

MADE IN GREECE

The Cookie That Crossed the Atlantic

How the Tsanos family went from an unlabeled bag to America’s shelves. *By Theodora Tsevas*

The air outside the Tsanos facility in Markopoulo smells of moustokouloura—Greece’s most enduring cookie, and the one that built this place. It all started with an unlabeled plastic bag of breadsticks and a bakery in Neo Psychiko.

The Tsanos family did not arrive in Athens with a business plan. They arrived with a recipe and a trade that had shaped the family for generations.

Evangelos Tsanos’s father was a baker from Ioannina who came down to the capital sometime in the 1980s with his wife, a Greek-Australian woman who had seen, growing up in Australia, what a modern bakery could look like. Not the narrow neighborhood founo with its two or three standards, but something wider, more ambitious: a counter with real variety, breads that looked and tasted different from each other. When they opened their shop in Neo Psychiko, it stood out. The neighborhood had not seen anything quite like it.

From the bakery, the family expanded into a factory in Palini—bread, toast, a growing range of baked goods. Then the factory caught fire. Evangelos’s father’s health failed. The business, as it existed, was over.

Evangelos was 18. He went back to the bakery, started producing breadsticks, and began making the rounds of Greek supermarkets with an unlabeled plastic bag and a wholesale price. The year was 1988.

What followed was a slow, deliberate expansion. More breadstick varieties, then cookies, then a sugar-free line.



Around 1990, the moustokoulouro entered the lineup, and with it, the product that would come to define the brand.

Among the Tsanos product line, it is the best seller. Every Greek house-

hold knows it. It is the kind of thing that does not need to be advertised to a Greek consumer because it already lives in their memory, associated with a particular smell, a particular kitchen, a



particular time of year.

Evangelos moved out of the Neo Psychiko bakery and into his own production facility in Palini, which eventually gave way to the current factory in Markopoulo. He put his name on the packaging, designed the boxes himself, down to the colors and the copy. The company now employs 100 people and carries 10 breadstick varieties, five cookie formats, and a growing sugar-free line. It is present in every major supermarket chain in Greece.

The thing that distinguishes Tsanos products, says Maria Tsanos—Evangelos’s wife, and the person who runs the business alongside him—is not the variety. It’s what’s inside. No preservatives. No additives. The moustokoulouro contains grape must. The orange cookie is made with fresh butter and fresh orange. The apple variety uses actual apple. The sugar-free carrot cookie is made with carrots grated on-site, at the factory.

“What the fresh carrot gives,” she says, “is what goes into the product.” Nearly the entire range is suitable for vegans and vegetarians, the exceptions being the orange cookie, which contains butter, and the cheese breadstick.

This has not been a small commitment. It requires fresh raw materials, tighter production timelines, and less margin for error. But it has also, she believes, been the reason customers stayed loyal through Greece’s difficult economic years, when many shoppers might have been expected to trade down. They didn’t.

In 2019, Tsanos began exporting. Paris was the first market. Since then, the company has maintained a presence

at three international trade fairs and established distribution in the United States, a New York–based distributor covering the East Coast, a second partner in Pittsburgh, a third in Illinois, and placement in World Market locations across the Southern states.

For the Greek diaspora, Tsanos products need no introduction. The moustokoulouro is bought on recognition alone, comfort food, the taste of something familiar, a product that connects second- and third-generation Greek-Americans to a grandmother’s kitchen. Greek-American markets along the East Coast have been a natural fit, and the diaspora customer, Maria Tsanos notes, is a reliable one.

The non-Greek American consumer is a different proposition entirely. The concept of grape must, the thick, sweet syrup pressed from wine grapes that gives the cookie its distinctive depth, does not exist in most American pantries or vocabularies. In a market where the cookie aisle is one of the most competitive in the grocery store, a product that requires more explaining faces an uphill battle. The product is unchanged; the story around it has to shift.

That shift, for Tsanos, means translation. “You sell it as a cinnamon cookie,” she says. “Or a spice cookie. You say it’s made with grape juice. You find the language that makes sense to the person in front of you.”

Beyond the United States, Tsanos has found interest in Asia. South Korea, Maria Tsanos says, is a market that is actively seeking European baked goods, and products like these fit exactly what that market wants. She is measured, however, about what international growth actually requires. A trade show lead is not a market. A market is a long-term relationship with a reliable distributor, consistent orders, and enough shelf presence to build recognition over time. That process is made harder by the absence of meaning-



ful institutional support. Italian food exporters benefit from state-backed marketing infrastructure that operates almost as a separate arm of government. Greek exporters navigate the same terrain largely alone. Some EU funding has helped offset costs in a given year, but the gap between what Greece offers its food producers abroad and what competitor countries provide is considerable.

There are new products in development—three or four concepts held back not by recipe, but by the realities of a factory running at capacity. The Tsanos family handles all R&D internally; the recipes are their own, tested and refined in-house across decades. Bringing a new product to market takes roughly six months from concept to shelf, accounting for packaging design—which Evangelos oversees personally—production planning, and the demands of keeping everything else running simultaneously.

The company has grown almost entirely through product quality and word of mouth. The fundamentals have not changed since 1988: Make something good, put your name on it, and let the shelf do the talking. A shopper picks up a box, tries the cookie, and comes back. In 1988, there was no box. There was no name. There was only the product. As it turned out, that was enough.



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