

A Day in the Life of the Greek Café

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photo Nikos Aggelakis

Mastering the Art of the Libation

by Chris Deliso



A Day in the Life of the Greek Café

Whether in Athens, with its ancient sites, or by the beaches of the islands, for the real Greek experience you simply must learn to feel the spirit of the kafeneion - the café.

It's a fact that the café, whether indoor or out, is like a second home for the Greeks. It is a sanctuary for relaxation, a spot for good conversation with friends, a cherished location for philosophizers and daydreamers, a vantage point for people-watching and contemplating the sea and so much more...

Indeed, for the Greeks the café is many things all in one and makes up a vital part of life all year round. Relaxing with the "pareia" ('company of friends') over a well-prepared Greek coffee or a cool, smooth "frappe", you feel life moves to a different, more relaxed rhythm. With the unhurried pace of Greek café life, perfected over centuries of the Mediterranean climate, time passes the way it was meant to be - slowly and enjoyably.

Everyone knows that to be a Greek is a big thing, and it comes with responsibilities - like always remembering to forget about work, to slow down and enjoy the little things in life, to go out, to enjoy. And there is simply no better place to do that than in the kafeneion.

But luckily, you don't have to be Greek to feel the Greek spirit... anyone can learn! With the right amount of café 'practice,' it's possible to become an expert in the art of the libation, Greek style.

To get you in the proper mood for the task, let's dream of one day in summer...



photo Diogenis Papadopoulos

Morning: 10 A.M.

It's a dazzling clear morning in the islands, and you're sitting at a little blue-clothed table, on a flowering veranda overlooking the sea. Costa, the dignified servitoros, greets you with a nod and returns from the whitewashed interior with a saucer and its rounded white cup, diminutive yet brimming over with that potent black elixir for which Greece is famous...

and it's not only you enjoying a Greek coffee in the balmy

breeze of the sea - nearby a grizzled old fisherman drinks reflectively, watching the caiques bob in the harbor, while someone else reads through the morning newspaper between sips...

In summer, 10 AM is the magic hour for Greek coffee; not too early, and not too late. The air is still cool, even as the sun is radiating promisingly up from the east. The water is sparkling, but soft, and the light falls in perfect shadows over land and sea...

A good Greek coffee is the perfect way to cap off a breakfast of tyropites (cheese pies), Greek yoghurt and fruit. When you drink it, you drink it slowly - the coffee gives you precious moments to renew yourself, to feel the air kiss your cheek, to savor the morning before indulging in the beach and the sea.

There is a whole ritual associated with the famous Greek coffee. It's made in a little copper pot called the briki. The recipe calls for powdery, pungent coffee and one spoonful of sugar if you want your Elliniko to be made metrio (medium-sweet), two if you want it glyko (sweet), or, the purist way - sketo (with no sugar at all).

The important ritual climaxes after a few minutes of warming on the stove, when the liquid's surface becomes leathery and bulges up; before it bursts into bubbles, you quickly spoon off the top into each little cup and then slowly pour in the remainder.

Greek coffee is all about the siga, siga approach to life - "slowly, slowly" in Greek. First, you must let the coffee settle for a few moments before even starting to drink it, so that the gritty bits descend to the bottom of the cup. The coffee, changing color from bronze to black in the light, is flecked by tiny bubbles and foam, like the sea lapping on a volcanic island beach. Even in little sips, the concentrated taste is powerfully firm and takes hold of your mouth, cleansing the palate for future delights...

Afternoon: 3:15 P.M.

You have now spent the middle of the day soaking up the sun and taking a swim- and thus worked up an appetite for a hearty lunch of Greek salad with rich olive oil, kalamari with lemon, sea bass or souvlaki and more under the awning of a busy taverna... so now, it's time to indulge in another national pastime- the famous Frappé.

When the warm weather sets in, all of Greece reaches for one of these tall glasses overflowing with whipped foam, the sweet coffee forming separate strata of colors from white to tan to black on the bottom half. The original Frappé that Greeks swear by is made with instant coffee, sugar and water, sometimes with milk too, all whipped together in a shaker or blender.

This is cool refreshment at its simplest- fitting a country like Greece, with its elemental basics of sunlight, blue water and whitewashed houses.

The Frappé is a whimsical, well crafted drink. You need to stir it a little, unlike the Greek coffee which you upset as

little as possible. You also drink it with a straw... and if you order a modified Frappé with a little ice cream, a long spoon too! But since it never lasts as long you want... you must have another!

The Frappé is the perfect drink for when you just want to relax, gaze at the beautiful people passing by, make gossip with your friends or make plans - but never too seriously - about what to do in the evening. Even long after all the coffee is finished, the deflated froth lingers on the sides of the glass, and you with it, sitting out the afternoon heat in the shade until it's time for one more trip to the beach....

Evening: 6:30 P.M.

Now is when the afternoon turns to evening; the sultry air starts to cool, and everyone is clean and dressed up and strolling through the old town, on the promenade above the sea, and - of course, to another café!

It's also the time for another kind of coffee. While it has Italian roots, this one has nevertheless been adopted happily by the Greeks: so imagine being engrossed in

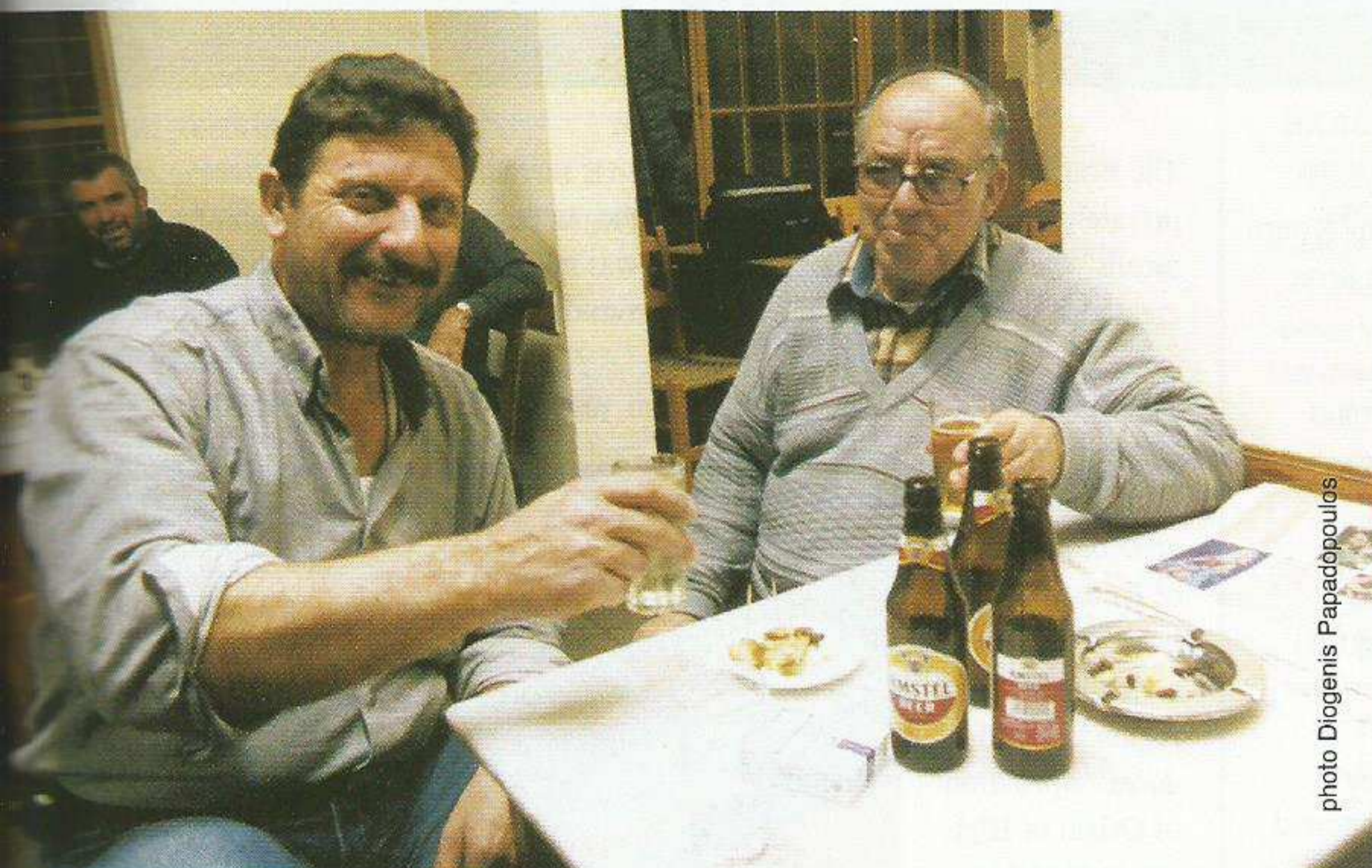


photo Diogenis Papadopoulos

conversation over a neat, aromatic espresso, or savoring a cappuccino or cool café freddo over a book- these elegant little drinks, always accompanied by a little biscuit on the edge of the plate for dipping, and a translucent green bottle of sparkling mineral water, prepare one for the festivities of night in Greece...

All of these coffees have a personality of their own. The taste of an espresso is slightly bitter, yet polished, matching your smart shoes; and a cappuccino feels refined, lending that touch of exclusivity you feel being far from the masses on a little Greek island... and the Freddo, an iced coffee somewhat new in Greece, but already much cherished, helps soften those sparse hills up behind you away from the sea, and is the perfect antidote to the hot Mediterranean sun...

Midnight

The tempo of the day has now changed completely; with the sun gone down, the lights come on and the measured pace of the Greek music starts, not too fast and not too slow; and

with the languor of the day long behind, the island really comes to life.

Now you have finished another long, late dinner in Greece, with plates of mezedes (mixed appetizers) of all colors and kinds, washed down with copper carafes of the rich Greek red wines celebrated since the time of Odysseus and Dionysius... a feast worthy of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, who wrote of nights like this in his Symposium - and sung the praises of the art of great food and drink for the proper attainment of wisdom in the process.

Today's descendants of Plato have carried on the tradition in a unique kind of Greek café and sometimes taverna - the ouzerie, a place dedicated to that inspirational spirit made from the dregs of the grape and flavored with anisette. You can drink it 'straight,' in a short glass; but if you add a few drops of water the clear alcohol goes cloudy- unlike your head, which stays strong and focused and determined... many Greeks swear that ouzo gives one the advantage in the great debates of politics, love, philosophy and passion for which the Greeks have been famous since the times of Plato...

After a glass or two of ouzo, you become inspired and ready for music, for dancing... and when the musicians start up with the rembetika (Greek blues) on the three-stringed bouzouki, a classic Greek instrument with its own unique, silvery logic, the combination becomes irresistible... you find yourself tapping your heel to the measured tempo of the enthralling music, and thumping the kafeneio's old wooden tabletop... a table that has seen maybe 70 years of ouzo and rembetika...

Now, with some ouzo under your belt, it is time to start the night for real, with more wine or a light Greek beer, in sophisticated bars near the sea and in the small streets of the town, pulsating with life and energy... qualities essential for the Greek way of life...

And Finally...after Hours

The town starts to quiet down as the last revelers head for home, with dawn just a couple hours away... but lucky enough to have a perfect climate for the health and sensibilities, the Greeks don't need too much sleep.

Telos panton - or "in the end" you are back where you began, looking for one last drink after the intensity of another summer night in Greece, the streets overflowing like always with fashionably dressed party-goers and the frenetic harmony of song, desire and energy... but what drink will you have?

Back home, where Costa is getting ready to close the kafeneion, under the stars and lapping waves, there will still be another Greek coffee waiting for you... after all, you can't fall asleep without waking up first!

And so the day's cycle is completed- until the next morning of potable pleasures, enjoyed the Greek way...

Photos courtesy of "STIGMES" magazine.