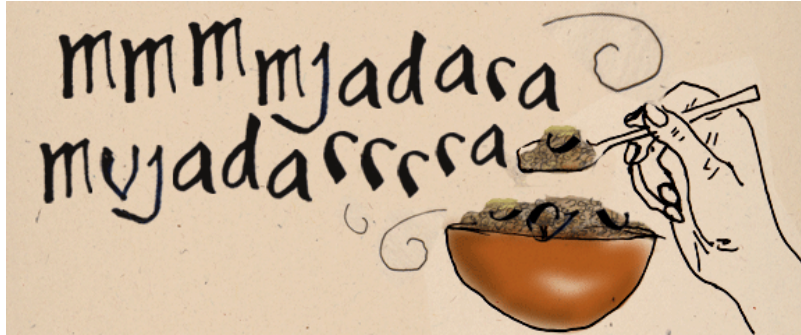


# table matters

 FROM THE CENTER FOR CULTURAL OUTREACH, A UNIT OF DREXEL UNIVERSITY'S PENNONI HONORS COLLEGE

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## FIRST PERSON



## THE LEGEND OF MUJADARA

A reclaimed family food legacy

by Amy Paturel

Growing up, my two sisters and I chanted loudly for foods 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 mmmjuddara," I said, of the traditional aromatic lentil and rice dish called mujadara (which has several alternate spellings), "As in mmmm, yummy."

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

We constantly begged my grandmother for Syrian dishes like fateyer (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'moul (heavy Semolina dough filled with nuts and rosewater and dusted with powdered sugar) or one of our favorites, a mysterious dish called lamtung. One night I asked my parents what it actually was.

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

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

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 cooking in a skillet with lamb and fragrant spices like cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper, and cloves.

It was a lesson in patience, as my grandmother worked for hours rolling delicate grape leaves around the unusual blend of lamb, rice, and spices. When I was a child, I didn't realize the amount of time she spent cooking once or twice a week was something most people did only once a year.

She prepared every dish by taste. No recipe book. No measuring. No instructions or set cooking times. 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 kidding. Sure, you can order these dishes at a Lebanese restaurant (though I have yet to see mujadara on a restaurant 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 20 years ago, when I was 12 years old. I haven't tasted most of her savory 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 flavors. In the midst of daily demands and non-Arabic partners—one of whom refused to eat lamb—we resorted to getting our Mediterranean fix from

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store-bought hummus and tabouli.

Unlike my grandmother who lingered in the Arabic grocery store for fresh baked Syrian bread (a.k.a. pita bread) and fondled countless onions before selecting the perfect one, we rushed through the aisles of Costco dropping frozen chicken tenders and prepared mac-n-cheese in our carts.

When I visited my four-year-old niece and she shouted karbanaki—or as Shannon coined her husband's favorite hamburger-like Czech dish: "garbage yucky"—I knew our centuries-old family tradition was kaput. My niece had probably never even learned the Arabic words that signify my favorite foods, and I was determined to change that. I couldn't let my grandmother's rituals die away.

So in honor of my grandmother's birthday in mid-July, 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 couldn't wait to scoop this hearty lentil stew on to soft pita bread loaves. I wanted to smell the memories of my childhood—slow-cooked onions, simmering lentils—mouth-watering scents that made me drool. My nieces and nephews deserve to feel the love that comes from preparing—and eating—Arabic foods, I thought. As long as it isn't lamtung.



I tracked down one of grandma's "recipes" my mother jotted down years before from memory. Whew, 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 told you so," playing back over and over in my head.

Okay, it's just five simple ingredients, I mused. I should be able to figure this out. I pulled together two different Syrian cookbooks and got on the horn to 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 grocery store and came back with two."

"All I can say is good luck," she said.

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 skillet of oil.

Forgive me, grandma, I thought as I dropped two whole onions down the chute of my Cuisinart.

Yep. That's a sin. In traditional Syrian cooking, everything is done by hand. But in my version, prep time was cut in half—as was the oil in the recipe. After all, I have to counteract the countless fat-laden meals I ate as a kid.

"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 on the couch with a bowl of mujadara and a glass of pinot noir. It looked just as I remembered—deep mocha brown, thick and yummy. I peered into the bowl and inhaled.

Ahhh the rich scent instantly transported me to my grandmother's kitchen. But I was still nervous to take the first bite.

Maybe I should have gone back to the store and bought two more onions. Maybe there wasn't enough oil.

I took a small taste and breathed out a deep sigh of relief. Even though the dish wasn't perfect, the time-honored tradition was back. As it turned out mujadara is just like grilled cheese—it's hard to screw up. Of course, lentil stew is still a little too foreign and sophisticated for my nieces and nephews. So I started their Middle Eastern traditions more simply.

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When they come to visit, instead of eating syrupy Eggos for breakfast, they have homemade hummus with fresh pita bread. The pre-made rice mixes have been replaced with traditional slow-cooked Syrian rice (browned vermicelli with white long grain rice and slivers of toasted almonds). And since a good aunt never forgets dessert, they occasionally indulge in Aunt Amy's version of ma'moul.

This Christmas Eve when I arrive at Shannon's house, her kids will be yelling "mack moody, Aunt Amy, mack moody"—their garbled attempt at pronouncing ma'moul. With those sweet sounds, I suspect I'll finally understand what grandma knew all along: Sharing the traditions of past generations with the future is the sweetest part of cooking.

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## GRANDMA'S MUJADARA



### INGREDIENTS

1 pound dried lentils  
3/4 cup raw white rice  
1/2 cup oil  
4 to 6 large onions  
1 tablespoon salt  
11 cups water

### INSTRUCTIONS

Peel and chop onions.

Heat oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Add onions, and cook onions until browned, about 30 minutes. Reserve about 4 tablespoons of the browned onions for garnish.

In a large pot, combine lentils, water and salt. Cover and cook over medium heat for about 40 minutes. Add uncooked rice and cook for another 15 to 20 minutes.

Add remaining onions to lentil and rice mixture and cook for another 15 to 20 minutes over very low flame, stirring occasionally to prevent burning or sticking.

Can be eaten hot or cold.

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