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Renowned local chef cooks up cross-cultural traditions in book

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Royal Oak — GEORGE VUTETAKIS CAN REMEMBER ALMOST THE MOMENT THAT HE BECAME A VEGETARIAN.

VUTETAKIS WAS 14 AND WAS ON A TRIP TO GREECE TO ATTEND A COUSIN'S BAPTISM, HE RECALLED.

"THERE WERE TWO GOATS, THEY WERE BEAUTIFUL AND I BEFRIENDED THEM," HE SAID. "THE NEXT DAY AFTER THE BAPTISM, THERE THEY WERE. THE DRUMSTICKS HAD HOOVES. THERE WAS A SKULL THAT WAS STILL STEAMING, WITH THE EYEBALLS STARING AT ME FROM THE PLATE.

"I REALIZED THAT THESE WERE MY FRIENDS."

VUTETAKIS SAID HE WASN'T JUST APPALLED, HE FOUND IT "UNCONSCIONABLE." OVER THE YEARS, HE DEVELOPED A PHILOSOPHY THAT ASKED, "WHY NOT EAT FOR HEALTH? WHY NOT EAT THE BEST THING FOR YOU?"

IT IS A PHILOSOPHY THAT CARRIED HIM TO THE INN SEASON CAFE IN ROYAL OAK, WHERE HE SERVED AS CHEF, BEGINNING IN 1981, AND EVENTUALLY BECAME OWNER FROM 1985 TO 2002 WITH A GREAT FOLLOWING.

"I LEFT WITH THE INTENTION OF DOING A BOOK. IT TOOK EIGHT YEARS," HE SAID. "THAT'S THE DEFINITION OF SLOW FOOD."

VUTETAKIS' PHILOSOPHY HAS TRAVELED WITH HIM TO SAN DIEGO, WHERE VUTETAKIS AND HIS WIFE, SARAH, HAVE DABBLED IN A VARIETY OF ACTIVITIES WHILE HE WROTE HIS RECENTLY PUBLISHED BOOK, VEGETARIAN TRADITIONS.

THE COUPLE RECENTLY RETURNED TO THE CAFE WHILE ON A BOOK SIGNING TOUR IN THE METRO AREA. VUTETAKIS LOOKED AROUND AND FOUND SOME THINGS HAD CHANGED.

"THERE USED TO BE A CABINET WHERE PEOPLE WOULD BRING PICTURES OF THEIR PETS. I GOT TO VIEW THEM EVERY DAY," HE SAID. A ROW OF TABLES SITS THERE NOW.

BUT OTHER STAPLES THAT VUTETAKIS CREATED AT THE RESTAURANT HAVE REMAINED ON THE MENU, LIKE BUDAPEST MUSHROOM SOUP, A TOTALLY VEGETARIAN CREATION IN WHICH MUSHROOMS AND CARROTS ARE SIMMERED IN A THICK BROTH WITH DILL AND OTHER SEASONINGS, AND THE EQUALLY VEGETARIAN FOURTH STREET BURGER. MADE OF GRAINS, IT IS MORE EASY TO DIGEST THAN NONVEGETARIAN OFFERINGS ELSEWHERE, HE SAID. THE BURGER WON THE PETA GOLDEN BUN AWARD, HE ADDED.

VUTETAKIS SAYS HE STILL HAS FAMILY IN THE AREA IN HUNTINGTON WOODS AND MENTIONS A GREAT AUNT, AND THE FAMILY'S CULINARY SPECIALTIES.

"THAT'S WHY IT IS CALLED VEGETARIAN TRADITIONS," HE SAID OF HIS BOOK. "ALL GREAT CULTURES HAVE FOOD AT THE CENTER OF WHAT THEY TREASURE. "... SO I TRIED TO GIVE PEOPLE A WINDOW INTO THE WORLD."

"FOOD IS ONE OF THE PRIMARY NURTURING ELEMENTS," HE ADDED. VUTETAKIS ADDED THAT HIS BOOK NOT ONLY SHARES RECIPES, BUT THE TRADITIONS AND MENTALITY BEHIND THE FOOD.

WIFE SARAH SAYS THAT HER HUSBAND DOES ALL THE COOKING AT HOME, BUT SHE TESTED ALL THE RECIPES IN THE BOOK WHILE COOKING FOR A PARENT AT ONE POINT.

VUTETAKIS' CULINARY JOURNEY HAS COME FROM THE STUDY OF EASTERN CONCEPTS LEARNED FROM MANY TRIPS TO GREECE AND SUCH PLACES AS INDIA. BUT HE SAID THAT HIS MENUS, AND THE BOOK, CROSS CULTURAL BARRIERS.

"I DON'T COOK PURE (EAST) INDIAN," HE SAID, FOR INSTANCE. THE IMPORTANT THING IS TO MAKE SURE "EVERY INGREDIENT IS HEALTHY, WITH NO PROCESSED FOOD OR PRESERVATIVES."

ADDED TO THAT ARE TRADITIONAL METHODS OF FOOD PREPARATION, WITH NO DEEP FRYING, HE ADDED, WITH PLANT-BASED SEASONING.

WHILE THERE ARE THREE BOOKS IN THE WORKS, VUTETAKIS ALSO HAS A WEBSITE WHERE VIEWERS CAN SIGN ON AS MEMBERS AND RECEIVE FREE RECIPES WHILE VIEWING VIDEOS, HE SAID. HE ALSO HAS A FACEBOOK PAGE AND IS ON TWITTER.

EVEN VUTETAKIS' OTHER LIVES CENTER AROUND FOOD. HE SAYS HE SPECIALIZES IN 1920S HOME RESTORATIONS. "WE DID GREAT KITCHENS," HE SAID. HE NOW ACTS AS A CONSULTANT TO THOSE WHOSE HOMES HE HAS RESTORED.

HE FINDS A PARALLEL BETWEEN HIS COOKING AND HOME RESTORATIONS. "IT CREATES SOMETHING THAT BRINGS THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN NEIGHBORHOODS UP," HE SAID.

HE SAID HE LONG HAS WORKED WITH LOCAL FARMERS, WHICH OFFERS "LESS OF A DEGREE OF SEPARATION BETWEEN YOU AND THE LAND." HE HAS HIGH PRAISE FOR THE ROYAL OAK FARMERS MARKET THAT HE SAID BEGAN IN 1929 AND THE EASTERN MARKET THAT BEGAN IN 1846. "THE FACT THAT IT'S BEING REDISCOVERED IS WONDERFUL," HE SAID.

VUTETAKIS LOOKS AROUND THE RESTAURANT AND IT IS CLEAR THAT HE STILL FINDS THAT WONDERFUL, TOO.

"THERE IS NOTHING LIKE THIS RESTAURANT IN SAN DIEGO," HE SAID. "THIS IS A GEM OF THE MIDWEST."

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Additional Facts

Where to find it

The 200-page hardcover edition of *Vegetarian Traditions* retails for \$29.99 and can be found on the author's website, the vegetarianguy.com, where Vutetakakis shares recipes, videos and stories. It can also be purchased on amazon.com, at the Book Beat in Oak Park and the Inn Season Cafe, located at 500 E. Fourth St. in Royal Oak.
