

## [A Rhode Islander Goes to Greece](#)



Nikos the shepherd ushers me over, and I kneel beside him in the crowded sheep den, the roof so low that even I — a solid 5’2” — have to hunch over to keep from hitting my head on the ceiling. He pulls the wandering sheep by its udders, positioning her over the white plastic container, a square hole at the top. He speaks in Greek as he demonstrates where to place my hands, how to grab and press and push downward. A cataract of milk gushes into the bucket from each teat, the sound reverberating like a hose on full blast. He hands the udders to me with a smile and shrug, as if to say, “No big deal.”

I am on the island of Thassos in Greece, participating in a month-long travel and food-writing workshop. There are six of us in this cohort, ranging from college students to recent masters graduates to mothers of five children. We’ve come together from all parts of the US to read, write, make food and experience Greek culture. Today, we are making yogurt from sheep’s milk.

I try to wrap my hands around the udder the same way I saw Niko. The skin slides around as I try to get my grip, and just when I think I have a handful of milk-laden teat, something shifts and there’s nothing in my hands. I re-grip, push, pull. The tiniest trickle of milk comes out. “*Pes ti na to kratisi pio apano,*” I hear behind me. My new Greek-American friend translates, “Jenny, move your hands higher.” I keep trying.

Earlier in the week, we made pasta. I remembered Daniela Mansella’s pasta demonstration at [Hope and Main’s Meet Your Maker event](#), which was the first time I’d seen pasta made from scratch: one cup flour to one egg, with a little water on the side. Here, we use a makeshift outdoor kitchen. We built the flour into a volcano, pushed a crater into the center, then dropped in the eggs. We beat the eggs and folded the flour, collapsing the crater until dough formed. We pressed the dough through the pasta maker — each setting making the strip longer and thinner until at the last notch, number six, we were making pasta strips longer than my arm. We hung the strips off of plastic patio chairs to dry. On to the sauce: tomatoes, onions, garlic and two salted anchovies — the secret ingredient — which we deboned and mashed into a paste with the minced garlic. “I use my senses to know when to add the next ingredient to the skillet,” our workshop leader said. “Hear that?” The onions were sizzling in the extra virgin olive oil, which Greeks drink by the spoonful, and the scent reached our noses one by one. He added the garlic and anchovy paste, then hand-squeezed tomatoes. We let the sauce simmer, returning to the pasta strips, which we cut into fettuccini. When the serrated knife failed, we used our fingers to tear the noodles. “The unevenness gives it character. That’s how you know you’ve got handcrafted pasta,” our leader assured us.

Milk starts coming consistently after each squeeze — I’m starting to get the hang of it. But these small

streams do not compare to the torrents Niko can extract. "*Pio apano*," I hear again. "Higher, Jenny, higher." I shift my weight from one foot to the other, uneasy about putting my knees onto ground, the smell of sheep and wool and Niko's overalls — harboring hours of labor — surrounding me. Milking a sheep is harder than it looks.

Since coming to Greece, the thing I've grown to appreciate most is how hard everyone on this island works for their food. Each night at dinner, the owner tells us about the fish he or his father caught that day, which he'll then prepare on the grill. The family loads and unloads the wood oven like miners, raising a hand near the door, counting seconds to feel for the right temperature. We pick fresh thyme from the side of the road to dress our dishes. Toasting multiple times with glasses of *tsipouro* and shouts of "*Yiomas!*" dinner lasts three hours. I've only been here three weeks, but I can't imagine a different way of life.

I stand up, my knees crack. As the next person steps through the wire gate, I wish them luck. My hands are grimy, dirty, with black specks underneath my fingernails. I think of how often I eat yogurt at home and wonder if it would be different if I didn't have Stop and Shop around the corner. I look at the milk I extracted and wonder how we'll have enough to make yogurt. But somehow, with everyone pitching in, under the guidance of Nikos, and the translation of a helpful friend, we end up with plenty.