

Furniko Flour: An Emblematic Traditional Food of Greek Pontic Cuisine

A. Keramaris, T. Sawidis, E. Kasapidou, P. Mitlianga

Abstract—Although the gastronomy of the Greeks of Pontus is well-known, it has not received the same level of scientific scrutiny as another Greek local cuisine, that of Crete. As a result, we planned to concentrate our research on Greek Pontic cuisine to shed light on its distinct recipes, food products, and, ultimately, its characteristics. The Greeks of Pontus have one of Greece's most distinguished local cuisines, having lived for a long time in the northern part (Black Sea Region) of modern Turkey and now widely inhabiting northern Greece. Despite its simplicity, their cuisine contains several mouthwatering delicacies. Even though they have been in Greece for a century, their gastronomic culture remains an important part of their collective identity. As a first step toward understanding Greek Pontic cuisine, furniko flour, one of its most well-known traditional products, was investigated. For this project, we targeted residents of Western Macedonia, a province in northern Greece with a large population of descendants of Pontus Greeks who are primarily engaged in agricultural activities. In this quest, we approached a descendant of Pontus Greeks who is involved in the production of furniko flour and agreed to show us the entire process as we participated in it. Furniko flour is made from heirloom non-hybrid corn. When the moisture content of the seeds is low enough to make them suitable for roasting, they are harvested by hand. Harvesting by hand entails removing the cob from the plant and separating the husks. The harvested cobs are then roasted in a traditional wood oven for 24 hours. After that, the these are collected and stored in sacks. The next step is to extract the seeds by rubbing the cobs together. Ideally, the seeds should be ground in a traditional stone hand mill. The outcome of this process is aromatic, dark golden furniko flour, which is used to make *havitz*. Along with the furniko flour preparation, we also documented the *havitz* cooking process (a porridge-like corn flour dish). One of the most delectable dishes in Greek Pontic cuisine, this savory delicacy is simple to prepare. Because of the ingredients of furniko flour, *havitz* is a highly nutritious dish, according to the research participant. Furthermore, he claims that preparing *havitz* is a wonderful way to bring families together, share stories, and revisit happy memories. Finally, as an initial effort to highlight elements of Pontic Greek cuisine, this study illustrates the traditional preparation of furniko flour and its use in various traditional recipes. Our next objective would be to evaluate the nutritional value of furniko flour by analyzing its chemical components.

Keywords—Furniko flour, Greek Pontic cuisine, Havitz, traditional foods.

I. INTRODUCTION

FURNIKO flour is an emblematic traditional food of Greek Pontic Cuisine. The unique taste and texture of the flour have made it a beloved ingredient in Pontic dishes, and it

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continues to be an important part of the culinary heritage of Greeks of Pontic descent living in Greece. Greek cuisine, as part of the Mediterranean Diet [1] and grandmother of Mediterranean cuisines [2, p.22], is hard to define because it is a mosaic of several local cuisines [3]. Among these numerous local cuisines, the Pontic Greeks' cuisine is one that distinguishes Greek cuisine.

The Pontic Greeks have lived in the Pontic region for centuries, an area that nowadays reflects Turkey's modern Black Sea region (Fig. 1) [4].

Following the Lausanne Treaty and population exchange [5], they mostly immigrated to northern Greece [6], [7]. Food is an important aspect of their ethno-regional identity [8]. Furthermore, their foodways have a distinctive dimension since they reinforce their sense of togetherness and belonging [9].

Pontic Greek Cuisine is an ancient cuisine with a cultural identity, flavor richness, and simplicity [10]. Its culinary economy directs the production of countless food products and dishes [11]. It is based on three nutritional pillars: fermented dairy products, grains (particularly pre-baked pasta), vegetables, and wild edible greens [12]. Pontic Greek cuisine has received less scientific attention than other Greek regional cuisines, such as Cretan [13]. Consequently, we aimed to explore its traditional foods to better understand of this culture's culinary traditions.

The aim of the study was to record the production procedure of *furniko* or *fourniko* (-u or -ou are pronounced like -oo in zoom) flour, which is produced from roasted corn cobs. Information about the production of *furniko* flour was collected in the region of Western Macedonia (Fig. 2), where many Greeks of Pontic origin live. We eventually discovered residents of Pontic Greek descent who were familiar with the production procedure of furniko flour and agreed to demonstrate it to us.

II. BACKGROUND

Corn was introduced to Greece via the Ionian islands in 1572, and cultivation began on the mainland in 1576 [14, p.50]. The first varieties introduced to Greece and southeastern Europe in general originated from Mexico, the Caribbean, and South America. Northern Flints and Southern Dents were imported from the United States more recently, whereas Corn Belt Dents were added in the late 1800s and early 1900s [15].

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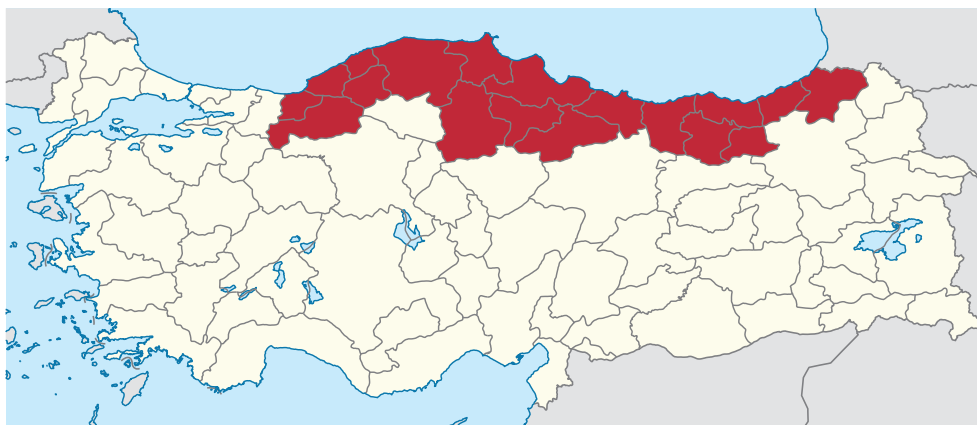


Fig. 1 The Black Sea Region Map [4]

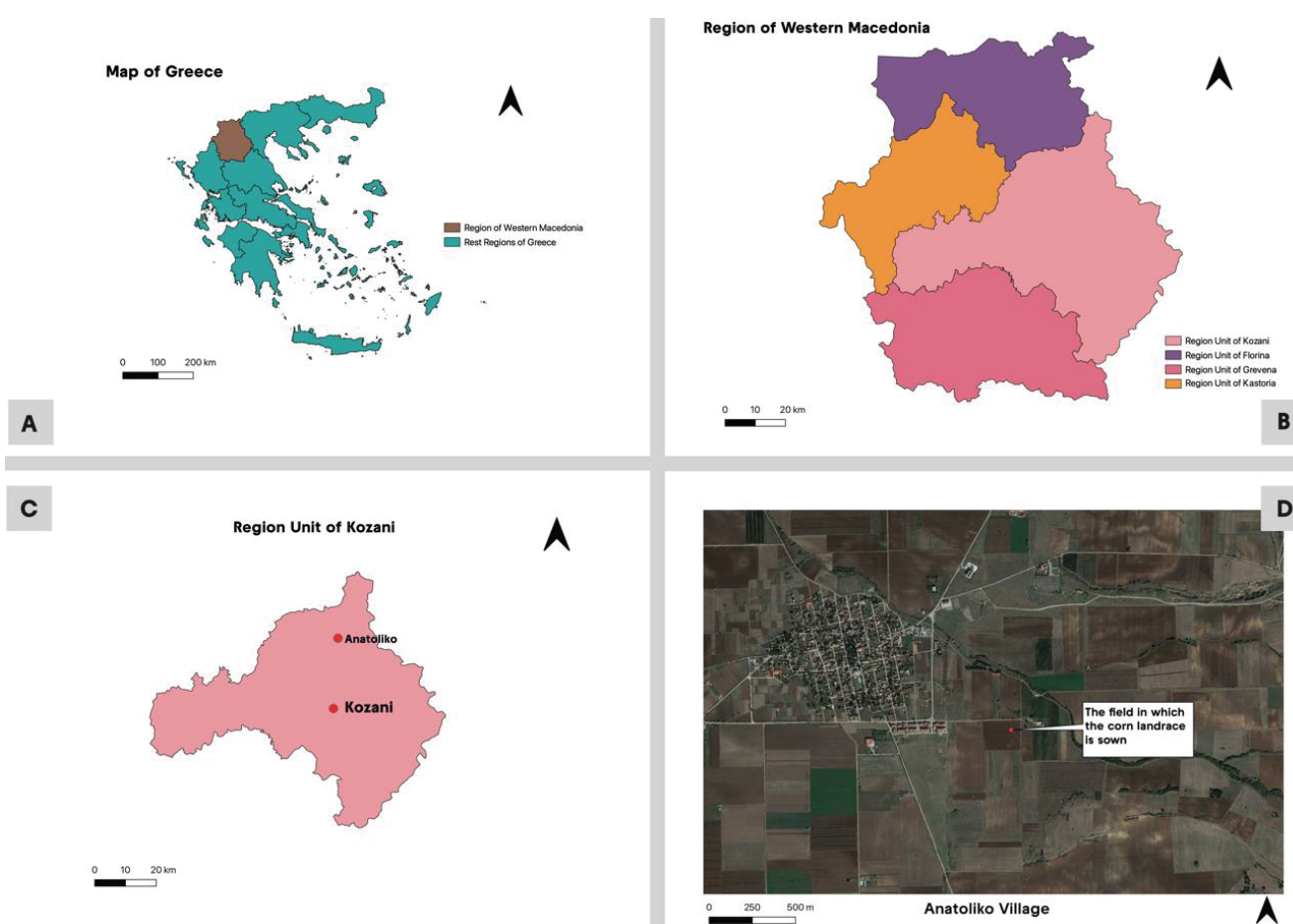


Fig. 1 Maps of Greece and the Western Macedonia region: (A) Map of Greece featuring the Western Macedonia region; (B) The Western Macedonia region with its regional units; (C) Kozani's regional unit, depicting the Municipality of Kozani and Anatoliko village; (D) The area where the corn landrace is cultivated

Corn is known as *kalampóki* or *aravósitos* in Greek [16, p.815]-[17, p.614]. The etymology of the word *kalampoki* is uncertain, but it is probably a loan from either the Albanian word *kalambok* or *kallamboq*, the Italian word *calambochi*, or the Turkish word *kalembek*. Corn's Greek name, *aravósitos* means "wheat acquired from the Arabs," referring to the crop's introduction to Greece from the Near East in 1600.

Corn (*Zea mays* L.) is one of the major crops in Greece with a significant financial contribution. Macedonia, Thessaly, and Thrace are the primary cultivation areas. In modern Greece, it is primarily utilized as livestock feed, with only a small amount intended for human use. The total annual production amounts to approximately 117,850 tonnes in 2020, from a total area harvested of 116780 ha [18].

Conservation of corn landrace is critical because it contains the majority of the crop's genetic diversity, which improves yield performance [19]-[20]. In addition, the long-term sustainability of corn landraces could be ensured through seed banking. The Greek Gene Bank (GGB) keeps about 15,000 samples of different plant genetic resources that are important for food and agriculture [21]. Corn cultivation has been documented in the Macedonian highlands of Greece since the 1800s [22, p.39].

III. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CORN IN GREEK PONTIC CUISINE

Corn was a major component in the diets of the Pontic Greeks as well as their neighbors in the Pontic region (Black Sea Province) [10, p.125]-[23, p.40]. In the Greek Pontic dialect, corn is referred to as *lazoúd* (where d is pronounced as *-th* in those) [24, p.510]. Despite the fact that corn cultivation was not widespread originally in the Pontic region, evidence of its use traces back to the Trebizond Empire (1204-1461 CE) [25, p.381]. Nowadays, corn is regarded as a cultural asset in the region, and it is generally perceived to be a significant component of regional cuisine [26]. Along with anchovies and kale, corn is a staple of Black Sea cuisine [27, p.161].

Corn landraces still cultivated in Pontos differentiate from novel hybrids. They differ in the number of seed rows on the cob as well in their better taste and sweeter flavor. The distinction between them consists of the number of seed rows on the cob. Additionally, they are tastier and sweeter in flavor.

Corn plants were also used as a food source for livestock and as a mattress filler, and their silks were used as a diuretic [10, p.125]. Due to the climate and high rainfall, corn cultivation was particularly prevalent in Akarsu, formerly Larahani [28]. However, in many places, such as Atalar (formerly Tsimera), corn cultivation was limited since it did not thrive there due to high altitude [29, p.395]. As a result, locals were obliged to buy from street Turkish vendors.

The Greeks of Pontus relied heavily on maize as a daily food, consuming it in a variety of forms including hulled corn, plain corn flour, and even roasted corn flour. Soups and vegetable-based recipes incorporate hulled corn. Extensive use of plain corn flour was made in the making of bread and *pazlamas* (a type of pie in the Pontian dialect) [10, p.130]. *Furniko* flour was used to prepare the well-known and delectable Pontic Greek dish, called *havitz* [10, p.131].

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. The Research Region

Furniko flour production was examined as a first step in studying Pontic Greek cuisine. With the support of locals and cultural associations, the authors visited residents of Western Macedonia in May 2021, a region in northern Greece with a significant number of Pontic Greek descendants.

The present research was confined particularly to Anatoliko (N 40° 32' 39.1452" N-21° 44' 43.0512" E) (Fig. 2), a village in the regional unit of Kozani. Due to its relative altitude from the sea and the foothills of Mount Vermio, the village of Anatoliko, which is located at 630 meters above sea level, is classified as

a semi-mountainous community [30].

B. Interviews

For the purpose of gathering information on the production of *furniko* flour, we used methods such as semi-structured interviewing and participant observation [31]. A list of questions had already been compiled, including questions concerning corn variety, sowing, harvesting, and processing. The interviews lasted 10-15 minutes. They were composed by two authors of Pontic descent who had a deeper understanding of Pontic Greek culture.

To identify respondents, a purposive sampling method was used [32]. After interviewing residents of Anatoliko Village, the responses became repetitious, and we reached data saturation, implying that no new findings emerged from the interviews. Table I shows the demographic characteristics of the participants.

TABLE I
 DEMOGRAPHICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Participant ID Code	Gender	Age	Generation
P01	Female	82	2nd
P02	Female	82	2nd
P03	Male	80	2nd
P04	Male	65	3rd
P05	Male	57	3rd
P06	Male	67	3rd
P07	Male	65	3rd

During the interviews, participants discussed the significance of the corn cobs harvesting time, the points to consider during the preparation of *furniko* flour, and its properties. Only one resident was still making *furniko* flour, despite the fact that we found a significant proportion of individuals who had this knowledge. In general, it is rare to discover someone who makes *furniko* flour, either because the traditional method has been forgotten, those who know it are elderly and lack the endurance to produce it, or because the difficult process discourages the younger generation.

C. Participant Observation of the Production of *Furniko* Flour

Beginning in August 2021, the resident who participated in the study has invited us to visit the field where he cultivated the corn. The *furniko* flour production methods were identified by targeted questions. Data collection required the use of photographs and video recordings [33]. A mobile phone (iPhone 12), an external microphone (Boya Shotgun BY-MM1), and the *Voice Memos* app were used as recording equipment. As extra tools, we used a tripod (Rollei Smartphone Tripod Traveler) and a gimbal (Zhiyun Smooth-Q3).

V. PRODUCTION PROCEDURE OF FURNIKO FLOUR

Initially, the participant began by demonstrating corn harvesting procedure. Following that, we participated in the entire procedure depicted in Fig. 3 for making *furniko* flour.

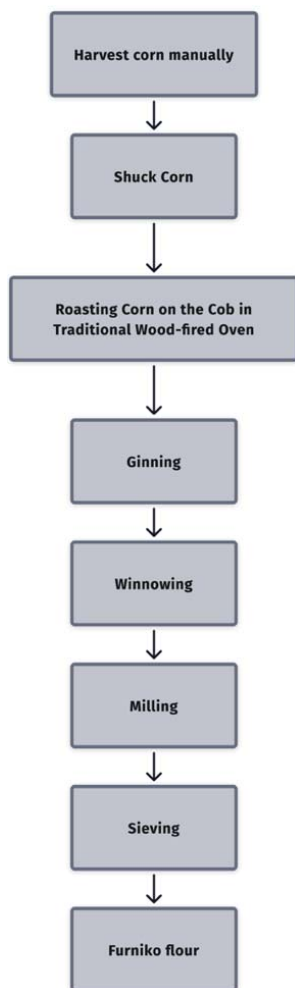


Fig. 3 Techniques for processing corn to furniko flour

A. Harvesting Corn

We interviewed the participant about corn cultivation and cultivars while he demonstrated harvesting in cornfield (Fig. 4). He stated that "Sowing occurs in the spring and is done in two phases, one month apart, to ensure a double yield". Following this, he defined the corn variety as a landrace with eight to ten rows of kernels per cob and a yellowish tint. In Fig. 5, the difference between our participant's corn landrace and a hybrid variety is presented. In addition, he informed us that this corn landrace has been cultivated in Anatoliko and neighboring villages for decades. The GGB at the Institute of Plant Breeding and Phytogenetic Resources of ELGO-DIMITRA (Hellenic Agricultural Organization-DIMITRA) keeps a sample of this variety.

According to the participant in the study, the appropriate time to harvest is "when no milky liquid comes out of the seeds when they are squeezed." Only the corn cobs are harvested by hand in the early morning. The corn will then be hand-husked by pulling the husks all the way down to expose the kernel-filled cob (Fig. 6). At the same time, the shucked corn cobs are placed in storage crates. The amount of corn harvested depends on the capacity of the wood-fired oven. In the case of our participant, his oven has a capacity of roughly 200 cobs.



Fig. 4 The cornfield

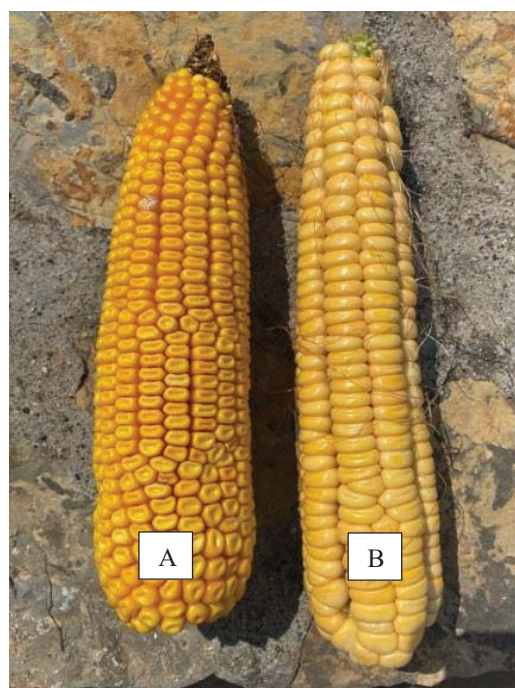


Fig. 5 A hybrid variety (A) and corn landrace (B)



Fig. 6 Shuck corn in the field

B. Corn Roasting

After gathering the required number of corn cobs, they are brought to the yard of the participant's house, where a traditional wood-fired oven is built to roast corn (Fig. 7).



Fig. 7 Front view of a traditional wood-fired oven



Fig. 8 The wood-fired oven ready to roast the corn cobs

Traditionally, wood-fired ovens were built of stone and clay [34]. It is rectangular on the outside, with a gabled roof covered in hardwood or tiles. The vaulted interior is built with stones and clay, while the floor is built with stone blocks. An iron lid is placed over the square mouth of the oven, which is connected to the chimney.

For the oven's lighting, a supply of logs and kindling (small branches or pinecones) must have been prepared. The fire is

started after placing the logs and kindling in the oven. The oven temperature reaches the proper level when the inside of the dome turns white. At the point where the flames have been reduced to embers, they are removed from the oven (Fig. 8).

The participant explains, "We typically wipe the ashes from the oven deck with the *katamaya* (a long wooden pole with fabric strips knotted to the end), as it is known in the Pontic dialect, and then we place the corn cobs on it."

By placing the corn cobs on the oven deck side by side, the oven is closed with an iron lid. The corn cobs are left to roast for 20 minutes. After that, according to the participant, "we open the iron lid again to lower the temperature of the oven and to allow the steam to escape." Meanwhile, the corn cobs must be turned over and stay in the oven for 24 hours so they can be perfectly roasted. When we arrived the next morning to meet the participant, he opened the iron lid to show us the golden-brown corn cobs (Fig. 9).



Fig. 9 Roasted corn cobs

The corn cobs were still hot after a day. As shown in Fig. 10, they are carefully removed from the oven and placed into sacks.

C. Corn Ginning

The corn cobs, as they are collected in sacks, are transported to a storage room where they are ginned both by machine and by hand. "In the past, ginning was done entirely by hand," the participant explains, "but for the purpose of convenience, the majority of the ginning is done by machine." Only the cobs that have not been completely ginned are hand-ginned (Fig. 11).

D. Corn Winnowing, Milling, and Sieving

The subsequent phase in the production of *furniko* flour is winnowing, followed by milling and sieving. Winnowing is a crucial step for the quality of the final product and particular

attention should be paid during its application. Fig. 12 shows the cleaned kernels being placed in metal buckets after winnowing.



Fig. 10 Storing of roasted corn cobs in sacks



Fig. 11 Hand-ginned corn



Fig. 12 Cleaned corn kernels ready to be milled



Fig. 13 The milling process in a millstone

As seen in Fig. 13, the kernels are poured into the millstone machine and processed into *furniko* flour.

As the first sample of flour was prepared (Fig. 14), the participant stated, "There is no other flour that can be consumed on its own that smells and tastes as delicious as this one."



Fig. 14 The furniko flour

The *furniko* flour is then sieved and prepared for use in cooking.

VI. USES OF FURNIKO FLOUR

Furniko flour is used to make dough for pies and *halva* (confectionery made from flour, sugar, water, and nuts), as well as to cook *mavrolahana* (kale) [8]-[35]. Its variant with melted cheese is called *tyroklosti* in the Pontic dialect, while in the

modern Black Sea region of Turkey it is known as, *muhlama* (in Rize), *kuymak* (in Trebizond), *yağlaş* (in Ordu), and *havitz* (in Greek speaking areas) [36], [37].

As we mentioned above, *havitz* is traditionally prepared with *furniko* flour, but in various regions of Pontus it is also prepared using plain corn flour or wheat flour. "It is one of the most nutritious foods that many generations have grown up with," the participant states of *havitz*. "It can be eaten at any time," he continues, "but now we usually cook it at home on cold winter nights or whenever we have guests from family and friends."

In its most basic form, it is a thick cream made with cow's butter, water, and salt (Fig. 15). Furthermore, it can be eaten alone or topped with various ingredients (yoghurt, meat, sausages, etc.).



Fig. 15 The havitz dish in its plain form

Kuymak tends to be an iconic dish of Trebizond and its surroundings, where it is generally consumed for breakfast [38]. And the locals in that area prefer the roasted corn flour (*furniko* flour) for its distinct flavor. In Rize (Fig. 1), *kuymak* is made with clotted cream (*kaymak*) instead of butter and is known as *höşmerim* [39].

Roasted corn flour like *furniko* is widely consumed in several countries, including Cote d'Ivoire [40], Ghana [41], Nigeria, and Zimbabwe [42].

VII. CONCLUSION

This study examined the production procedure of *furniko* flour, an emblematic delicacy in the cuisine of Pontic Greeks. Through participant observation, we attempted to document its unique production techniques, which were not previously documented in the literature. Future research should focus on the nutritional value in relation to current guidelines for healthy food consumption. Additional parameters affecting the sensory characteristics and eating quality of the product should be examined.

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