

The Joy of Lebanese & Armenian Cooking

Excerpts from “*Mom how do you cook....*” by Phyllis Saraf Tabakian McShane

Sights, Sounds and Aromas

When I was just a youngster, I observed my mother and grandmother as they prepared the various dishes that were so delightful not only to taste, but to smell! Ahhh! The stimulating, mouth-watering aromas of garlic, olive oil and onions wafting through the house and even outdoors as pots simmered on the stove. And when I married, I marveled at the agility and skills of both my mother and father-in-law as they prepared huge quantities of kibbeh, baklava, and mahshi for our large family gatherings.

No recipes – no measuring cups – no spoons. They hand ground lamb meat for the lamb dishes used both hands to mix blughour, meat and onions for kibbeh. They crushed garlic with a pestle in a wooden bowl, and squeezed numerous lemons by hand; they wilted large heads of cabbage over steaming pots of hot water in preparation for stuffing grape leaves, squash and cabbage for our all-time favorite, Mahshi.

They rolled filo dough (which had been mixed and allowed to rise in giant washtubs), on their long cloth-covered dining room table into six by three foot sheets... so thin that they looked like cigarette paper. By the time the dough was rolled and cut to fit into numerous buttered pans, the whole dining room which was the biggest room in their modest home, would be dusted with corn starch, (used to roll the dough) from ceiling to wall to floor and their faces, hair, arms and aprons were coated as well.

The stamina and love that went into the preparation of what is commonly known as Baklava was a marvel to watch. It was a real art – one that is rarely emulated today with rolled and packaged filo dough now available in the freezer cases of our super markets. I remember beads of perspiration standing out on their engrossed and kindly faces as they prepared this most delectable pastry at Christmas.

And my grandmother, also, shed pints of sweat as she prepared Easter Cakes (Samboosek) in her large rustic kitchen. An assembly line of family members and friends encircled the table and as she rolled each piece of dough, one would place the nut filling on it, another would fold and seal it, another would stamp a design upon it with cut glass, and another would shovel them into the huge iron wood-burning range with the aid of an oversized wooden paddle, to bake. It was a real family affair, and the joyous spirit of Easter was certainly present during those memorable hours of shared time and skills.

My Turn To Cook

I started preparing some of these dishes when I was only 13 years of age. My father had died and my mother had to continue operating a confectionery and ice cream shop to support her seven children. Being the oldest, many of the home chores were left to me, and thus began my introduction into the world of cooking. I loved it! And I loved to experiment, to try new recipes, and new techniques.

Sometimes my attempts were doomed to failure as when I made a double batch of chocolate fudge and it turned out like syrup. My brothers and sisters, feeling sorry for me as I cried over the waste of so many expensive ingredients, gathered round the table with spoons in hand and began dipping the chocolate and eating it with accompanying sounds of delight. How I loved them for rescuing me from my feelings of guilt – and my mother never knew!

Marriage and Cooking With Joy

When I married, my cooking became more extensive as I experienced the joys of preparing meals for my Armenian husband and eventually six children. And believe me when I say there is real joy and satisfaction in seeing one's family and friends smiling, relishing, and praising the food you so lovingly prepared.