



THE FEARLESS OLIVE  
BY REEMA ISLAM

## Sheep Shearing or Kouraes in Crete

One of the first things you notice on the mountains of Crete are the goats and the sheep. Hordes of them. Blocking roads as they waddle along, guided by their shepherd's tinkling their bells or simply, camouflaged amidst the brown-green Mediterranean landscape on the mountains of this Greek island. Even the cuisine spells goats, in the form of meat or from the various cheeses that goat's milk produces. It is a popular form of livelihood, where most shepherds still reside in sleepy villages along the mountains of Crete, maintaining this ancient tradition of animal farming.

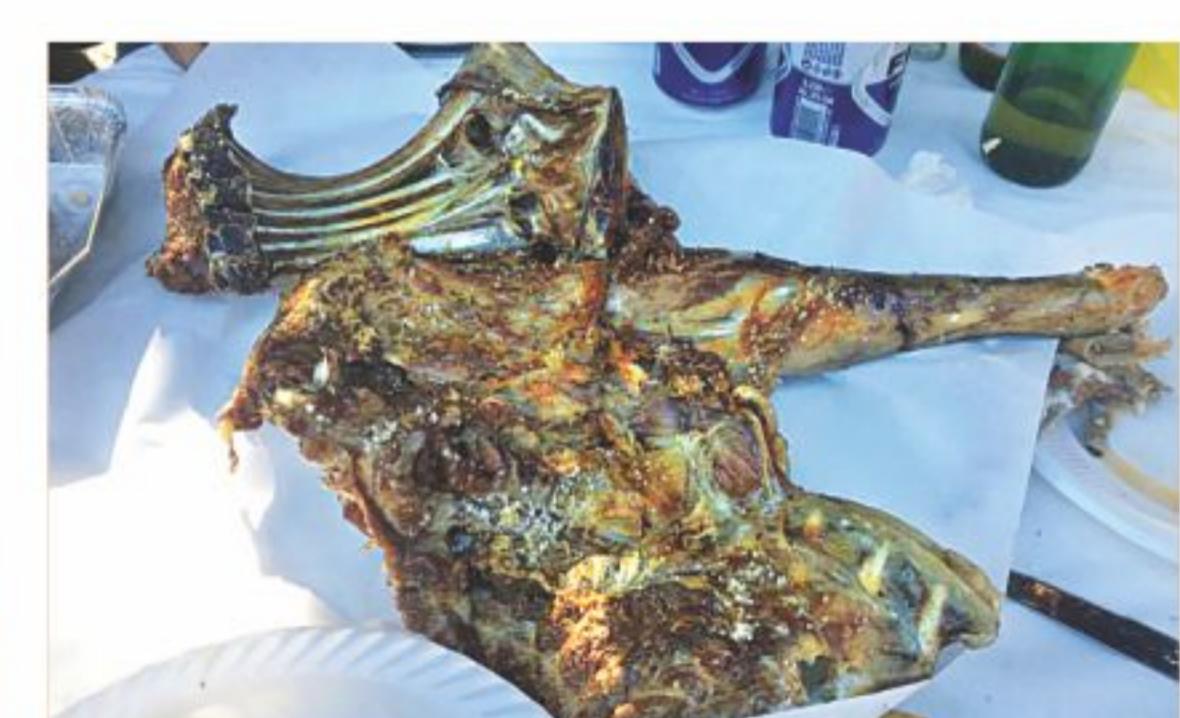
As the days get hotter and temperatures soar in the 40s (C), it is time to relieve the sheep of their cumbersome wool and the shepherd sends out a verbal invitation to all friends and family. Each shepherd chooses a day of convenience for everyone, as this annual event brings together people from the village and even the diaspora living in the cities to enjoy an evening of some hard work, followed by a hearty meal hosted by the shepherd. The sheep roam this rocky terrain with free abandon so when the day arrives, everyone heads up to the mountains in their 4 wheelers, carrying boxes of cakes, pastries or drinks for the host. The women have a specific task of cooking goats meat in a pot on a stone fire while the men prepare a fire and set up a circular grill, with goats, sliced into halves, hung on stakes all around it. This is called an antichristo and the only spice used is salt!

As the afternoon gets cooler, the men roll up their sleeves and bring out the sheep, dragging them towards an open space as the sheep initially resist. Their feet are tied up and using one hand only, huge shearing scissors are used to cut away the wool, in a painless process. The task takes about 5 minutes per sheep and as soon as

they open the binds, the sheep literally leap off with relief at their lighter bodies! They start gathering in a crowd and wait for more sheep to join them, while the wool keeps piling up. At this point, the women enter the pen and collect the wool into sacks. The wool feels muddy and even wet but is possibly one of the best experiences for your hands, as wool naturally contains

The women have by now prepared a mammoth bowl of salad with local herbs and tomatoes, feta cheese, cucumbers, peppers, olive oil and boiled potatoes or zucchini. The salad is dished out, drinks provided and the boiled goat meat is first served followed by the arrival of the shepherd, carrying huge pieces of the half lamb on a stick, sliding off the meat in one fluid move. Someone cuts up major portions but

could possibly not eat anymore, the desserts are brought out with more fruit and drinks. One of the elderly members of the party eventually takes a shoulder bone from the remains of the antichristo goat and cleans it with a knife to read the fortunes of the shepherd. Colorings and markings are noted and predictions, like death in the family have been known to come true so many shepherds prefer to avoid this



lanolin and the after effect leaves your skin feeling amazingly soft. The shepherd offers the laboring guests with a plate of cooked goat lungs or liver and some raki; an alcohol made of grape residues from wine making. The shearing done, the animals are let off to roam the mountains but some cheeky ones escape the shearing process and are duly dragged back to get sheared!

everyone basically uses their hands to bite off the succulent meat, subtly flavored by salt. A rice dish eventually arrives which has been cooked in the soup of the boiled goat, sprinkled with lemon and acts as the best palate cleanser and side dish. Reminiscent of a congee or a panta bhaat which also appears at Cretan wedding menus. The Greeks have an immense heart and appetite for food and when you feel that they

practice. The evening ends with music, songs and dance, accompanied by the louto or the lute and the warm wishes of everyone that took part in this social event.

**Photo: Marcelo Miranda**

Reema is currently staying in the village of Gonies, near Heraklion, attending a summer school on material culture with the Heritage Management Organisation.