

INTRODUCTION

Writing is not something that I usually enjoy doing. So why have I written a cookbook? Well, like most things in my life, this book more or less gave form to itself. When I was diagnosed with cancer, I traveled a long and winding road to recovery. This journey included a life-altering visit to Greece, where I learned that changing my diet empowered me to change my life for the better. Sharing my experience with others who may find themselves in a similar situation is therapeutic for me.

In a way, writing this book helped me recover from cancer. I share my experiences in the hope that they may be of value to others who are struggling with difficulties in their lives.

This is not a book about cancer. It is about how one is able to triumph, to live with and after it, as well as how such a life can be a more fulfilling one. Most importantly, it is not just for cancer patients. Traditional Mediterranean—and especially Greek—cuisine is renowned for its health benefits. By following the sensible and healthy cooking and eating habits in this book, you can enjoy a longer, fuller, and healthier life. I hope my book will help you find comfort, joy, and even a few laughs!

How I Conquered Cancer While Gaining Happiness and Creativity

Some time ago, I received a call from fate. Without it, I would have continued to live a blissful life without incident. But in 2005, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. Now every day is a new journey, and I actively appreciate the good. I unleashed my creative self and live my life with joy and fulfillment, the way I have always wanted. I take pleasure in meeting new people. I have started painting. I am delighted to see the bright-blue Athenian sky despite the political problems that exist in my city and my country. I admire people in their late 80s and 90s who maintain good health naturally and are focused and creative, whether they express that creativity by writing poetry or working on marble sculptures. They have found the secret to living a good life and always being

productive. For them, purpose and serenity replace concerns about high blood pressure, heart disease, and many other ailments.

I modeled my life after this example and have adopted a new lifestyle. Liberated to express myself creatively, I have found purpose and happiness through creative cooking, writing, and painting.

During my illness, I went from a size 10 to a size 16. Now I am losing weight without starving myself by following a healthy diet from the recipes in this book. I discovered that eating healthy food makes one feel great. I came to realize that the process of aging is directly related to nutrition; making wise choices in the kitchen is the key to a long, healthy, and happy life. I hope that this book will inspire you to embark on a journey that will lead you to acquire strength and help you achieve fulfillment and joy. We are what we think and do; thus, all is possible!

My Realization

Healthy Greek home cooking is a self-empowering art and joy. I began practicing it to protect myself from cancer, inspire my painting, overcome the sadness, and most importantly be my own person in charge of my own life! In this book you will learn the art and joy that is healthy Greek home cooking.

As anyone who has beaten a serious illness will attest, the experience brings life into crystal-clear focus. It enables you to distinguish what's really important and makes you aware of the time left to enjoy life, to make every day the happiest yet. Every minute is precious when you want to make the hours satisfying and fulfilling.

My Kind of Therapy

Cooking your own food, especially when you live alone, is a form of therapy. Whether you're in a good mood or have had a bad day, cooking can change your attitude for the better. Go to your kitchen, turn on the radio, open your refrigerator, and think about what you can prepare with the ingredients you have. This is a creative process, so don't overthink it. As you dream up new dishes, imagine what you would like to do today, tomorrow, or even next summer. And if the music inspires you, dance a little!

Life is what we make of it. Learn to take control of your emotions and to forget everything that brings you down. Consider what makes you happy and go for it. Embark on a journey of self-discovery. As I'm now well aware, facing cancer will make you less patient; you will tend to get angry more easily. Try to calm down and speak gently. Don't expect anybody who hasn't been there to understand what you have gone through. Be considerate; remember that others cannot imagine, regardless of their love for you, just how much you have changed inside.

Cook the foods that give you energy while nurturing your body and helping yourself, as well as the people you love. Learn about the vitamins and minerals contained in foods you prepare. We can help cure ourselves; we just have to find the right combination of ingredients! Good food can heal our bodies and our minds. Make room for tranquility in your life and try to surround yourselves with happy, positive people. We don't need pills to sleep, and we don't need pills to be happy. Nature has remedies for everything. It's all out there!

The aim of *Healthy Greek Cooking* is to give you the strength to relax and help you focus on eating well and living a healthy and vibrant life. It is a chronicle of my journey from there to here, detailing how my understanding of food helped me to beat my illness. I appreciate life more than ever before. Life is beautiful. It is also what you make of it. I have chosen to stay in Greece permanently, as I felt that a change of environment would also soothe my soul. In the beginning, coming back to my country of origin felt a bit daunting, as I was all by myself, far away from my son and my friends, and far removed from my doctors. It felt as if I'd left behind my security.

Today, I hardly recognize myself! I decorated my apartment the way I wanted and have put my paintings on the walls. I have a small terrace with lovely roses and vegetables, including cucumbers and green peppers, and in August I harvest my own small crop of watermelons. I have met wonderful people and reconnected with high-school friends. I enjoy the mild Athenian weather while visiting the open-air fruit and vegetable markets.

I feel like I've traveled back in time every time I prepare these recipes, as if I have instantly been transported back into my mother's kitchen. When combining ingredients, I feel her presence and artistry. I enjoy the same pleasure and gain the same strength that she had while preparing food for her customers or for us at home. The sense of her beside me is inspirational, making me feel as if her spirit were cooking with me. Writing down my recipes and taking photos of the dishes was fun. I learned to use a PC to write this book, a challenge when you are not any longer in your twenties!

Compiling this collection of recipes has been one of the most rewarding things in my life. I hope it will improve your health and give you the strength it has provided for me. I would be delighted to hear from you and will do all that I can to help you start or continue a new path of life with the support of a better way of cooking. Please don't hesitate to contact me through my publisher.

My Early Life in Greece

I was born on the Greek island of Corfu, a green and beautiful land full of

flowers and friendly people, reminiscent of scenes in an Italian movie from the Amalfi coast. The island’s culture is a fusion of influences: Italian, French, Armenian, Jewish, and English happily merged with Greek culture. Creativity and the love of the arts is everywhere; there have always been many musicians and painters on the island. Within this environment, it is hardly surprising that my father was a painter and my mother a professional chef who worked in some of the best restaurants in the town of Corfu – which is the cultural center of the island – and later on in Athens.

My mother, Christina, was a beautiful, vibrant, and outgoing woman. I recall walking through the piazza with her as a child and noticing men coming out of their shops just to look at and talk to her. She was never formally trained as a chef but instead acquired her cooking skills through the years from people she would meet. She loved cooking, and I retain fond memories of her kitchen, radiating warmth and wafting aromas as she cooked lunch every day. In those days, breakfast was not considered essential. But after school we would always come home for lunch. Although the period following the end of WWII was a difficult time for Greece, my mother always managed to maintain a comfortable, pleasant home, in which I remember having a happy and carefree childhood. Since my mother was a successful professional chef, her restaurant openings were



With my mother, Christina

always big events where all the townspeople would arrive in order to dine, dance, and socialize. Sundays at the restaurant were also rather memorable: I remember doing my best to dance, frequently by standing on other people's feet, as I was so little. As soon as the place was packed, the agoronomia would also invariably show up. Agoronomia (if it still functions) is the municipal police that inspects restaurants. In those days, one of its duties was to weigh the food, just before the plate was offered to the customer, in order to ensure that portion sizes were correct. I distinctly remember that, although my mother never actually weighed anything, she was always accurate. All inspectors knew that, but they would still arrive, simply because what they really wished for was to be treated to a nice meal.

Since my mother worked year round while I was growing up, much of my time was spent in the company of my father, Sarkis, a survivor of the Armenian genocide in Asia Minor that began in 1915. At the tender age of seven, my father had lost all of his family, who were brutally killed in front of his eyes. Because he was between the ages of seven and fourteen, by order of the Turkish authorities he was placed at a school in Constantinople (the city is now officially called Istanbul, but we Greeks still refer to it by its traditional name), in order to learn Turkish and subsequently be converted to Islam. He somehow escaped and arrived on Corfu by boat with several other young Armenian orphans. Throughout his life, he would never forget either his family or his Armenian roots and language.



With my father, Sarkis

Sarkis stayed at school until the age of sixteen, when, having to earn a living, he became an apprentice at the workshop of an Italian painter who lived on Corfu. There he learned how to paint and do restoration work. Soon he was able to accurately draw and paint everything he saw. I still have a picture of him as a young man enjoying a day out in the countryside alongside his friends; everybody is looking around, savoring the view, while my father is drawing the landscape.

Already a well-known painter when he met my mother, my father always remained a kind, quiet man. He was a typical Armenian of his time: tough, reserved, and very private. Although he lived amongst Greeks for most of his life, he was never really comfortable with them, feeling much closer to other Armenians who lived on the island. Honor was always the most important thing in his life, which also meant that he would never break his promises. Growing

up, I constantly felt surrounded by his love. My father has always been a source of great pride for me, and also my own link to our common Armenian heritage, which I hold dear despite that fact that I do not speak the language.

Sarkis was not a man of many words, but I can still recall so many memorable things he said. I also remember the feeling of security and happiness I enjoyed while, as a little girl, I held his hand.

Every summer, I would accompany my father to different palaces on the island, where he restored faded and peeling frescoes. The whole process seemed like a mystery to my eight-year-old self! I remember watching him climb up a ladder so that he could reach the ceiling, as many of the frescoes were painted there. Day in, day out, he worked until the painting was restored and was finally revealed in all its glory. I can also recall being fascinated by the bright and richly detailed images of historical figures in the frescoes. It is actually quite telling that at a time when he had completed work in one of the palaces, the then-king Constantine, whilst on a visit to Corfu, asked for my father in order to congratulate him on his work. But my father never went. He felt such an honor was rather overwhelming.

I also remember him frequently taking me out. I have fond memories of getting dressed up on Sundays, Christmas, or Easter to go to Listòn, in the heart of Corfu town, and of walking next to vibrant cafés and hearing happy voices. Then, as now, sitting at cafés, socializing, and flirting with boys of a similar age was customary. However, no flirting for me since I was very young. As my father enjoyed his beer, I enjoyed the hors d'oeuvres. I was not fond of beer – it was too bitter for me.

Sarkis never gave me formal painting lessons. I learned by watching his work closely and imitating what he was doing. When I was twelve, I started painting watercolors and participating in art events at school. I even sold a watercolor landscape to a local store. Painting relaxed me, and I continued to paint at school. When I was sixteen, my family moved to Athens. Without my friends, or greater family except for my parents, I felt lost in the big city. Ironically, it was during that first summer that I met my future husband. I noticed an advertisement in a magazine for girls to act in a movie. With considerable difficulty, I managed to convince my parents to allow me to audition. The story was about a young high school girl in love with her teacher, and I was the director's first choice. I was of the right age and had a distinctive look: an innocent face and long, braided hair. That day I met Daniel, an American producer, who was editing a film at the same studio. We married a few years later. Then I had my son, David.

I spent most of my early adult life enjoying being a mother, whilst also helping my husband with his work. His filmmaking career gave us the opportunity to travel all over Europe and Israel before settling in New York in the late 1960s. And although I have been painting since I was twelve, it never occurred to

me to pursue a career as an inspired artist. I believed that my talent was in restoration and reproduction, just like my father, the restorer of old frescoes.



With my son, David, one year old

My husband did acknowledge the beauty of my work, but he would observe that I needed to develop a style of my own. As I have always been overly concerned with other people's opinions of my painting, I felt foolish for pursuing it. It seemed an indulgence on my part, and I started to neglect it. It would take me over a year to finish a painting, and I would hide my work behind curtains or keep it inside closets. Needless to say, the thought of having an exhibition or showing my work to strangers never occurred to me. On the other hand, like most housewives, cooking was part of my daily routine. Daily life progressed in this pattern until 2005, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer.

My Life with Cancer

When I was diagnosed, it was as if a lightning bolt had struck me and everything would be changed forever. It was a lonely time. Endless questions filled my mind as I constantly thought, "Why had this happened to me?" Having no family history of cancer and being healthy to the point of almost never getting a cold, two questions preoccupied me: How had it come about? What had I done wrong? My cancer was treatable, and I am grateful for that. Cancer also forced me to take a hard, honest look at my life.

My operations, constant exams, and the trauma of separation from my husband after forty years of marriage reversed my relationship with my son; I became a burden on him. Previously, I was so very happy looking after him as a doting mother. It was as if my world had stopped and turned upside down. Confronting my mortality was heart breaking. It made me focus on myself for the first time. Inconsequential things faded away as I focused on one thing: surviving.

To try to reduce the duration of the constant stress and avoid being a burden to my son, I opted for the stronger and faster course of chemotherapy, lasting two months instead of six. I wanted to get it over as soon as possible and return to relax in my native Greece. Although chemotherapy notoriously drains energy, I hardly felt tired or depressed during treatments. It sounds vain, but the hardest time for me was when I lost my hair.

I vividly recall touching my head one time, shortly after starting the

chemotherapy, and having most of the hair come out in my hand. Then came a day when David said, "Mother, I have to shave your hair." I said nothing. I just let him shave the little that remained, and I felt his pain in doing it. I felt two affectionate hands on my head, which he wiped and covered with a warm, wet towel after finishing. It was the sweetest touch I was ever blessed with. Facing my vanity in mirror was not easy, so I bought a wig to hide it.

As the chemotherapy progressed, I was overcome by a flood of emotions. With my energy focused on survival, I lacked the stamina to restrain emotions I had suppressed for years. I needed to ease my mind, so I sought comfort in painting, releasing my sorrow, grief, and frustration onto canvas. I painted non-stop during chemotherapy, forgetting what was happening elsewhere. I found the strength to paint a self-portrait, capturing my hairless face and chest covered with bandages in iconographic form. Remarkably, despite the hair loss and the effects of the powerful drugs, I felt more energized, creative, and in control than ever before.

For the first time ever, I was able to do something just for myself simply because it made me feel good, without feeling guilty or being concerned about someone else's opinion. Painting offered me a release, and I embraced it with fervor. It's amazing how a disease can change your view of the world, and most importantly, how you can see yourself in it. I learned a priceless lesson—do not waste your time. I painted; it felt good, so I continued doing it. Painting enabled me to live in the present, to steady my emotions, and to focus on the future. I worked all day without stopping, consumed with the process of creating my art. I ceased to feel pity for myself. Focusing completely on my work made me forget that cancer had ever been a part of my life. For the first time I felt my own personal sense of strength.

I was my own subject. I understood that there was no use for talking or crying. I could express myself, reveal my personal tragedy, by baring my broken heart on the altar of my canvases. It was there that I could show how far I had travelled and where I wanted to go. I painted myself in the emotional and physical condition that I was in. I painted myself with no hair and a bandaged chest sitting on a Chinese-red lacquer chair while chemotherapy is being administered through a tube to a vein in my arm. Behind me a big, black, threatening silhouette with long, dry, hooked fingers is leering over me, trying to pull away the intravenous tube. All is offset by a youth resembling a Byzantine angel.

I no longer desired to produce copies of other people's work. I was so consumed with my work that I completed a painting every week or two. In two months, I finished five paintings, all originals. I recall that wonderful sense of accomplishment knowing that I no longer needed to copy others. For the first time in my life, I felt like a real artist.

Inspired, I felt the need to research. I wanted to occupy my mind, to find and consume knowledge. I was never scouring for books, and I hardly knew how to use a computer, so nothing was simple or easy for me. However, I knew I had to think about how to change my life.

Having spent so much of my life preparing it, one of the first things that came to mind was food. Questions arose like: What could have possibly been wrong with my eating habits so far? What was I supposed to eat from then on? All my life I thought I was being careful with the food I had been cooking for my family and myself. Could it be that I was wrong? I felt that I had to improve my way of living. That



A self-portrait, painted during my cancer treatment

was the time when I first contemplated the idea that the human body is one of the wonders of the world; yet we hardly know how to look after and protect it. It was an overwhelming thought. As a result, I became careful about my diet. As I finished chemotherapy, I was aware that I needed more information on how to fight my illness to keep it from returning. I asked the American Cancer Society for brochures and received a booklet, which I read thoroughly. I was astonished to realize that, according to them, there were no food restrictions whatsoever! Red meat, white bread, and butter were all allowed! It saddened me to discover that our health experts neglected to guide patients towards beneficial nutrition. That was the moment I became determined to explore diet and its connection to health.

About that time, some Greek friends came to stay with me for a few weeks. As a good host, I felt that I had to cook at home or accompany them to restaurants, which I did not want to do. I did not want to discuss my problem with them. So whenever we went out to eat, I took a little bottle of olive oil with me to give to the chef so that he could cook the simplest dish of spaghetti with olive oil and garlic for me. But most of the time I would cook for my friends and myself at home. One evening, while preparing an elaborate moussaka, I came to realize the changes that I had made in the way I prepared that particular dish; I had in fact significantly altered the recipe in order to accommodate my newly found health consciousness: blanching the eggplant instead of frying it, exchanging butter with olive oil, replacing the rich béchamel topping with one simply made from cheese.

You can imagine that I was thrilled to receive rave reviews from my friends, who noted that the dish was often tastier, lighter, and easier to digest than the original version. I continued to cook for my guests over the next month, modifying old recipes and creating new ones. By the time they left, I had developed a whole set of new recipes. I noticed an improvement in my health and mental state that progressed over time. Could it be the food itself, and Greek cuisine in particular? The feeling that I had taken control over my body and mind improved my self-esteem and sense of well-being.

I finally understood the dual benefits of healthy Greek home cooking. Being able to take food stuffs in their natural state, combine them with herbs and spices, and create something new – to share it with people – appealed to my creativity, as well as my social life. Most importantly, I realized that proper food and nutrition could be a vital part of my healing process and healthy living. Wanting to know about nutritional content of the food that I consumed became a habit. It was fortunate that my mother was a chef, for I had cooked for many years. Medical authorities increasingly appreciate that proper nutrition is the first medicine for many kinds of disease. It mimics the play of action and reaction. I do not consider this book to be simply an aid for cancer patients; I'd like to think that it is helpful for everyone who wants a better, healthier life.



A second self-portrait. I felt I had taken control over my body and mind and improved my self-esteem and sense of well-being.

“The body is the temple of the soul,” the ancients proclaimed, and therefore what we consume helps to shape what we are. I believe that the way we feel and think can poison our bodies. Cancer may be one of many unfortunate results. We know that cancer is not necessarily lethal and that hope is a key component of well-being, perhaps equal in importance to nutrition. I never felt that I would die of cancer. I believe that there is a way to solve every problem, so deep down I knew that there had to be a way to wellness. I just had to stop doing all those things that I did not enjoy and that made me unhappy. I knew all too well what they were. Learning how to stop obeying orders was first and foremost for me; putting an end to always doing what others wanted while feeling guilty about my own wishes was also key. I felt I had found a way to free myself from

these things and that I had a right and duty to protect myself by alleviating distress and worry so I would be able to live longer. I believe that everybody has this right.

My Life After Cancer

With the chemotherapy complete, I felt the need to get away. I wanted to be alone. I wanted to be able to sleep whenever I felt tired; to talk to people only when I wished; to relax my body and mind. As it was summer, I had three months ahead of me to think about other things. I left for Greece.

That was the time when I felt an urge to take a closer look at Greek cuisine. I visited a Greek nutritionist, Dr. Koumentakis, a disciple of Dr. Shelton, who firmly believes that adopting a better diet is the key to maintaining one's health. As a result, Dr. Koumentakis does not prescribe any medicines whatsoever and only cures with the help of the appropriate diet. Some of the things he told me were quite astonishing, offering an early insight into the route I was about to follow.

I researched the dietary habits of the monks at Mount Athos, a place where culinary customs still remain distinctly Byzantine. I discovered that the monks rarely suffer from illnesses and typically die of old age. Unfortunately, being a woman, I was unable to visit Mount Athos in person, so I read every book I could find on their cooking habits. I also visited women's monasteries, where the kind nuns generously shared their recipes with me. This part of my research lasted a year.

I'm now free of cancer and feel better than ever. I am happier and have more strength to continue my life. Within five years, I have grown into an accomplished artist and re-invented myself as a writer and a cook with a healthy vision. Despite the feelings of pressure and insecurity that at times resurface, I believe I can do anything I choose, provided I am able to focus on it. There are other issues besides health and happiness, but I have been taught a valuable lesson: life is what you make it. From this perspective, I do not regret all that has happened. Cancer intervened to offer me the life I had wanted; it brought me the hope of happiness. I felt renewed and invigorated. Perhaps it was the food itself; perhaps it was the creative act of cooking. But the simple fact was that I felt good and wanted to continue feeling that way.

Wishing to continue in good spirits, I decided to refine and organize my recipes, drawing from my mother's handwritten recipes so that I could share them with others. The foundation of these recipes is well-known to Greeks who cook the traditional way. Some of the recipes have been collected during my stay in monasteries; others are my mother's. A basic rule is that I never fry. I begin by adding a little olive oil and a little filtered water (I never use tap water), simmer on low heat and never use a microwave oven, and use only a tiny pinch

of natural sea salt or pink Himalayan salt. Most importantly, I ensure that the ingredients are organic and fresh.

Carefully taste the food while preparing each recipe to ensure that it has the traditional and authentic Greek flavor. I prefer simple tastes; I'm not a fan of the elaborate style of cooking, where the natural taste of the ingredients disappears.

For Cancer Patients

Do not drink coffee. Actually avoid everything with caffeine. Stay away from sugar and alcohol other than the occasional glass of red wine. In the morning, before you drink or eat anything, take a tablespoon of organic sunflower oil, swish it in your mouth for a few seconds, and then spit out. You will notice that what you spit will have become white. You have just got rid of all the toxic bitterness that stays in your mouth from the medicines of the night before. The result is a clean mouth and a pleasant sensation.

I feel that knowing the vitamin and mineral content of food is important. I like to start off each recipe by explaining the nutritional aspects of the ingredients. But listing vitamins and their benefits is not enough. For example: "Vitamin B5 or Pantothenic Acid: vitamin B5 is excellent for stress, arthritis, infections, skin disorders, graying of hair, cholesterol, fatigue, listlessness, sensation of weakness, numbness or weakness, and soothing tingling and burning pain in the feet." That's all very well, but where are we to find that particular vitamin when we need it? What are the best foods for it? I thought these were important elements to include this in this book.

I have tried to explain everything in a simple and understandable way. The recipes are presented in an order similar to that seen on most restaurant menus so you can plan your meal as if you were in a Greek restaurant. *Bon appétit*, or as they say in Greece, *kali orexi!*