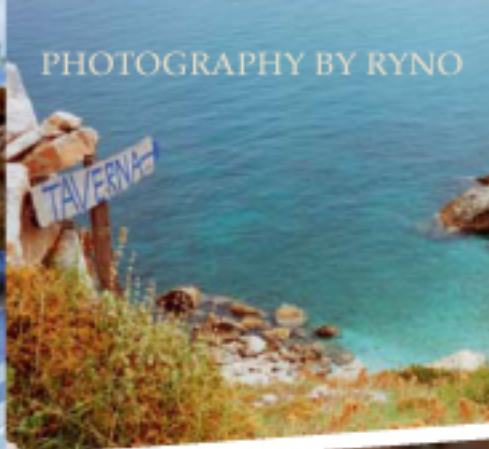
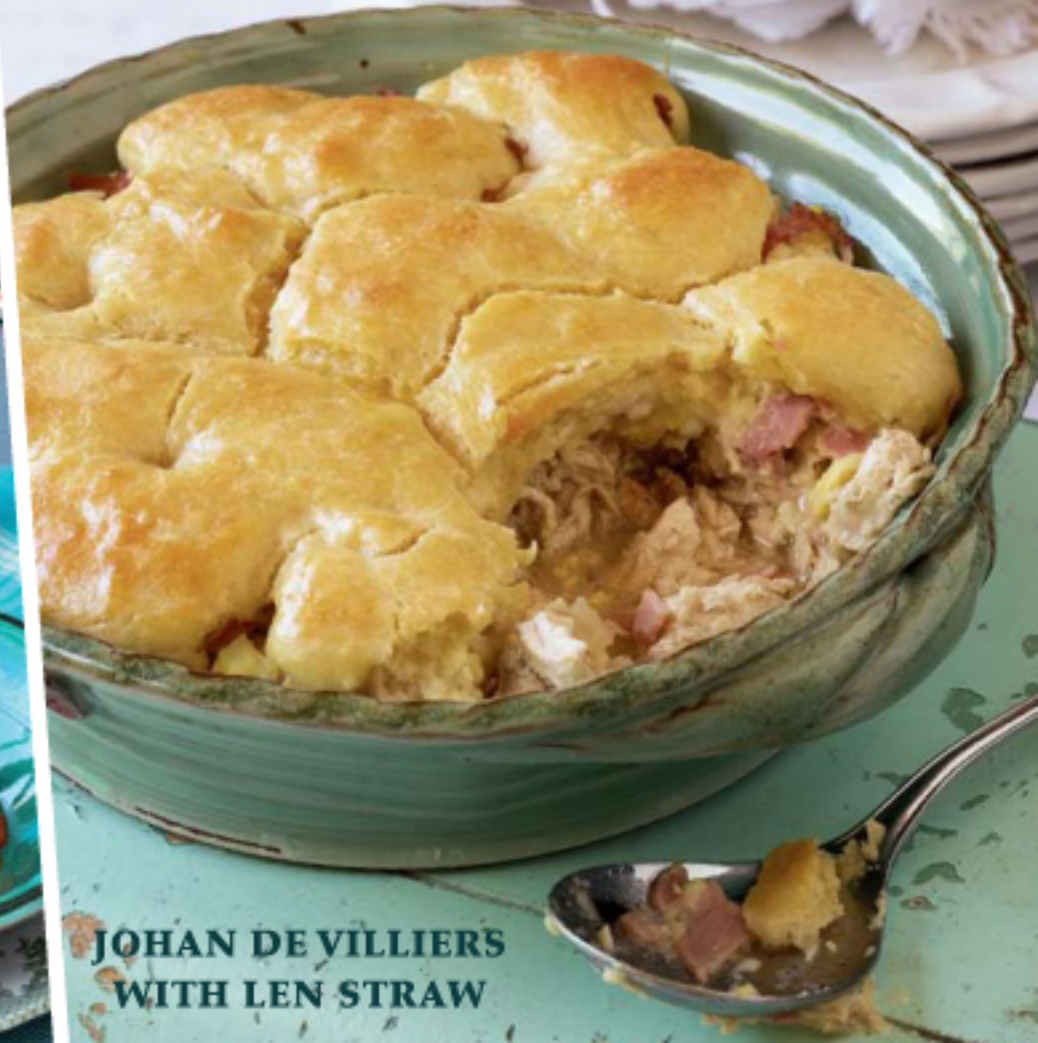


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Once upon a
Chicken Pie
AND OTHER FOOD TALES



JOHAN DE VILLIERS
WITH LEN STRAW

Once upon a Chicken Pie

AND OTHER FOOD TALES



This book is dedicated to all the food lovers and travellers around the world who have either knowingly or unwittingly inspired us.

JOHAN DE VILLIERS WITH LEN STRAW

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*F*OREWORD

It was in the old Huguenot town of Franschhoek, in a tiny, elegant hotel that we met two uniquely gifted characters who were the heart and soul of the establishment. They managed everything to perfection. Their daily focus centred on the comfort and well-being of their guests as though it were their own home.

Len with his infectious, effervescent nature was there to greet us and place us under their protection, while Johan with his gentle, smiling eyes – Jasper, his beloved greyhound at his side – welcomed us with all his heart. If a shadow of concern flickered across his brow, it was merely to be assured that everything was to our liking.

I was so entranced by the beauty that enveloped me, I recall traipsing behind Johan like a puppy into his kitchen, his domain. And it was there, with the light streaming through the open windows, the heady aroma of the sun-ripened fruits and freshly harvested herbs piled in abundance on great platters like a Dutch still life, that I had found Nirvana. This kitchen was a hive of happy industry where Johan encouraged apprentices while he stirred the pots, tasted sauces and conjured up his dishes.

Try to imagine the pleasure of my first morning. Peacefully refreshed after our long flight, we came down to a breakfast table that Matisse should have painted: bunches of wild flowers gathered that morning and popped into a vase, an assortment of the prettiest flowered china rescued from bric-a-brac shops by the incomparable eye of Johan and Len during their years of browsing. They were living the Buddhist teaching: 'To truly give from one's heart, one must not merely offer, but must bestow a gift, unbidden at the feet of the guest.'

In this book you will find far more than a compendium of recipes. It is a collection of a lifetime, appreciating the skill of cooking, understanding the alchemy that ties food together; that the right twist of lime, a thread of saffron and few torn leaves of tarragon can make a dish sing. Inspiration came to Johan at the knee of his mother, and from his sister Voy's passion for cooking delicious, Afrikaans food for the family. Throughout his years of travel, his repertoire broadened and expanded, finally realising that truthful food is the best and that good cooking, in the end, is an act of love.

PATSY PUTTNAM

*I*NTRODUCTION

Lennie and I have been blessed with creative spirits, minds and hands. Thirsty for inspiration and information, we love travelling. In bothersome, impecuniary times, we rely on books and magazines to keep us buoyant. Our families and friends are also invaluable in this respect and not a day passes without us being touched by a kindred spirit. Our French-style tea and coffee shop, la Petite Tarte, miraculously attracts guests who we not only relate to, but also grow fond of, or in the case of foreign visitors, we are very sad to bid adieu.

Our lives have been filled with opportunities. Len worked as a bookkeeper, in retailing at Harrods, created beautiful displays at the old Stuttafords, moved into PR and managed a shopping centre. He established a charming deli/take-away called Straws, which grew into a fully fledged restaurant in Cavendish Square. But eventually the creative urge triumphed and he started his career in painting, both pictures and interiors.

When I left Stellenbosch University in 1969, I worked as a designer at a firm of architects – but only until I had enough money for my *grande tour* of Europe. Ten months and ten million unforgettable experiences later, I returned to Cape Town. Four days after my return I took up a position as lecturer in jewellery-making at the Ruth Prowse Art Centre run by the jovial, capable and well-loved Erik Laubscher, who nurtured a unique environment of creativity. I also grabbed the opportunity of working in the costume props department of the Cape Performing Arts Board. More interaction with talented designers and artists!

Some 18 years of teaching at government schools followed, working with children through to young adults, and always trusting that they enjoyed themselves as much as I did. In the meantime, Len's decorative painting studio grew and grew and the temptation to join him was overwhelming.

Together we established a successful studio-base from where we taught, executed commissions and compiled three books. A successful sideline of Len's was ChinaWorks, where he and Belinda Wilkinson produced hand-painted china. The harder we worked, the more frequently we could visit friends in Greece and Egypt. Painting contracts followed in Cyprus, Paris, New York and finally on Skiathos, which saw us helping to establish Villa Athena. That was followed by two years of running the villa and its self-catering cottages. It was hard work, but we met wonderful people and cemented everlasting friendships.

On our return to South Africa, we joined the Royal Portfolio as managers of La Residence in Franschhoek. Once more we were blessed with beautiful surroundings, gentle guests and magnificent experiences. After seven years we moved back to our Cape Town home. Cristiana, daughter of our friend Lina, was ready to sell her lovely *salon du thé* and coffee shop to us and we jumped at the opportunity to be independent again. la Petite Tarte seems to attract a most pleasant, refined clientele, we see our friends regularly and treasured old friends have been coming back into our lives.

A delightful aspect of growing older is the facility to look back. I presume that it is a universal phenomenon to discard, or pass on, more and more chattels, treasure or junk – whatever clutters one's 'later' world. This world of mine produced little notebooks, slips of paper, itineraries, museum tickets, photographs and many memories of our very own history. Precious as these are to us, Len and I worked together to record them and present them to others who may enjoy them with us.

The recipes all have connotations of feasts, family meals, gatherings of friends or quiet tables *à deux*. Some dishes have always been around, others are new and some have reappeared. Therein lies the fascinating quality of food. To have others at one's table and to entertain them with food, drink and hospitality is a privilege and a gift. Passing on a few of 'our' recipes is an extension of that. The title, 'Once Upon a Chicken Pie', Lennie says, 'fell out of the sky', a thought that came to him. It had immediate appeal though and inspired the link to the children's rhymes and story titles. Once the child in us was awoken, it was unstoppable!

Never at a loss for a dream or two, we will forever want to go back to visit our friends overseas, to discover new places, to enjoy our home, to do things to it, and to paint, cook, listen to music, string up some beads, scratch in the garden and spoil some doggies again.

At least one little dream has come to fruition: this book!

JOHAN DE VILLIERS



Once Upon a Chicken Pie



*An oil painting we bought in Cairo (left),
and our first view of Skiathos harbour
from the ferry (below).*



le HICKEN PIE AFTER MIDNIGHT

Early in the summer season of 2001 – the new Villa Athena not yet on the tourist map – we were quiet. Skiathos was becoming busier by the day, and shopkeepers stretched their days longer and longer ... making the most of trade-on-tap. Takis and Niki, our dear friends from the city of Volos, had opened a third shop that year and were weary even before the season began.

We wanted to reward them for their kindness and invited them to dine with us. Our time was flexible, theirs was ruled by the shops. Lennie asked Takis when they would like to join us for a meal. After various protracted consultations with Niki, Giorgos, Theologia and Poppie (real name Caliope, after one of the nine Muses) – all involved in the running of the shops – an appropriate time was chosen.

‘We come for lunch at 12 o’clock!’

‘Oh,’ said Lennie, ‘a midday meal then?’

‘No, no,’ said Takis, ‘the night lunch ...!’

And so they arrived at Villa Athena at 12.00, 12.30 and 1.00 in the dead of night. With them came two friends who play in the State Symphony Orchestra of Thessaloniki. Oh goodness, we thought, two eccentric Greek musicians. To our surprise, however, both were young, attractive and pleasant, only one of them being slightly eccentric and the other a little melancholy. This was the start of a most significant friendship with Yannis and Mimis.

The main ingredient of a successful dinner party fell into our laps! Jovial and handsome Takis, Niki with her beautiful lilting operatic voice, bird-like and petite Theologia twittering in Gringlish, Giorgos’s low, serious voice as percussion, Poppie with her drama-training doing the hot-potato, Mimis sounding like his violin rapidly speaking in Greek, English and French, while Yannis in true cello-style provided a steady sensible tone to it all. And that all before the wine ...

We were concerned that our friends might not enjoy outlandish food. On the other hand, I did not feel myself capable of producing a genuine Greek meal. Eventually we offered them a salad of ripe tomatoes and fresh basil from our kitchen garden, slices of fried Melinzana with thick yoghurt and origanum (freshly picked in the mountains that afternoon), and something that I introduced as ‘kotopita’ – chicken pie. I had made the word up, but they assured me that that was exactly what it was. Instead of making a large pie using layers and layers of phyllo pastry, I created individual parcels of filling wrapped in buttery phyllo with a honey-brown twist to crown each one. This was old hat back home in Cape Town, but our Greek friends loved it! The filling was flavoured with tarragon – a herb not too frequently used in Greek cuisine – and enriched with some sour cream.

‘The same,’ the guests concluded, ‘but not the same. *Poli oreia* (very good), Jo-han!’

Sadly, we had no left-overs for the real 12 o’clock lunch the next day.



Skiathos harbour



Our wonderful friend, Takis.

TARRAGON CHICKEN PIE

in phyllo

30 ml sunflower oil
1 large chicken
2 sticks celery, cut into 4-cm pieces
3 medium carrots, cleaned and sliced
2 leeks, topped, tailed and thinly sliced
10 ml dried tarragon
1 litre water
salt
45 ml cake flour
500 g phyllo pastry
125 g butter, melted

Pour the oil into a saucepan and heat on medium heat. Brown the chicken in the saucepan, turning from time to time to sear all over.

Add the vegetables and tarragon, then pour the water over the chicken. Add a little salt. Simmer until the chicken is really tender, falling off the bone. Remove the chicken and leave to cool down. Strain the liquid, discarding the vegetables. Leave to stand until all the fat has risen to the top, then skim it off.

Return the saucepan to the stove with the strained liquid and boil until this 'stock' has reduced to ± 750 ml, then top up with 250 ml water to make 1 litre of liquid.

Bone and skin the chicken, reserving all the good, solid meat and set it aside. Preheat the oven to 180 °C.

Whisk the flour into the reduced stock and bring it to the boil, stirring constantly to avoid lumps from forming. Pour this thickened sauce over the chicken and mix well. Leave to cool. Place 12 sheets of the phyllo pastry on a cutting board and cut them in half. Brush a sheet with a little melted butter, then place another sheet on top of it at an angle and brush with butter. Repeat twice more, i.e. you should have a 'staggered stack' of 4 sheets. Scoop about 3 tablespoons (45 ml) of the chicken filling into the centre. Gather the outer edges of the pastry together and close them over the filling to form a pouch, twisting the pastry to close it. Make 5 more of these pouches.

Arrange the pouches on a baking tray and brush any leftover melted butter over them. Bake for about 15 minutes, but do take care as phyllo pastry can darken very suddenly. The parcels should be pale golden in colour. Serve with roasted vine tomatoes and wilted spinach leaves. Serves 6 as a main course





PHILIP'S CHICKEN PIE

1 whole chicken (±1.5 kg), cut into portions	TOPPING
salt and pepper to taste	1 egg, beaten
30 ml butter	125 ml oil
1 onion, chopped	125 ml milk
8 peppercorns	120 g cake flour
3 blades mace or 5 ml ground mace	10 ml baking powder
6 allspice berries	3 ml mustard powder
500 ml water	salt
125 ml dry white wine	
1 egg, beaten	
juice of 1 lemon	
2 hard-boiled eggs, roughly chopped	
4 slices gypsy ham, chopped	

Season the chicken portions with the salt and pepper. Fry each portion in the butter in a heavy saucepan, to seal. Remove the chicken from the saucepan.

Brown the onion in the same saucepan, then return the chicken pieces together with the peppercorns, mace and allspice. Pour in the water and wine. Bring to the boil, then cover and simmer until the chicken is very tender. Turn the heat off, remove the chicken from the saucepan and leave to cool. Skin and debone the chicken, and flake the flesh.

Whisk the beaten egg with the lemon juice, then add a little (about 125 ml) of the warm cooking liquid. Stir the egg mixture into the liquid in the saucepan. Cook, stirring over a low heat until slightly thickened. Add the flaked chicken to the sauce. Pour the mixture into an ovenproof baking dish and sprinkle with the chopped eggs and ham.

Preheat the oven to 180 °C.

For the topping, whisk together the egg (reserve a little for brushing), oil and milk. Sift the dry ingredients together, then add to the egg mixture. Mix thoroughly, but do not overwork. Cover the chicken with spoonfuls of the batter (they should look like scones).

Brush lightly with the left-over beaten egg and bake for 30 minutes. Serve with yellow rice and seasonal vegetables. Serves 6 as a main course



Our late friend Philip du Toit in contemplative mood on my balcony in Mouille Point, Cape Town, 1969.



The Monastery of Evangelistria in the mountains above Skiathos, and (opposite) a ceramic sculpture by John Knowers.



Yannis and the Beanstalk





Churches on Mykonos (top), and traditional open-work, cotton curtains at Villa Ella, Skiathos (bottom).

We did not at first realise that there is a distinct difference between the overwhelming hospitality and generosity of Greek people, and genuine long-term friendships. All newcomers are entitled to the first. *Xenia* (hospitality) is a given; only a Greek with shoddy manners will deny a stranger that. Real friendship, however, needs to be earned. The process involves many nights of ouzo and *mezethes* (tasty morsels), talking and talking into the wee hours, disagreements, little gifts, solicited and unsolicited advice, kind gestures and a few put-downs – in fact, all the aspects that enhance and test a friendship. And that takes time, but it lasts.

Such was the friendship we built up with Yannis (not the same Yannis as referred to on p. 7), Maria and their daughters. There is no doubt that our love affair with Skiathos would have been lacking were it not for them.

They are pillars of the community, hoteliers, entrepreneurs, villagers, but above all, hardworking farmers. They have sheep, goats, orchards, vegetable and flower gardens, vines, chickens, geese and even kept turkeys until Maria decided they should be no more! Petite Maria cooks and bakes, she knits, crochets and enjoys home crafts. She nurses lambs, collects eggs, harvests olives and fruits, launders and cleans. Happiness, for her, is being busy.

Yannis is the same. His big, strong hands can drive an earth digger or nurture a chick. He does not do things in half-measures and, as he ages, it probably shows. But he remains a handsome man; the blonde hair is greying, but the blue eyes still sparkle. As he reminisces about his youth on the island, one conjures up visions of the Golden Greek: blonde, blue-eyed, fishing, swimming and charming the young girls! The Cat from Skiathos! His wise sayings all find their context in farm life. For instance, a boy was once described as too stupid to divide the hay between two horses, or explaining the awkward situation he and Maria were in when they each had to stay in a hotel they had to run, separated and missing each other, he maintained, 'Oh well, one cannot keep the bull with the cows all the time!'

Since I grew up with a dearest father who was a farmer at heart, I have a lot of love, respect and admiration for farmers. Yannis understood this and loved talking about his farm, the animals and fruit trees. He showed me the trenches, the new, budding vines, the rich, crumbly compost and the new patch of broad beans. The bushes were lush and bearing with such fecundity that he could not harvest them quickly enough. Yannis threw a plastic bag at me and commanded, 'Pick!' I did. At half-a-bag full I hesitated – one should not be too grabby. 'Pick!' he said again. And I did. Until the bag overflowed.

Then we had an *ouzaki* (a local drink) while I was shown how to prepare Yannis's beans. 'It's not good,' he explained, 'if you do not take many ...,' which I discovered was dill. Such was our introduction to the many bean dishes of the traditional Greek kitchen.

WHITE BEAN PÂTÉ

500 g fresh shelled white beans

1 large leek or 3 shallots

2 fresh or 4 dried bay leaves

125 ml virgin olive oil

4 spring onions, finely chopped

50 g flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped

2 sprigs of thyme, finely chopped

salt and pepper to taste

Boil the beans, leek (or shallots) and bay leaves in plenty of water until the beans are very soft. Skim off any impurities from time to time. The beans will need at least 40 minutes to soften. Drain the beans, reserving a small quantity of the cooking liquid, but discard the leek (or shallots) and bay leaves.

Place the beans and about half of the oil into a food processor, and blend into a smooth mixture. (Use a little of the cooking liquid to achieve a light, almost frothy, mixture.) Add the spring onions and herbs, and blend. Season to taste.

Decant the mixture into a shallow dish and drizzle the rest of the oil over the entire surface. This prevents it from drying out and becoming seriously unattractive. Garnish as you wish.

Enjoy the pâté with warm pita bread, lashings of olive oil, a squeeze of lemon juice, more chopped spring onions, herbs, a jug of village wine ... and some villagers! Serves 6 as a starter





ANNIS'S BROAD BEANS

500 g very young, fresh whole broad beans or fresh shelled broad beans

125 ml virgin olive oil

1 large onion, peeled and sliced

2 large potatoes, peeled and cubed

2 large (Yannis-sized!) handfuls fresh dill, roughly chopped

a little grated nutmeg

salt to taste

ground white pepper to taste

The beans I got from Yannis were young and tender. All I needed to do was to top and tail them, and discard the string along the seam of those pods that did not quite pass the infantile test. Should your fresh shelled beans be slightly past their prime, dunk them in boiling water to loosen their skins. Remove the skins with their 'eyes'. This is a seemingly thankless task, but one with great returns! Cut the beans into 4-cm lengths.

Heat the olive oil in a saucepan and braise the onion slices over a medium heat until golden and almost melting. Add the potatoes and braise for a few minutes.

Stir in the beans until covered in oil, then braise. Keep a moderate heat going, adding a small amount of water in order to stew the dish. Do not cover the saucepan, but stir occasionally and simmer gently. If necessary, add more drops of water from time to time to keep a little sauce bubbling.

Once the vegetables are really tender, you could squash a few pieces of potato to thicken the sauce. Add the dill, nutmeg, salt and pepper. (Be warned, use white pepper modestly. A small quantity will impart all the lovely fragrant, spicy taste that's required.)

As soon as the dill is thoroughly wilted and mixed in, transfer the beans to a serving dish. Yannis was so generous with his gift and advice that we could hardly wait for this minute and enjoyed our dish while it was hot.

The next day at lunch we had (much) more of the same at room temperature with crusty bread and feta cheese. The flavours had melded and improved greatly overnight. A drizzle of olive oil and a squeeze of lemon later, there were no more beans left to spill ... only full tummies, happy memories and oily chins!

Over time I have made this recipe mine by varying it on occasion. Sometimes I use leeks instead of onions, or I add 2 tablespoons (30 ml) of ouzo along with the dill. At other times I combine whole baby artichokes or trimmed fresh artichokes with stewing beans, but then I hold back on the dill.

Bean there, done that, very happy! Serves 6 as a light meal



