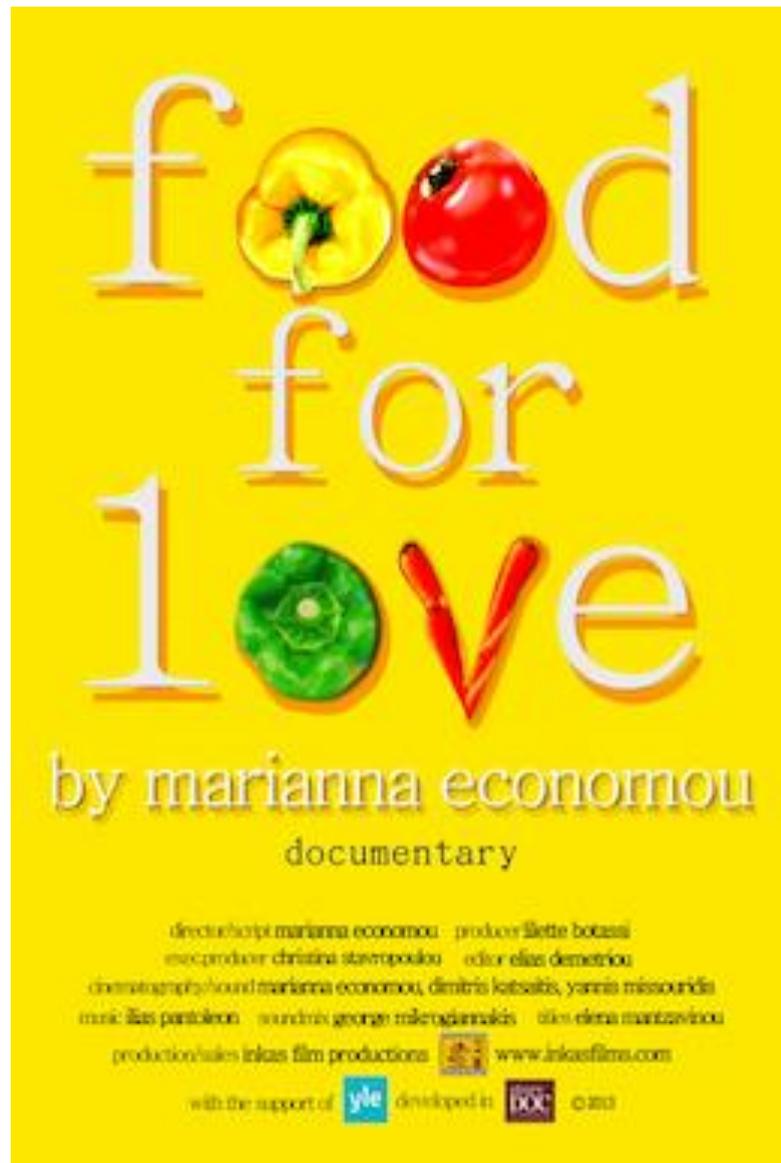


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Food for Love: Tasting a Genealogy of Gifts

By Dina Iordanova



In the late 1980s I was still living in my native city of Sofia, blissfully unaware of the impending end of Zhivkov's regime under which my life had evolved up until then and of the subsequent cosmopolitan émigré life that was in store for me. One day, friends came to talk about a text that was exposing Bulgaria's "economy of jars." There was some element of embarrassment in this -- we had been "found out" about a practice that was far too common and that we did not give much thought of. The author was a Western woman who had written about the habit of Bulgarians who would visit with her to bring along jars of self-preserved food and leave them as gifts. This was so persistent that over time she had built up surplus and had started taking jars to other friends herself. Thus, she had become part of Bulgaria's "economy of jars," one of us.

I never read the text at the time, so rudimentary was my English, so all I knew about it probably came from conversations. Today I can confirm that this was a study by Canadian anthropologist Eleanor Smollett, whose 1989 text "Economy of Jars" was published in *Ethnologia Europea* and is now available online. Smollett was wondering "what could be learned about contemporary Bulgarian society by tracing the movements of the thousands, nay millions, of jars of food that criss-cross the country? Who gives what kind and how many to whom on what kinds of occasions? What statements about relationships are built into these gifts? How much importance do these jars (and other gifts of food) have in the quantity and quality of a family's food consumption?" (1989: 127).

Indeed, the "economy of jars" was an extricable part of our lives. Even though I come from what would be classified as a well-off intellectual family from downtown Sofia, my own reality in regard to jars did not differ particularly from what Smollett was talking about. I had moved out to live separately from my parents already at the age of 18, at the time I entered

college, and by 1989 when the article appeared, had already been married for a few years, was employed and financially independent. The journey of jars between my parents' apartment and my own, however, was as much part of my life as it was part of the extended family practices across the country, as described by Smollett. I would normally visit my parents' place at least twice a week, and whilst there I would be expected to eat. Each time I would leave with a bag containing several jars of cooked food which I would transport on the public bus, from Lozenets to Orlov Most. If I did not visit, my mother would come out and bring jars over, as well as collect the empty ones. I had never asked for these food donations, and never really needed them. Whilst on my own and later on with my husband, I was perfectly self-reliant and able to cater for myself. We enjoyed entertaining and often cooked together. There was no demand for additional food propping. But it was also one of these things that was not possible to try changing. The food was all cooked by my mother, a busy professional who was sacrificing her limited leisure time to prepare it. If we did not accept the jars and if we did not eat the content, we would unnecessarily offend her, something which we would not dare doing.



It is with this background that I came to watching Marianna Economou's 2013 documentary *Food for Love*, a film that shows how several Greek mothers exercise the transmission of love to their children through the manipulation of butter, flour, sugar, eggs, tomatoes, aubergines, garlic, onions, octopus, mince, and through the preparation of moussaka, keftedes, makaronia, dolmades, tyropitakia, papoutsakia, schnitzel, béchamel, sausages, tsoureki, tarta, bougatsa, you name it.... "Food in the hands of Greek mothers," Economou says, "is a powerful practical and symbolic tool that bridges any geographic and emotional distance and keeps the family bonds tight forever!"

The film resonated with me, as it would have resonated with many other Bulgarians, Greeks, and, no doubt, with viewers based further afield across the Balkan lands. Indeed, so much in the films from the Balkans evolves around food: from the popular Greek melodrama *Politiki kouzina/ A Touch of Spice* (2003, Tassos Boulmetis) through to Cristi Puiu's grim satire *Sieranevada* (Romania, 2016) is an all about endless cooking and preparing to eat.



Food for Love is made nearly three decades later than the period I was describing, so by comparison with my memory it is no longer an “economy of jars.” Rather, the prepared food goes into more suitable containers or sealable plastic boxes, properly packed and stacked. It is no longer plastic bags but heavy food parcels, sealed with tape and labelled. It is not quantities that would cater for two meals but rather massive amounts. It is no longer what a working mother has been able to prepare in rush after work but elaborately planned menu checklists written out on notes stuck on the fridge and meticulously ticked off. It is not a journey on the bus within the same city but delivery through dedicated services of refrigerator vans operating across Greece and abroad. It is not the mother showing at the door to recover the jars but rather skype conversations.

All this is shown through a glimpse into the daily lives of three women:

First of all, Vicky, a youthful single mother from Chalandri, a well-off suburb of Athens. Her daughter Anna is medical student in Patras whereas son Angelos lives in and studies engineering in Athens. In the course of the film, Vicky undertakes a massive cooking marathon. We see her plan for and prepare from scratch more than ten different dishes which are then packed in a large cardboard box and dispatched on the special delivery van to Patras where daughter Anna will receive and store the goodies. In the course of the preparations, Vicky’s monologue reveals that she is more than clear about the dynamics of the food-for-love equation. From early on difficulties in the family have been resolved through food. “The Greek parents biggest fear is that their children will move away and will be ok without them,” Vicky says, revealing her own fears. She is biased and favours daughter Anna over son Angelos and it gradually becomes clear why; a proto-feminist discourse gradually takes shape: Vicky never fulfilled her dreams – but her daughter will fulfil hers. She has some issues with men. What was done to her she wants to see undone through the daughter. What

she did not do she hopes the daughter will now do. And in order for this to happen, she has to nourish and maintain the relationship with the daughter. Sending food “is a practical way to say I love you.” At the other end daughter Anna slyly takes part in the scheme: on receipt of the food parcel she is immediately on skype, staging on a show for her mother and overacting enjoyment and appreciation.



Then there is Vasso, who, along with her husband, runs a pharmacy in Agrinio, Central Greece. Her two sons, 18 and 22, study pharmacology in the seaside of Constanza in Romania but do not like it there. Vasso once dreamt of flying away, but is now stuck in prosperous provincial life. Her husband is boring and controlling. The boys have had to comply with the parental choice and do what they are told. Tensions are brewing. Yet Vasso pretends to not notice and focuses on “the orgasm of the kitchen”: shopping, cooking, shipping the food. She keeps repeating – somewhat to herself -- that “they are expecting the food box.” Also: “They know you are giving them a bit of yourself.”



In another Athenian suburb, Pefki, Maria and husband Nikos turn on Skype to talk to Teophilos, their son who is studying in Aberdeen. Each party sticks to their agenda: Teophilos asks for money, whilst Maria requests that she is given a video tour so that she can check if his closet is tidy enough. A Greek flag adorns the dorm wall. The father has never had the strength to reveal to his son he is now unemployed. But at least there is affection in the air; Maria and Nikos are “lovebirds again,” overweight but in good mood. All conversations in this home evolve around food and eating. Mother to son: “Have you lost weight? You must eat!” Husband to wife: “My extra kilos are proof of your good cooking.” Grandmother, coming in to visit, to father on arrival: “Have you eaten?” (she has brought home made food from Crete...). Later in the film, Teophilos will come home for a short visit. Before he leaves, Maria hides some packs of food in his luggage and then lies the suitcase is full of clothes only. “He will start grumbling but once he sees the food he will get really happy,” she asserts.

The three women in the film are not hugely different from one another; at times I found it difficult to be sure if this was Vasso talking or Maria, and whose son was where and who had

lost how much weight...Perhaps it was the director's intention to choose such relatively similar case studies – so as to blur them into one big Greek mama, as the intention clearly was to “open a window into the [...] Greek family with the powerful mother figure at the center and the children as kings and queens!” And indeed, whilst watching I could not help thinking of the families of my own Greek friends who could have easily been recruited for this film.



Marianna Economou studied anthropology, and this documentary is revealing of her background. At moments, where we see the parents skyping with their children, it fully concurs with Smollett's observations of households where “there is a good deal of concerned, emotional conversation about non-resident relatives and their affairs, and about what role should be undertaken in various of their affairs” (1989: 129). And, clearly, the food parcels fully qualify under Marcel Mauss discourse of “the gift,” where giving and receiving are building blocks not only of reciprocity and exchange but also of self-interest.

Food for Love is not just a window into the Greek family's generational dynamics. It is also a feminist film. The control impulses of these women, their inability to let go is only part of the story. Even if cheerfully observed, it is a documentary that shows inconvenient truths about being an average middle-aged woman in Greece: far too unable to imagine oneself differently, far too complacent easing down into old age, far too willing to imprison oneself into domesticity.

The "food for love" monologues that are delivered in the process of cooking all reveal unfulfilled dreams about oneself, a context in which "love" serves as defence. "Love" must be attached to something; it must find a physical expression in the parcels, the morsels, the bites. It cannot be expressed in any other way. Food, prepared by the hand of the loving mother, stands in for love itself. I wonder if it was not for this documentary, for being requested to talk to the camera and discuss what they are actually doing, if these women would be as articulate and conscious of the emotional element in what they are doing with this compulsive cooking, day in and day out?



I ruminated quite a bit about my own mother in recent years, always coming back to a memory of her emotional absenteeism. I kept accusing her in my mind for being distant, just to refute myself immediately that no, it is not fair to say she was aloof as she invested so much love in the act of preparing and sharing food. I now know that she, equally emotionally starved since childhood, had not been able to express her emotions in any other way but through the endless cooking routine. We were needy and emotionally deprived; the only way to receive her love was by eating.

The jar economy is a distant memory for me today. Nearly half of my life now has been conducted in distant lands, where no food deliveries would have been possible. The purveyors of love-through-food jars are no more, and I am free to eat whichever strange foodstuffs I wish. I remember a friend wondering, back in the early days of our emigration, were we escaping communism or our parents?

NOTE: In 2017 Dina Iordanova served on the inaugural jury of the Thessaloniki Documentary Festival, and is planning to do further writing on Greek documentary, reflecting on works by Myrna Tsapa, Menelaos Karamaghiolis, Christos Karakepelis and others.

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