

The Legend of *Mujadara*

Determined to keep the culinary rituals of her Syrian grandmother alive, **AMY PATUREL** remembers that the best tradition of all is not the eating of food, but the sharing of it.

GROWING UP, MY two sisters and I chanted loudly for food that most kids would grimace at. Lima beans in a stew of tomato paste and water, crushed garbanzo beans, chopped parsley. And the sounds that came from our mouths weren't exactly words, but garbled attempts to pronounce the Arabic dishes we craved.

"It's *mmmmjuddara*," I said, of the traditional aromatic lentil and rice dish called *mujadara*, "As in *mmmmm*, yummy."

"No, it's *juddarrrrrrra*," my sister replied, rolling her Rs.

We constantly begged my grandmother for Syrian dishes, like *fatayer* (thick, buttery dough stuffed with minced lamb and pine nuts), *hushwi* (Syrian stuffing made from rice, lamb, pine nuts and spices – most notably cinnamon), *tabouli* (salad of chopped parsley, tomatoes and bulgur wheat), hummus, *ma'amoul* (heavy semolina dough filled with nuts and rose water, and dusted with powdered sugar) or one of our favourites, a mysterious dish called *lamtung*. One night I asked my parents what it actually was.

"You know what it is," my mom said casually. "It's lamb's tongue."

My sister Shannon and I glanced at our plates. Then we dashed to the bathroom, never so eager to wash our mouths out with soap.



An Arabic staple: hummus with fresh pita bread.

But *lamtung* aside, the scents that emanated from the kitchen when my grandmother prepared dinner were enough to make us swoon. Our empty bellies grumbled when we got a whiff of onions sautéing in a pan with lamb and fragrant spices. It was a lesson in patience, as my grandmother worked for hours rolling grape leaves around the blend of lamb, rice and spices.

When I was a child, I didn't realise the amount of time she spent cooking once or twice a week was something many people did only once a year. She prepared every dish by taste. No recipe. No measuring. Just instincts and frequent tasting, testing and modifying.

"You girls better watch me and learn how to do this," she said. "One of these days I'm not going to be around,

and then what? You'll never get this food again."

She wasn't joking. Sure, you can order these dishes at a Lebanese restaurant (though I have yet to see *mujadara* on a menu). But they never taste the same. There are countless nuances, styles and techniques to Arabic cooking. And since I was raised with a gifted Arabic cook in the house, I'm convinced her versions are the best.

My grandmother passed away 23 years ago, when I was 12 years old, and I haven't tasted most of her savoury concoctions since. When she left us, so, too, did our experiences communing over her dishes. For a few years my mom and aunts tried to recreate the magic of her recipes on Christmas. But as my sisters and I grew older and

began building families of our own, holidays were split between in-laws, and our Syrian festivities became a multicultural mesh of flavours. In the midst of daily demands and non-Arabic partners, we resorted to getting our fix from ready-made hummus and *tabouli*. Unlike my grandmother, who fondled countless onions before selecting the perfect one, we rushed through the supermarket aisles, dropping frozen chicken breasts and prepared meals in our trolleys.

When I visited my 4-year-old niece and she shouted *karbanaki* – her father’s favourite Czech dish – I knew our centuries-old family tradition was kaput. My niece had probably never even learnt the Arabic words that signify my favourite foods, and I was determined to change that. I couldn’t let my grandmother’s rituals die.

So, in honour of my grandmother’s birthday, I donned an apron, pulled out some old recipe books and prepared for an all-day affair in my kitchen. I decided on *mujadara*. Hot or cold,

“I told you so” playing in my head. Okay, it’s just five simple ingredients, I mused. I should be able to figure this out. I pulled out two Syrian cookery books and phoned my mom.

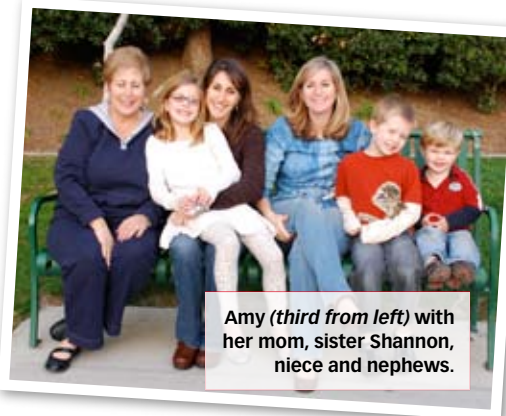
“I’m attempting the impossible here. Can you help me?”

The conversation went downhill from there. I heard my mom opening cupboards, shuffling through books and removing pages.

“You need four onions,” she said.

“Four? The recipe I have calls for two. I already went to the shop and came back with two.”

“All I can say is good luck,” she said.



Amy (third from left) with her mom, sister Shannon, niece and nephews.

I took a small taste and breathed a deep sigh of relief. Even though it wasn’t perfect, the time-honoured tradition was back.

I couldn’t wait to scoop this hearty stew onto soft pita bread. I wanted to smell the memories of my childhood – slow-cooked onions, simmering lentils – mouthwatering scents. My nieces and nephews deserve to feel the love that comes from preparing – and eating – Arabic food, I thought. As long as it isn’t *lamtung*.

I tracked down one of Grandma’s “recipes” my mother had jotted down years before from memory. Phew, only five ingredients: water, lentils, onions, rice and salt. But as I studied the white sheet before me, I found no mention of spices. No reference to how much water or rice. I looked up to the heavens and laughed, my grandmother’s

I hung up the phone and decided to improvise. How bad could it be?

As I filled a large pot with water, sweat began dripping from my brow. I had two burners going – one with boiling water and lentils, the second with a pan of oil.

“Stir constantly,” my mom warned. “You don’t want it to burn.”

Darn those maternal premonitions! Sure enough, the onions sizzled past their golden-brown peak. But I dropped them into the pot anyway. Just 20 minutes later I was sitting down with a bowl of *mujadara* and a glass of wine. It looked just as I remembered – deep mocha brown, thick and yummy. I peered into the bowl and inhaled.

Abbb ... the rich scent instantly transported me to my grandmother’s kitchen. I took a small taste and breathed a deep sigh of relief. Even though the dish wasn’t perfect, the time-honoured tradition was back. Of course, lentil stew is still a little too foreign for my nieces and nephews. So I started their education more simply.

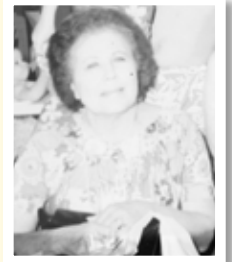
When they come to visit, instead of eating sugary cereal, they have home-made hummus with fresh pita bread. And since a good aunt never forgets dessert, they occasionally indulge in Aunt Amy’s *ma’amoul*.

When I arrive at Shannon’s house for our next family get-together, her kids will be yelling “mack moody, Aunt Amy, mack moody” – their garbled attempt at pronouncing *ma’amoul*. With those sweet sounds, I suspect I’ll finally understand what Grandma knew all along: That sharing the traditions of past generations with the future is the sweetest part of cooking. 0

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GRANDMA’S MUJADARA

- 4 to 6 large onions
- ½ cup oil
- 450 g lentils
- 11 cups water
- 1 Tbsp. salt
- ¾ cup rice, uncooked



1. Peel and chop onions.
2. Heat oil in a pan over medium-high heat.
3. Cook onions until browned.
4. Reserve about 4 Tbsp. of the browned onions for garnish.
5. Place lentils, water and salt in a pot. Cover and cook over medium heat for about 40 minutes.
6. Add uncooked rice and cook for another 15 to 20 minutes.
7. Add remaining onions to lentil and rice mixture and cook for another 15 to 20 minutes over a low flame, stirring occasionally to prevent burning or sticking. Serve hot or cold. Makes approximately 8 to 10 servings.