

About the seasons with love and gratitude

Our lands follow the rhythm of the four seasons and it is quite natural our bodies to do the same. It is evident that with the climatic changes and the overall cultural globalization, the food culture being a part of it, especially in the last twenty years, people more or less have distanced themselves from the rhythm of the seasons in their original meaning ~ to give us the rightful energy in every moment ~ to charge and heal us, to fill us with radiance and life and to give us strength for the day. The "Mediterranean diet" in its nature is based on fresh seasonal products, a lot of color on the plate, and also on local products which are generously provided to us by the earth. And this is the reason why I would love to dedicate several pages to the essence of the seasons and to the generous and unconditional gifts they are offering to us.

Spring comes in March and awakens us for the light, the sparkling green, and the rejuvenated life strength. It is light and cheerful, bright and tender at the same time. It is optimistic. There is no such sensation like coming across the delicate leafing of the birch or the hazelnut tree, the opening buds of apple or lilac. It is an affirmation of life and its repetitive cycles, which every year are both similar and very, very different and revived. Everything in Nature is

fresh and radiant ~ thyme springs, which make their way to the sun, sorrel, which delights us with its juiciness, young nettle, which catches and pinches us, the blossoms of the olive tree, which promise healthy and fresh green fruit. The sun rays that gently caress the face, and the dreams that fly freely and manifest sincerely.

It is the same with our bodies and our entire essence that crave for lightness, purity, unloading, renewing, and recharging for the new cycle. And also, for expansion, flying and broadened horizons, which we can experience fully and wholesome only with a lightened body. For joy and happiness that come from within us, and for the goals and dreams that we set ahead. For love and sharing. For hope. Last fall I contemplated about the colors of the seasons and quite naturally the color of Spring is Green, with the symbolism of renewal, optimism and love.

The food which our bodies need is a natural reflection of Spring's energy expression ~ light and full of precious vitamins, minerals, antioxidants and dietary fiber to drive the body metabolism, to clean and energize it. I really appreciate all spring leafy vegetables such as broad-leaved dock, nettle, sorrel, spinach, parsley, chives and garlic, celery,

asparagus, sprouts, radishes, spring onion and leek, vine leaves. They are all fresh and pair beneficially with legumes and grains, with soft cheeses and yogurt. I love the freshness of the lettuce being sweeter or more pungent, the arugula and the Belgian endive, which I actively include in the menu and my creative interpretations. All these gifts of Nature will be leading heroes in my Spring recipes presented in the second part of "Sun and Olive Oil". Also, fresh herbs like basil, mint, coriander, fennel, thyme, oregano with which we will pair them in harmony. Herbs complement and enrich the characteristics of the greens in a vivid, memorable, and fragrant way.

Summer comes in June ~ at first modest with its expansive energy, and after filling us with so much light, warmth, abundance, and happiness ~ a true explosion. The dreams are floating freely and to places far away, the desires are powerful and persistent, and they capture us recklessly. We can hardly resist them. Everything is in its life peak and generously ripens ~ the fruits, the vegetables, and the dreams. It is an unimaginable experience to pick a fresh peach, whose sweet juices make their way down on the chin, or to taste a piece of watermelon whose freshness and sweetness are contagious. A crispy cucumber, fragrant of freshness and coolness, or a zucchini whose drops of dew effortlessly manifest when you slice it and tempt you with their freshness. Tender celery stalks which give boldness and cheerfulness to the salads with their delicate salty and at the same time delightful, sweet notes. The greens and the herbs are already more potent and charge us with their strength and colors. We dry them slowly in order to preserve the aromas and the strength, for the flavors of our Autumn

and Winter dishes. The sunflowers and the lavender are blossoming and their perfumes drift away ~ sensual and sweet. And we fly with happiness. We fall in love. We laugh. That is why, to me, the color of Summer is Yellow.

Yes, our whole being is abundant and charged with heat, and our body is following and multiplying the sensations. It needs freshness and cooling, rest and lightness, calmness and airiness, which is provided by food. And everything else is so euphoric and generously abundant. Cucumbers, zucchinis, artichokes, more pungent leafy vegetables like radicchio, lettuce, dandelion, arugula and Belgian endive, radish and beet leaves, purslane. And they, combined with the cooling qualities of bulgur, couscous, polenta, fresh cheeses, fresh fish bring in lightness in our everyday menu, and activate the digestion. Fresh peas, tender green beans and okra. The zucchini flowers are welcoming fresh cheeses and brown rice. Sweet sunny tomatoes, which are part of our DNA for us Bulgarians, and when paired with artisan fresh bread and extra virgin olive oil become a light and energizing snack. Fruits full of juice and ample quantities of water which should be cool and not freezing, as it needs to calm our body down and refresh it, and not to stress it out with its iciness. Fresh drinks with mint and basil leaves. White wine, sparkling wines, rose wines are an inseparable part of the summer mood with their joy and smiles which they bring to us, and especially when they are shared. Extra virgin olive oil by its nature is cooling and an excellent companion for the fresh and tenderly cooked vegetables. It brings a completeness of the summer dishes and enriches them with tastes and flavors of freshly cut grass, aromatic herbs, pungent leafy vegetables, artichoke, tomato and even more

~ depending on the olive cultivar used for crafting the olive oil. Parsley, rosemary, fennel, sage, basil add more vigor of the dishes and the salads. The food is fresh and delicately cooked, without hot spices which bring additional warmth to the body.

This is the natural transition towards a later Summer, from the beginning of August to the end of September, when we start slowing down the speed, to add some peace and quietness, to ground the bodies and to gradually prepare for the Autumn. No matter that almost never do we want the Summer to go ~ carefree and happy. Not at all, we wish to keep it even through the food. However, Nature and our bodies know very well the natural rhythm and tempt us to follow with an unconditional trust in order to experience an unburdening and beneficial shift to the colder months. We begin to add warmer and cooked food, and fresh food and salads begin to step back. We charge our bodies with the new strength which will make them more resilient. It is natural to reach for more oval vegetables colored in yellow and orange like pumpkin, carrots, onion, sweet potatoes, and when we prepare them with spices as a stew, they give us warmth and comfort, and a natural transition towards the beauty and generosity of Autumn.

Autumn is magical with its shades and abundance of shapes, forms, flavors and tastes. It is calm and at the same time optimistic with its caressing sun of the gypsy summer, with its drizzles, with its changing moods which gradually tune us to the calmer colors, temperatures and moods of the Winter. I love it much for its depth, maturity, richness and the slowly revealing layers, for its calmness and confidence,

as following the Summer euphoria, life brings us calm and peaceful happiness, and a dreaminess which makes us rest and relax. The walk in the forest and its entire palette from green to amber yellow and deep brick red is divine and invigorating, relaxing the mind and revealing new calmer horizons. I chose Red as a symbol of Autumn ~ deep and calm, royal and beautiful. It suits Autumn ~ with its multiple layers, generosity, and complexity.

The mind and the body become more focused, step by step they calm down and "cool down" from the Summer passions. They need to strengthen up, boost and increase the energy in a balanced way. Therefore, the white foods consumption rises. All types of roots, rich in dietary fiber and vitamin C, turnips, cauliflower and celery root, complemented with chickpeas and white beans become an integral part of our daily menu. Beet and Swiss chard leaves, lightly stewed and delightfully warm, with extra virgin olive oil and lemon juice become a great alternative salad. The sweet ripe red bell peppers, iconic for the Bulgarian autumn menu and abundant in vitamin C, are prepared in all shapes and forms ~ roasted for salad, in a "kyopoulou" with a lot of parsley, stuffed and baked with a bouquet of spices, vegetables and rice. Generally, the flavors are deeper, multilayered, and warming. The same goes for the fruits and their rich sweetness, grapes, pumpkin, apples, now baked and enriched with walnuts, hazelnuts, cinnamon, and honey. We are setting for the Winter, definitely. Breakfast also includes warm oatmeal or multigrain porridge with boiled pumpkin or persimmon, with a drizzle of delicate extra virgin olive oil to enhance the nutritional value and the flavors of the breakfast. Herbal tea infusions, sweetened with some honey

and bringing the sun of late Spring and early Summer, warm us pleasantly. A glass or two of red wine are just in place. All the above is an expression of the Mediterranean seasonal diet, with a lot of care and love, and a minimum stress for the body.

In December comes the Winter and the anticipation of Christmas, New Year and the series of name days, and a lot of fun and celebrations. A time to evaluate things bigger or smaller. A time for the birth of a new cycle; time for White, the natural color of this season. To me, Winter is a special time, it manifests itself with a very festive mood and magnificence, and at the same time with an inward look towards ourselves, towards the new horizons inside and out which we dream to discover. We allow ourselves peace after the euphoria of the holidays and we adjust with the more modest sun, with the snow, with the cold, with the layers of clothes. Therefore, the food that we need now is more nutritious and it provides us with warmth and a lot of coziness and comfort, without being stressful and cold. It is prepared with a lot of love and attention for us and our loved ones, with whom we now spend more time at home. Again, root vegetables, turnips, parsnips, kohlrabi, Jerusalem artichoke, celery root. Lentil stews combined with red or brown rice and boldly spicy and sweet, and warming oriental spices. Crispy pickles of celery root, bell peppers and carrots, sauerkraut, "lyutenitsa" are all an integral part of the Bulgarian traditions and the magic of preserving the sunny Summer flavors from Autumn to Winter in a perfect way ~ using natural fermentation which is so beneficial for the energy flows and strength in our bodies. At the same time, they are bringing joy, as they very harmoniously complement

the natural rhythm and metabolism. Cream soups of root or pumpkin, frozen broad-leaved dock and nettle, which I prepare in the preceding seasons for a warmer diversity during Winter, and a lot of my favorite fennel in its different interpretations. Gratin with potatoes, fennel and more pungent cheeses, as well as white risotto with fennel and celery root, and lots of Parmigiano Reggiano. The Bulgarian classics "Sirene po shopski" with cheese, cherry tomatoes confit and fennel tenderly baked in an earthenware pot.

Fresh salads are out of the question in Winter. They do not make much sense with the greenhouse vegetables with flat taste. The freshness comes from the balanced salted pickles, grated fresh or steamed root vegetables with a zesty citrus-olive oil dressing. It also comes from citrus fruits, oranges, tangerines, grapefruits and lemons and their peels, full of vitamin C and antioxidants, which we can generously add to food, and thus the mood for sun and joy is with us during Winter, with the pomegranate and persimmon loaded with sun and vitamin C. Winter carries a different charm and genuinely sets us on the waves of warmth, stability and determination. It tunes us on a spirit for food and health supporting a stable immune system.

That is the beauty and charm of the seasons. They give us a different perspective of the meaning and cyclicity of life and food, rightful in the different stages of the year. And they make us truly alive and in synchrony with the rhythm of Nature and Life. Genuine and full of energy and strength, at all times. Because food heals, and we are excellent self-healers, smiling and accepting the flow of the day and life. Appreciating deeply.