

Baklava

By Yareli Ortiz

A sweet scent came from the kitchen, gently luring me in. I began to tiptoe, following the aroma into the kitchen to see my Grandmama standing tall over the marble counter. The oven was turned on to high blast, the assembled baklava sitting on the baking trays. My mouth began to water thinking of the sugary goodness. I filled my head with images of the sweet golden honey, toasted walnuts, with tons and tons of sugar and never forgetting the hints of cinnamon and lemon zest. As always, the final piece seemed even better than the first of the flaky morsels with oozing blotches of honey once broken in half.

Every summer Grandmama flew in from Russia to see how tall every one of her grandkids had become. She always complained, with her hand flinging all over the place, how Americanized baklava was so disgusting. Before her visits my mother knew exactly what ingredients to place on the counter, cinnamon, butter, sugar, walnuts and lemons. Grandmama's eyes would gleam in astonishment as she saw her favorite ingredients sitting on the marble counter. On every visit she would look at me and tell me to put on an apron and be her little helper. My face always became lit with a smile brighter than the sun. As I opened up the flour, it fell and made a white mess. Seeing my face covered in flour, my grandmama would reach for a moist paper towel and gently wipe my face of the mess, chuckling slightly.

Every time we made baklava, the mess would decrease. Each visit was a class. I learned how to roll dough and how to blend ingredients together. As Grandmama placed the phyllo dough on the butter pan, we'd exchange stories. Grandmama would tell me about Russia's beauty, and as for me, I would teach her how to groove like the BackStreet Boys. Laughter always overcame us as Grandmama attempted to disco dance while stirring the boiling sugar water.

Since I was her only special helper, she taught me to roll the phyllo dough back and forth, side to side. I would finish rolling, and she'd cut small pieces of phyllo dough on to the baking sheet rubbed in butter. Once I had nothing to do, I'd look at my Grandmama's handiwork, pouring honey, vanilla, and lemon zest into a hot pan on the stove. The summer was blazing so hot that it made her sweat; she wiped the small drops off her semi-wrinkled forehead, as she pushed back her bushy grey hair with a sliver hair clip.

The family dinner table was rarely put to use. It was for "special occasions" like Grandmama's visits, my mother always told us. They were special because she wanted to cook for us. She never wanted us to cook for her. Grandmama treated us like the guests even though we tried to snatch the pots and pans from her. After dinner was over, my lovely Grandmama would be the first one to grab all the plates from the table like a NASCAR driver in a race. She'd place the dishes in the sink as she pulled out the prepared baklava and decorated it with drizzles of chocolate syrup for good tasting.

Grandmama would assemble every delicate plate for each person and await our response. We'd take a bite, and our eyes would begin to dance in joy realizing that we had missed her baklava since last summer. The sugar rush energized the family's taste buds. After the family was finished, we seemed as if we were going to explode like an atomic bomb from the fullness. Baklava was always the sensational dish of every visit.

Summer of 2001 was a special visit from Russia. When Grandmama came to our home, for some reason it seemed as if it was to be the last. She seemed to be growing very weak and frail, yet I always brought a smile to her face. I was so glad to see Grandmama that I asked her if

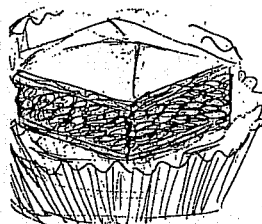
she'd help me bake baklava for her. She became emotional as she sat on the chair regaining energy. I rolled the phyllo dough and combined the rest of the ingredients. Once the final piece was done, I grabbed plates for my Grandmama and me to eat. I assembled the baklava on the plate, serving her as she once did for me.

My Grandmama gently ate my creation. Her eyes lit up, giving me a sign that it was scrumptious. I took a bite of the baklava, tasting its sweet honey taste and the flakiness. The flakes drizzled like rain onto the plate after a bite. The baklava was not sour or too sweet, yet it wasn't as good as the original instructor of baklava's. Once she finished the piece of baklava, she began to cry tears of joy. I hugged her and asked why she was crying. She gently grasped my hand, looking straight into my eyes, and said, "I'm so happy that you've prepared this wonderful and delicious recipe for me. You did a wonderful job." She wiped the tears from her eyes with a napkin as both of us rose in a swell of emotion.

The year went by, and my Grandmama passed away. My life became gloomy as it set into reality that I would never get to bond again with my amazing great grandmother. Baking together was long gone. Yet reality split upon me, I knew I still had a piece of her in the palms of my hands. I had her baklava recipe, one of my Grandmama's favorite desserts. I vowed to myself that I would never forget her recipe, for it was better than a golden locket or a diamond. Instead of letting go, I received a piece of my Grandmama's loving heart. Now each time I eat baklava, the great memories flow back; from the laughter to the tears, those were the best. Now those memories lay in the baklava's good old taste.

Ingredients

1 pound walnuts finely chopped
½ cup sugar
½ cup melted butter
1 package frozen phyllo dough
1 cup water
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 cup honey



Directions

Preheat oven to 300 degrees. Combine and set aside walnuts, 1/2 cup sugar, and cinnamon. Using a pastry brush, lightly brush the bottom and side of a 10 x 14" pan with melted butter. Open the phyllo dough layer, 6 whole leaves (or half leaves), in the pan, buttering each layer as you go. Spread 1 cup of the walnut mixture.

Layer 8 half sheets of phyllo dough. Butter each layer. Each sheet will be an inch or so short. Stagger the sheet from corner to corner to cover the baking pan. Spread 1 cup of the walnut mixture. Repeat 8 sheets and walnut mixture twice. You will end up with 4 layers of nuts. Bake 1 hour or until golden brown.

Fifteen minutes before the baklava is done, mix 1 cup sugar, water, and lemon juice in saucepan. Cook sauce over medium heat, and stir occasionally for 15 minutes. Remove sauce from heat, and add the honey and vanilla. Stir until well blended. Remove the baklava from the oven, and finish cutting through the layers. Pour the sauce over the hot baklava. Let it cool. Let the baklava sit in the fridge for about four hours.

Makes 36 pieces