

Have you ever tried to make a dish from a cuisine you love, and never been able to reproduce that *taste*? I used to wonder why?

Taste is a sense that I have always found intriguing and fascinating. By *taste*, I do not mean the flavour of specific foods such as an apple, an orange or a banana, but a more general sense of *taste* that is the expression of a culture. It is the result of different elements, combined in a particular way that is the interpretation of a tradition.

The various cuisines - Indian, or Chinese, French, German or Italian – all have a uniqueness which goes beyond the ingredients they use. Every culture has dishes that have been reproduced for generations, mostly without recipes, based on *tastes* that always evolve yet never change in essence. If I tried to make a curry from scratch, with all the correct ingredients, the end result would be as though I were speaking pigeon Punjabi, at best a good approximation.

Taste is more than the sum of its ingredients. I first came to realise this at home as a boy. My mother's cooking was traditional, following techniques and recipes learnt from her mother. It had a personal style, which was "mother's *taste*". My father, who loved cooking, would do it once a week and on special occasions. When he cooked, the food sparkled with flavour, even though it was the same dish. That was "father's *taste*."

We also experienced aunt Marietta's *taste* and aunt Stella's *taste* and so on with other relatives, who all cooked the same dishes, but with their own individual style. As a child I associated these *tastes* with their faces and voices, as if their food reflected their personalities.

Living in London, I have been exposed to many different cuisines and realised that each cuisine has such a distinctive *taste* – Indian, French Chinese and Italian – that it cannot be just the sum of its ingredients. Whilst on holiday in Crete, I discovered that many of its ingredients and style of cooking were similar to those from Puglia, the region where I was born, and the *taste* reproduced bore a true likeness, more so than the *taste* from Venice, a Republic that had imposed its rule on Crete for about 300 years. Why should that be? I learnt that the first settlers in Puglia came from Crete, and Puglia was part of the Magna Graeca for about 400 years. How did that *taste* survive for 2000 years, considering the lack of contact between the two regions? Was it passed on from generation to generation, as were the Greek expressions in our dialect?

I strongly believe that *taste* carries the same heritage as a language, evolving over the years, influenced by different cultures and ethnic groups merging together, but never losing its character and identity. As language varies in intonation, accent, and ways of expression, according to city, neighbourhood and social background, so does *taste*, which is similarly learnt in childhood and determines the way we appreciate and enjoy food.

And when cooking, the end result will inevitably be influenced by it. I know my cooking is. I like to believe that somehow part of the heritage of the first Cretan settlers in Puglia is still present in the *taste* I produce.