

Costa's Taverna

During our six years in Athens we must have visited Costa's taverna on average at least once a fortnight, usually on a Friday evening. From April until October we sat on battered white plastic garden chairs in a dusty forecourt at Formica topped tables covered in white paper tablecloths on which the children drew or played games such as noughts and crosses or battleships. Around our legs mangy cats and dogs waited for titbits to fall, but they never did. With the darker evenings we moved inside along with the garden furniture and were spared the presence of the animals. The area inside, I hesitate to call it the dining room, was large with a high ceiling, and walls a distinctive shade of faded tobacco brown. Just inside the glass door on the left was Costa's grill and barbeque territory surrounded by a Formica topped counter.

Costa was a small unkempt figure encased in a large dirty apron which was tied off around his generous middle. His hands were usually greasy, dirty and covered in minor cuts and burns and a cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth. All in all he was the most unhygienic and unsavoury thing in the whole building. At the back of the dining area were a few steps leading up to the toilets on the left and the kitchen on the right. This was Mamma Costa's domain; it was here that she and her daughter worked their magic that was the heart and soul of Costa's. Tassia was her name but everyone called her Mamma Costa. She was almost the opposite of Costa, twinkly eyed, smiley faced, light and quick on her feet as she buzzed around the kitchen enveloped in a clean flowery wrap-around pinafore.

There was never a menu, you just asked the young waiters, usually extended family members what were the specials of the day. Most meals began the same way, tzaziki, chips, deep-fried courgettes and meat balls. Four simple dishes but each in their own way sheer perfection. The tzatziki was rich, creamy and satisfyingly chewy, the chips fresh and crisp, the courgette fingers covered in the lightest of batters and the meatballs, well we have never tasted any to compare with Mamma's. We ate with our fingers, dipping everything in the tzaziki. The children loved it.

There were always pork chops, chicken souvlaki and chicken pieces battered to a regulation thinness cooking on the grill. Occasionally sausages appeared but we were never sure where they came from or what they were made of, but we knew that Mamma had not made them. There was never any fish, after all we were 40 minutes from the coast and we could not see the sea. Tomatoes, peppers and aubergines, when in season, featured strongly on the specials lists. When stuffing the tomatoes and peppers Mamma sometimes used rice and sometimes mince, but whenever they were on we had to have them. She made her moussaka in the shell of half an aubergine with potatoe slices, we always had double portions, but in my view her piece de resistance was her stuffed aubergine. The glistening purple vegetable was filled with fragrant tomatoes, onions, aubergines, sweet olive oil and herbs. Ambrosia.

But eating in Costa's was not just about the food although that was the biggest attraction; it was a social occasion with families meeting up at the end of the week. The ex-pats gathered early in the evening and drifted away just after ten when their children became tired and drowsy, then their places were taken by the locals who injected Costa's with their own brand of noise and laughter. The children all knew each other from the British school which was in the same area and would play games of catch, chase, and hide and seek in and around the courtyard. The parents sat together rearranging the rickety tables to provide two separate eating areas with the children's tables adjacent. Bottles of coke and fanta adorned one table and beer and wine the other.

On our last visit to Athens in 2004 we paid a sentimental visit to Costa's one Friday evening. The courtyard was packed as usual. Our charming waitress was Costa's granddaughter who had played with our daughters all those years ago. The food was nearly as good as we remembered it, and the meatballs were as perfect as always. We had heard that Costa had suffered a heart attack and died several years before, but were delighted to find Mama Costa sitting, dozing on a comfy old armchair beside the kitchen.

On hearing our voices she opened her eyes and smiled.

'You came back,' she said in heavy accented English. 'It's so nice when people come back'

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