggplant in batches until lightly browned. Add oil as needed. Set aside on paper towels, seasoning lightly with salt and pepper.

### ***Fry the potatoes***

Wipe out pan and heat another 1/4 cup of oil on medium. Fry potato slices until lightly browned, working in batches. Set aside on paper towels, seasoning lightly.

### ***Make the meat sauce***

Wipe out the pan, and heat a tablespoon of olive oil on medium. Add onions and sauté about 3-4 minutes, until soft. Add ground meat, garlic, and salt and pepper and cook until the meat is browned, about 7-8 minutes. Add tomato and cinnamon, heating through for another minute or two. Remove from heat and check seasoning.

### ***Make the cream sauce***

In a saucepan, melt butter on medium-low. Add the flour and cook for 2-3 minutes until smooth. Add milk, and season with salt and pepper to taste. Cook, stirring frequently, until thick and smooth (about 10-15 minutes). Add nutmeg, and check for seasoning.

### ***Assembly***

In a 13×9” pan, layer your eggplant along the bottom. Next, spread the meat mixture over the eggplant. Finally, layer the potatoes to cover the meat. Pour the cream sauce over the potatoes evenly, and bake uncovered until golden on top, about an hour. Allow the moussaka to rest for 10-15 minutes before serving.

*Photos by Jenn Hall*

Jenn Hall writes about food, culture, travel, and the spaces in-between. A wanderer with an ever-rumbling belly, she’s learning that the best stories are hidden in plain sight. Follow along at [www.jennhallwrites.com](http://www.jennhallwrites.com) and on Instagram and Twitter @jennsarahhall.

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