

Lebanon



The Art of the Grape Leaf

By Amy Paturel

When my sisters and I were kids, our Lebanese grandmother would spend hours rolling delicate grape leaves around a blend of lamb, rice and spices to create her wonderful dolmades. Her recipes were

imprecise. There was no mention of specific spices or measurements—she prepared every dish by taste. And there was always at least one secret ingredient.

"You girls better watch and learn," she said. "I'm not going to be here forever."

Of course we didn't take her advice. When she passed away more than 20 years ago, we were left to our own inept (and impatient) devices. Unlike Grandma, who lingered in the Arabic grocery store for hours to select the perfect ingredients, we rushed through the aisles of Costco, dropping chicken nuggets and boxes of mac 'n' cheese into our carts. With busy lives and non-Arab husbands or boyfriends, we got our Mediterranean fix from store-bought hummus and tabbouleh.

But even though my Arab family had grown and changed, my sisters and I still wanted the next generation to experience the love that emanates from an all-day affair in the kitchen. So we got together with my mother and started cooking.

We could never replicate Grandma's blend of spices, but we knew enough to get started. Mom pulled recipes out of three-ring binders as I tried to decipher the chicken scratches in the margins. There was no mention of spices. No hint as to how much water or rice to use. I looked up to the heavens and laughed, my grandmother's "I told you so" playing back in my head.

"It's just five simple ingredients," I thought. We should be able to figure this out. Then the chicken scratch: "Place pigs' feet in the bottom of pot."

"She's kidding, right?" I asked.

"Nope," my mom replied. "Now you know why your grandmother's grape leaves were so tasty."

"Why don't we try a batch without pigs' feet?" I suggested.

She reluctantly agreed. In the absence of my grandmother, my mom had become our grape-leaf dictator. "Amy, you're rolling them too big," she said.

I knew she was right. Anything larger than your index finger is guaranteed to fall apart in the pot. I tried to roll the leaves smaller and tighter. Somehow they just seemed to get fatter and looser. But I could almost feel my grandmother congratulating me for bringing the tradition back—however imperfectly.

That night at dinner, my new beau whispered in my ear, "Are we supposed to eat the leaf?" At that moment I realized the presentation isn't important. It's the flavor inside that counts.

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Amy Paturel's Dolmades

MAKES 50 DOLMADES

My grandmother used pigs' feet to add richness to the cooking liquid, but an alternative is lamb bones, if you can get them. Sometimes my mother also lines the bottom of the pot with any torn, imperfect grape leaves that can't be used for rolling. She says this helps keep the dolmades from sticking.

TOTAL TIME 55 minutes

- 1¼ cups rice
- 1½ pounds ground lamb
- ¾ cup tomato sauce
- 1 tablespoon cinnamon
- 1 tablespoon allspice
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 2 teaspoons pepper
- 1 jar (1 pound) grape leaves
- ¾ cup lemon juice

1. Rinse the rice with cold water and drain well. Place the ground lamb in a bowl. Stir in the rinsed rice, tomato sauce, cinnamon, allspice, salt and pepper, and mix well.
 2. Rinse the grape leaves under cold water. Place a grape leaf on a plate, vein side up, stem end (wide end) toward you. If the leaf still has a stem attached, cut it off. Put about 1 tablespoon stuffing—about a finger's thickness—crosswise at the widest point of the leaf. Fold in the sides of the leaf, and roll up the grape leaf tightly. As you work, place the stuffed leaves in a 5- or 6-quart kettle or Dutch oven, arranging them side by side and in layers on top of one another. (If you have stuffing left over, use it to stuff zucchini or bell peppers.)
 3. Place a dinner plate on top of the grape leaves (this keeps them submerged), and add water to just cover them. Cover the kettle and bring to a boil over medium-high heat. Reduce to a simmer and cook for 25 minutes.
 4. Add the lemon juice and continue cooking until the rice is tender, about 10 minutes.
- EACH DOLMADE HAS 57 calories, 2.9 g fat, 5 g carbohydrates (0.2 g fiber), 3 g protein, 378 mg sodium.