

## Introduction to Lamb



Sam Watson & Neighbor Cooking Lamb For Easter

In 1963, I was studying Russian at Syracuse University and I'll never forget the afternoon when I entered a university dining room with a massive appetite. I picked up a tray, a plate, some silverware and proceeded along the serving line, loading up with everything that looked good. There was a large tray full of what looked to me to be thin slices of roast beef. I asked the server to put several on my plate. Upon finding a table, the first thing into my mouth was a chunk of that "roast beef." Argh@#\$\$%!! I nearly spit it all back out. I jumped up from the table, took the plate back to the serving line and told the server, "This roast beef is rancid!" He laughed at me saying, "That's not roast beef. It's lamb."

Right then, I decided that I would never ever eat another bite of lamb the rest of my life.

Fast forward seven years and I'm living in a suburb of Athens, Greece. Lamb happens to be a mainstay in Greece. A neighbor invited my family, my wife Shelia, son Charlie and daughter Andrea and me to his house for dinner. He was grilling some lamb on his barbecue grill in the back yard. When it came time to eat, I declined the lamb and he found my refusal to be incredulous. I told him the story about the rancid roast beef in Syracuse. After much insisting, I finally agreed to try a tiny bite of his lamb. It nearly melted in my mouth! That experience turned out to be a bit of an epiphany for me. I realized that nearly everything in the universe can run the gamut from awful to wonderful. Lamb meat from an animal that has been well fed and well treated, then prepared properly, can be as tasty as a premium beef steak. Lamb from a lesser animal, poorly prepared, can resemble rancid roast beef.

Another similar experience served to validate the epiphany. On the first or second day of our arrival in Athens, my wife insisted that we check out a shop that appeared to me to be an obvious "tourist trap." Once inside, the proprietor, recognizing us immediately as Americans brand new to the country (It's like we had "New Americans" stamped on our foreheads), began profusely welcoming us to his country and insisted that we stay right where we were until he returned. He disappeared in the back of the shop for a couple of minutes then re-emerged carrying a tray with small glasses of wine. We each took a glass and the proprietor made a toast, welcoming us to Greece. We sipped the wine and I nearly spit it all over the floor. It was a challenge just to try to keep a straight face. That was the worst wine I had ever tasted in my entire life! It was Retsina, a wine aged in barrels made of pine wood. The taste is very similar to turpentine. Right then, I swore to myself to never take a drink of Retsina ever again.

Fast forward a year or two and a friend begins insisting that I try a taste of Retsina from a bottle that he just opened. I refuse at first but eventually give in to his cajoling. Hmmmm..., I say to myself. This is petty nice stuff! So there you go. There is "rot gut" Retsina at one end of the scale and "fine" Retsina at the other. By the time we departed Greece a few years later, I had actually acquired a fondness for the stuff.

