

# It's all in the foam

'Frappe Nation' captures what makes Greeks tick

By Angelike Contis

**T**HE PARADOX about frappe coffee is that it is both about speed and slowing down. Clients can't get too mad when taxi drivers must stop to order one, for they know it'll only take a couple of minutes. At the same time, when you add water to the brown foam, the coffee's lifespan can stretch out for hours.

The frappe is an answer to modern life's demands and Greek cafe/agora social habits, Vivian Constantinopoulos and Daniel Young point out in their new bilingual gift book *Frappe Nation*. "Conceived at a time

overfrothing though, grounding itself in personal stories, like that of one frappe rebel. "Yiota Potamiti, who grew up in Patras and now lives in Rhodes, remembers secretly drinking frappes at home as a 16-year-old. She would close her bedroom door and quietly mix them with the instant coffee, sugar and blue shaker she hid under her bed. She didn't use ice cubes, fearing the noise might alert her parents."

Not every photo is 100 percent slick, but most replicate cafe-people watching. It's easy to stare at images like one of a woman in silent ecstasy of her first sip or another of two men with lively eyes catching the attention of a midriff-bearing waitress. Old coffee ads and commercial stills provide colour, while a black-and-white 1956 photo of the Zaharatos cafe by Dimitris Harisiadis glorifies Athens' coffee past.

There are detailed recipes and even an entire chapter devoted to "The Science of Frappe Foam", which includes statements like: "Understanding the principles of foam formation is the basic foundation for investigating frappe foaming".

With its balance of details and broader insights into Greek society, *Frappe Nation* has its finger on the rapid, caffeine-fuelled pulse of a nation addicted to a drink far more potent than espresso. *Athens News* quizzes *Frappe Nation*'s authors below.

**In the book you end up talking about much of contemporary Greek society through the foamy coffee drink. Was this your original intention?**

Constantinopoulos: Yes, absolutely. You can't separate the two and we never saw the two as separate. The idea of exploring contemporary Greek society through a drink everyone is so familiar with, whether they drink it or not, was a very attractive one to us. It was an interesting pretext to talk to people about changes in contemporary Greek society, and how Greeks of all generations and backgrounds perceive modernity and tradition. There are few cultural phenomena that say as much about modern Greeks as frappe.

**What surprised you most about the history of the frappe?**

Constantinopoulos: The fact that different generations identify themselves as 'the frappe generation' - from recent retirees who started drinking frappe in the 60s, to thirtysomethings who grew up on the 80s TV ads and the jingle *Kane mia stasi* [Take a Break], to 21st-century students and servicemen who maybe remember sneaking their first sip from a parent's glass but nonetheless regard frappe possessively as their drink.

Young: That Greece's frappe was originally made with icecream, just like the classic cafe frappe of France. It wasn't until the early 1960s that icecream was eliminated from the frappe formula.

**How did you choose which of Greece's thousands of cafes to feature in the book?**

Young: Our objective was diversity -

geographic, stylistic, demographic, historical. We hoped that all the featured cafes taken together would draw a rich portrait of the Greek cafe landscape. We were worried that trendy cafes would be closed or at least have changed their names by the time the book was published, so we shied away from the boutique lounge cafe/bar of the moment.

**Are you both responsible for the writing and photos?**

Constantinopoulos: We divided the research, the writing, and the photography according to our experience. On visits to the cafes, I, the Greek speaker, tended to do most of the interviewing, while Daniel took photos. But Daniel was always looking around, making observations and suggesting new questions and points of attack. I researched the Greek bibliographical and archival material while Daniel, the food writer, investigated the art of coffee and science of foam. As husband and wife, we live together and we were always trying out material on each other, shouting between rooms and laptops.

**Can you each describe your initiation as well as current relationship to the drink?**

Young: I tried my first frappe nearly 25 years ago in New York at Omonia Cafe, the first Greek cafeteria in the Astoria neighbourhood. I was puzzled at first by the drink because it looked like a creamy milkshake and yet the beverage itself was thin. You can sip it through the thinnest of straws. That paradox is one of the characteristic I now like best about it. While everyone is copying Starbucks and their faux coffee milkshakes cum smoothies that fill you with air, ice, sugar and thickening agents, foamy frappe is an ethereal iced coffee.

Constantinopoulos: I first tried frappe on holiday as a teenager at a Greek cafeteria. It was a *horis gala* [without milk] and I hated it. I didn't realise you could have it with milk and I didn't even think to ask. Two or three years later I tried it again, having ordered it with milk, and had an infinitely more pleasant experience. Nowadays, I'd say my relationship with the drink is more intense, simply because of what I've learnt about other people's experiences. We're still collecting frappe stories.

**What are common mistakes in making frappes?**

Young: A good foam depends on filling the shaker or drink mixer with just the right amount of instant coffee and water. Too much water and the foam is not very thick. Too little water and there's way too much of it. A good ratio, measuring by volume and not weight, is one part instant coffee to four or five parts cold water.

**What do you think Greece would be like without the frappe?**

Young and Constantinopoulos: It would be a catastrophe not only for Greece but for all humanity. To be serious, we are bothered by the sameness you now find on both sides of the Atlantic. High streets, main streets and malls everywhere have the same shops, the same brands, the same merchandise. If Greece loses frappe, it loses something that makes it different.

✓ *Frappe Nation* (hardcover, colour, 188 pages, 32 euros) is published by Potamos (www.potamos.gr). It can be purchased at the Potamos bookstore (32 Skoufa, tel 210-3621844).



when Greece was looking ahead to a better life, the convenience and accessibility of frappe provided an instantaneous taste of the future," they write.

Though the book forces you to wait until Chapter 7 for all the details, *Frappe Nation* reveals that it was in the late 1950s that the coffee was born - by accident - out of instant Nescafe coffee that is predisposed to frothing and a need for something cool and potent. Leading up to the frappe's birth, the nicely laid-out book digs into the history of Ancient Greek conversation, and the tale of coffee's arrival in Greece.

The book is vacuum-packed with coffee facts and quotes from coffee professionals as well as hipsters ranging from actor/director Renos Haralambides to our own funnyman Brian Church. The book not only explains why coffee is more expensive in Greece than elsewhere, how London's first cafe was Greek and when "Turkish" coffee became "Elliniko" (Greek), but it also radiates out to discuss actress/politician Melina Mercouri as a female role-model, the popularity of Asia Minor cuisine and student-dating practices. There are profiles of over 20 Greek cafes, including a few remaining old gems.

It's a smooth read. For instance, in describing a pick-me-up, *Frappe Nation* asserts: "The distance between glum silence and spirited chattiness can sometimes be measured by the length of a straw."

The coffee-table book avoids