

An Insider's Note

By *Thalia Tsiachlakis*

Stelios Parliaros, a giant in the field of modern Greek pastry, tells the story of the country's confectionery and pâtisseries by presenting fifty-six sweet delights that are part of that history.

I can't say for sure in which year I met him, but I remember that the first substantial discussion we had took place on the occasion of an interview I had with him for the magazine "Gefsi – To Live Better", published by Technikon Ekdoseon. We met at Fresh in Palaio Faliro, which had only opened a few months earlier. It was a pâtisserie unlike any other at that time; everything around me looked unpretentious, utilitarian and bright, just like Stelios. I felt like I knew him from long ago; I felt that we were talking the same language, even if we'd had such different experiences. I liked how he comported himself and I appreciated his modesty, even though I understood that his intention was to transform our pastries and other sweets, to modernize them while still taking tradition into account, trying to understand the philosophy behind the heritage and to build on that without, however, ever feeling restricted by it. What I took away from that meeting, which lasted several hours, was the image of a man satisfied with his fate, blessed with lots of love from his family, who decided at one point that the best way to channel energies was with confectionery. He spoke with passion, and with a respect unprecedented for his age, about his teachers, the confectioners alongside whom he had apprenticed. Although

the media at that time had already anointed him as the next big thing, I never had the feeling that he let it turn his head at all. I sensed that he was ambitious, that he was a perfectionist, but at the same time I felt that he was principled and had his feet firmly on the ground. You could see the fire in his eyes, his creative enthusiasm, and his ceaseless appetite for work.

By happy coincidence, Stelios Parliaros found himself at the crossroads between two eras and, as a man with a wholly different philosophy, he was able to change the old ways and establish his own milestone in the evolution of Greek confectionery. His contribution to this evolution can be summed up in two adjectives: "fresh" and "light". He created Greek sweets with Greek ingredients, replaced compôtes – and, wherever possible, candied fruits – with fresh fruit, and cut back on sugar. Over the years, he never messed with the classics, loading them up whimsically with sweet chocolates or unnecessary icings and jams just to "make them stand out".

Those of us who were around when Stelios, at age 23, opened the first Fresh clearly remember his approach to pâtisserie aesthetics and the trends that he introduced to confectionery.

We won't forget how he transformed the once drab street Sekeri with his bright and cheerful pâtisserie-delicatessen, or how people lined up there to buy the kiwi-and-grape tart or the honeycomb cake, made with honey and lavender.

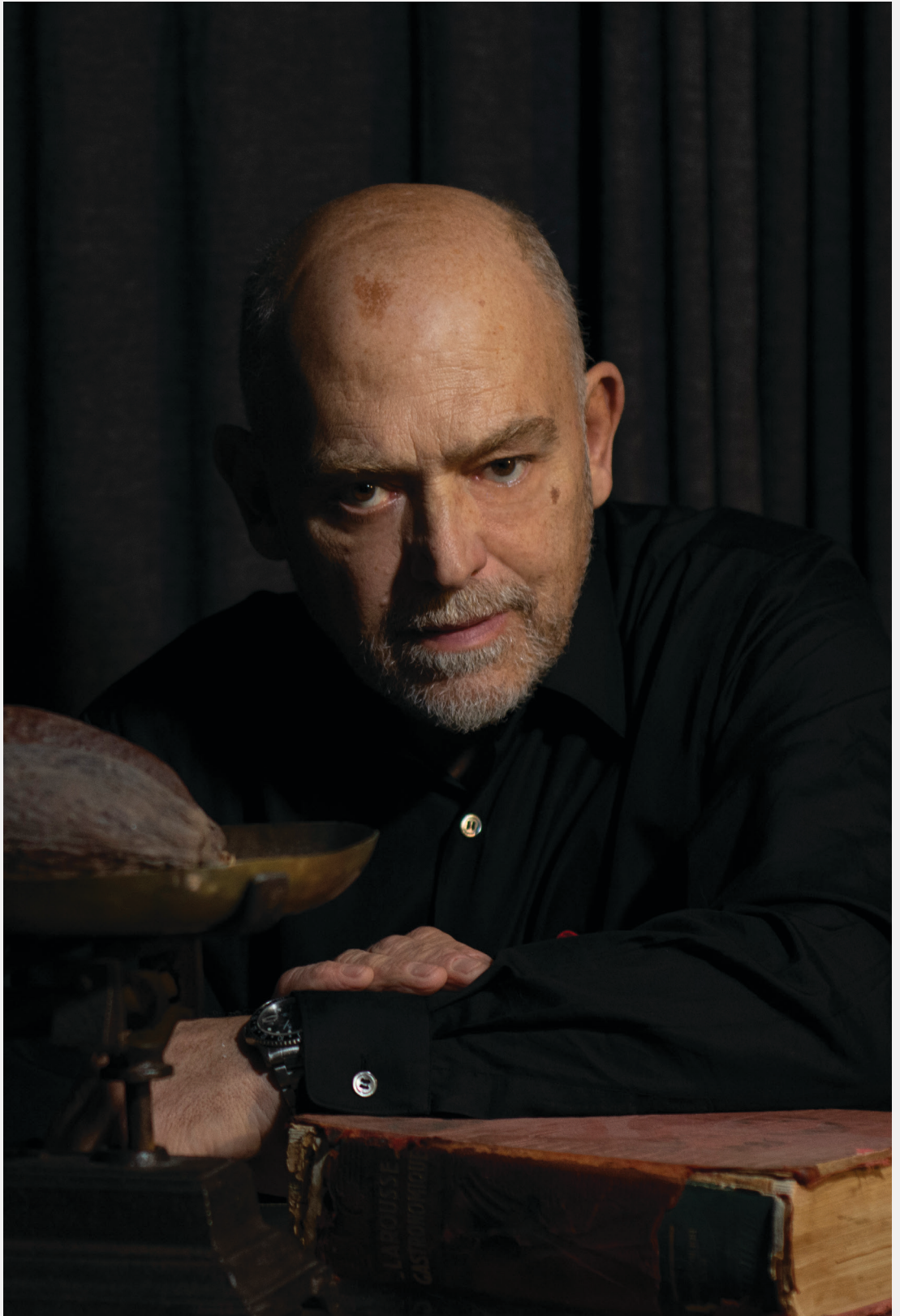
Today, having known Stelios Parliaros for so many years, I can say with certainty that there's no one better qualified to narrate the history of our pâtisseries and the treats you'll find in them. He is a man who has experienced this culinary world first-hand, both during the period of his apprenticeship, which he served alongside some master craftsmen, and afterwards. Being part of this history himself, he's the ideal individual to present it to us, through 56 recipes, all representative of Greek pâtisserie, in the book you're holding in your hands.

Introduction

Dessert has always been part of the culture and the traditions of Greece.

Most Greeks have fond memories of candied preserves, presented with ritualistic care on crystal saucers and eaten with small spoons. They can still picture the candy bowls at Grandmother's house, always full of chocolate treats, or the halva made with semolina that followed so many wonderful meals, or the large glass jar, full of butter-less cookies, carefully placed on a high kitchen shelf, out of reach of little fingers.

Greek housewives of old knew the secrets of their ingredients and they knew how to make sweets without spending a lot. Confectionery in Greece had authenticity and soul. They might have been missing basic ingredients, such as butter, but the Greek countryside always had other gifts to offer in their place. Olive oil, fruits, nuts and honey all featured in sweets made with passion and with love for others.





Crucial to the evolution of Greek confectionery were the influences from those Greeks who had lived in Turkey and Egypt, largely in the cities of Constantinople and Alexandria respectively. They were cosmopolitan people who came to Greece with ideas and the knowledge of materials and techniques needed to create the foundations of a new confectionery.

I was born in Constantinople, between syrups and butters. I grew up eating kadaifi and baklavas, brioche buns and Turkish delight. I still have magical images imprinted on my mind of colorful markets full of spices, fruits of all kinds, fresh nuts, and flavored butter. As a child, I experienced the grandeur of the pâtisseries in that city. Coming to Greece, I brought with me my love for sweets, and over the next 40 years I worked hard, hoping to put my own stamp on confectionery in this country, all while keeping the country's quality raw materials in the foreground of my work.

It is unfortunate that, during the years when so many Greeks were flooding back into the country from Asia Minor and Egypt, Greece did not seize the opportunity to create an educational system for confectioners; without one, its efforts to preserve old recipes and to draw on tradition as a foundation for further evolution failed. Unlike other countries, such as France, that have invested in preserving the history of their sweets, Greece has let the knowledge of certain sweets and techniques slip into oblivion, lost to time, and our confectionery is the poorer for it.

The need for convenience has driven the younger generations of confectioners away from pure raw ingredients, preferring ready mixes and standardized products. While there are many accomplished young confectioners at work today, what I've noticed is that there's a tendency towards a sterile copying of recipes, which means that these confectioners are not creating their own identity or pushing confectionery forward.

Instead of using our tradition in confectionery to shape its future, we stand awkwardly in front of the creations of other countries, trying to copy them. Imagine this, for instance – we're in a picturesque village in Greece and, instead of enjoying a nice walnut cake, they bring us panna cotta! It's time instead to appreciate our own legacy in confectionery and, with that as a foundation, to proceed with its evolution.

Based on my experiences, I'm attempting in this book to tell the story of Greek confectionery through 56 traditional Greek sweets that everyone will love. Some are classics and some are the results of a little creative liberty. I hope that these 56 recipes will inspire you; perhaps you'll even create your own variations, yet always insisting on those wonderful raw materials, gifts from the Greek soil, that guarantee success.

Stelios Parliaros