

PLOW TO PLATE PRESENTS: WHEN TOMATOES MET WAGNER

December 6, 2022



Safe Food Committee Report

*By Adam Rabiner*

*When Tomatoes Met Wagner* takes its peculiar title from a quirky experiment to see if the organic tomatoes grown by Alexandros Gousiaris in the tiny farming village of Ilia, in central Greece, will do better when exposed to classical music rather than the traditional Greek music that usually plays for them over several speakers arrayed in the fields. Alexandros, the central character and heart of this film documentary, is a tinkerer, entrepreneur and risk taker, which can be seen in his decision to return to his home village, a place most young people seeking economic opportunities had fled, after studying mathematics at the university in Heraklio in Crete. In 1996, he founded Odysea, Ltd. to produce and export honey, and added tomato production in 1998.

Alexandros works with a cadre of elderly women, two of whom, Agathi and Katina, are his aunts. The small team of employees democratically creates and tests a new sauce and other recipes, spending up to two years adjusting herb and spice ratios. Based on feedback received from a business trip to Brussels visiting local retailers, Alexandros decides to substitute more fashionable quinoa and barley for traditional rice in a stuffed tomato “meal in a jar.” He even considers exporting his tomato sauce to England in beer bottles to appeal to its pub-loving citizens.

Though his willingness to be dexterous as a businessman shows he is not held back by the way things have always been done in the past, in the main, Alexandros is hewing to tradition. His great-grandmother and grandmother both bred bees in their backyards and his family’s roots in beekeeping go back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As an organic and small-scale artisanal producer Alexandros’s production costs are higher than conventional larger-scale operations, and he struggles for profitability. In a town of only 33 residents, half of them working for the company, there is a lot staked to Odysea’s success.

The tensions between Alexandros’s desire to live, farm, and create community in his moribund ancestral town and the economic challenges he faces are the central theme of the film. He discusses these existential questions with a colleague and answers

someone who asks why he returned to the village after college: “What does education have to do with a job?” Alexandros, who likes to regale his co-workers with stories and myths, particularly one about Christopher Columbus’s journey to America and return to Spain with tomato seeds, is himself a kind of mission-driven Odysseus, beset by travails, answering to a higher calling, and trying to reassert his place at home.

The village of Ilia has seen better days. It once had two coffee shops, but they have both been long shuttered. When Alexandros arranges a French student exchange and fills the local school with visitors (while giving the village a temporary dose of energy, youth, and life) we learn that the building had been closed thirty years earlier for lack of children. His aunt Agathi, the town’s former top student, now always wears a widow’s black attire. One of her friends comments that she has acquired a black soul by constantly dwelling on her memories and old times. When Agathi harvests with a sickle, she looks like the Grim Reaper. One of the ladies predicts that when the remaining older generation finally dies off, their children will also flee the town, as their grandchildren had done.

This remains to be seen. On that business trip to Europe, accompanied by several of his co-workers, Alexandros was informed by one manager that there was virtually no information on the labels. Discerning consumers want to know: what town is this from, what kind of tomato is it, who are the people that made it? A born storyteller and educator, Alexandros can easily and compellingly answer those questions. And once he does, Odysea may not simply continue to win awards for taste and quality in international and domestic competitions. With any luck, this food backstory could generate the same excitement in a new generation of Greek youth as it did for the curious and enthusiastic French visitors, or the back-to-the-land younger generation of farmers coming up in the United States, and spur much needed renewal, growth and economic development. Just like those tomato seeds Columbus brought back from the New World did.

*When Tomatoes Met Wagner: Tuesday, December 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022 @ 7:00 p.m.*

Screening link: <http://www.plowtoplatefilms.com>