

Continuity and Tradition in Foodways

by Joan Nathan

By the time Pablo Picasso was in his nineties he was able to dash off pen and ink drawings and produce large canvases without the careful thought of a young artist starting out. So it is with traditional culinary artists — cooks who have been spinning off strudels, fruit leathers, pot pies, biscuits, and even fish stews their whole life through. By the time a cook reaches fifty, sixty or seventy he or she is no longer bound by exact measurements and feels comfortable about adding merely a handful of this or a dash of that. Similarly, instinct tells the cook that the feel of the dough is just right. Consequently, rather than reading written directions passed down from one generation to another, it is easier for a young child simply to watch a grandparent or a parent stretching the strudel, ladeling out grape juice to harden into fruit leather, or rolling out puff pastry to envelope chicken.

Through repeated observation one generation learns from another. Somehow grown-ups do not have the time to watch grandparents, but young children do. In fact, before the advent of television, it was the customary afternoon activity to watch grandparents who lived with families do the cooking, the carpentry, and the sewing. Even while their hands were so occupied, familial tales could be transferred from one generation to another.

Cooking links generations, it binds families, it continues traditions. Although it is more difficult in the United States today, where families live separately and distances between them are greater than in the old country, or where migratory patterns have sometimes totally uprooted families and their traditions, it is still possible for two generations to spend leisure time linking up during vacations, long visits, or other set aside hours.

At this year's Festival we are stressing continuity and tradition in foodways. Rose Avadonian comes from a time-honored Armenian tradition where the grape and its leaf are the center of cultural and culinary customs. A function without stuffed grape leaves (*yalanchi*) or fruit leathers (*basdek*) is no function. Not only does Mrs. Avadonian teach Armenian cooking in her native Watertown, Massachusetts, but she has also always let her children observe her culinary activities. Aline Garrett of St. Martinville, Louisiana, learned to make puff pastry from a local French woman. Her pot pies, which she sells for \$2.50 apiece, have financed her children's education through college. Duncan Hukill of Skagway, Alaska, once the cook of a local restaurant, is his town's sourdough starter expert. His sourdough pancakes and his wife's sourdough bread and cakes are known throughout the area. His daughter and son-in-law are now using his 100-year-old starter to continue the tradition. And Pat and Bill Carson of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, love to cook the greens, biscuits, and sweet potato pies that they learned to make from their mothers and their aunt Arlena Davis, all of whom continue the culinary custom started in North Carolina, but now transferred to Philadelphia.

Joan Nathan is a contributor to the Washington Post Magazine, and author of the Jewish Holiday Kitchen, Schudken Books; The Flavor of Jerusalem, Little, Brown and Company; and the forthcoming American Folklife Cookbook, Schocken Books which includes these recipes.

70 to 80 fresh grape leaves
 water
 2 teaspoons salt

Freezing Grape Leaves

To freeze grape leaves, wash fresh ones in cold water. Boil water in a large saucepan, add salt and then place the leaves in stacks with dull sides up, criss-crossed in the boiling water.

Turn off the heat, cover the pan and let the leaves stand for 15 minutes. When the green leaves have turned light brown, remove from the pan, squeeze water out of the leaves and stack on a plate until they are cool. Roll up stacks, dull side up, squeeze again, cover with wax paper and freeze.

Yalanchi (Armenian Stuffed Grape Leaves)

80 grape leaves, fresh or bottled

6 cups diced onions

1/3 cup pignoli nuts

1/3 cup currants

3/4 cup vegetable oil

3/4 cup chopped parsley

1/4 cup snipped fresh dill

1/2 teaspoon cinnamon

1 tablespoon salt, or to taste

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground pepper

1 cup uncooked rice

1 tablespoon sugar

1 1/2 cups stewed tomatoes

1 lemon

Makes about 70

Saute the onions, pignoli and currants in oil until the onions are soft; add the parsley, dill, cinnamon, salt and pepper, rice, sugar and stewed tomato juice and simmer, covered, 15 minutes until the rice is half cooked.

Uncover, squeeze with half of the lemon, and continue cooking 5 more minutes. Chill.

Squeeze the water from some grape leaves, take off the stems and line the bottom of a heavy pot with the leaves, dull side up. Place another leaf, dull side up with stem removed, on a flat surface with the stem end away from you. Place 1 tablespoon of filling on the leaf near the stem end; flatten filling to the width of the leaf; then fold the stem end over the filling. Press the filling firmly underneath the leaf near the stem end; flatten filling to the width of the leaf; then fold the stem end over the filling. Press the filling firmly underneath the leaf; fold the sides in and roll from the top toward you.

Place the stuffed grape leaves in two rows in the lined pot. Add 1 cup more water. Place a small plate in the pot to keep the stuffed leaves down, then place a regular cover on the kettle. Bring to a boil and simmer for 20 minutes. Remove the covers and squeeze the remaining lemon over the leaves; simmer, covered, 10 minutes more. Allow to cool in the pot and then chill.

Serve cold as an appetizer or as a side dish with meat.

Basdek (Armenian Fruit Leathers)

12 pounds Concord, Thompson
 or Ribier grapes

1 cup water

4 cups sugar or to taste

3 1/2 cups flour

1/2 cup sesame seeds
 (approximately)

An Armenian trademark is *basdek*, a cousin to the apricot fruit leathers sold in Mid-Eastern grocery stores. It is one of the few cooked fruit delicacies in the Armenian cuisine and is a sign of welcome in an Armenian home. Although relatively easy to prepare, the timing is essential, as is the assistance of at least one other person. Leftover sauce makes a perfect grape pudding.

Place the grapes with the water in a large pot. Cover and cook slowly until the fruit is softened, stirring occasionally. When the fruit is squeezable, place in a large collander and knead the fruit with spoons to help squeeze the juice out.

To every 24 cups of grape juice add 4 cups sugar or to taste. Then mix a little of the juice with the flour, mixing well and gradually adding all the flour to more juice, beating well with a rotary egg beater until all the lumps from the flour are removed. Then place the juice mixture over a high heat and keep stirring until it comes to a boil, about 10-15 minutes. As soon as it starts to bubble, stir constantly for 25 minutes, lowering the

heat slightly if it boils over. Then spread a dining room table with at least three 2½' by 3½' bed sheets. Filling a saucepan with the pudding-like mass, using a large spoon, ladle it onto the sheets. Flatten out to the thickness of a pie crust and continue pouring until the sheet is filled, leaving a one inch border. Sprinkle with sesame seeds. Leave for about 4 hours. When it starts to jell, lift up and down a few times to aerate. Then hang outside over clotheslines for several days, lifting up and down occasionally, or place on a clothesline in a basement near the heater for a few days until hard as leather. Then fold in small pieces. Break off a piece to eat and serve with walnuts.

Variation: the leftover juice can be eaten as pudding or a string can be strung with walnuts and dipped 3 or 4 times into the *basdek* and eaten as candycoated nuts.

Aline Mitchell Garrett's Chicken Pie

Makes 3 dozen

Make a roux of the oil and flour, stirring constantly until brown. Add the onion, cooking until golden, and then add chicken, seasoned with salt and pepper. Add celery and green pepper. Almost cover with water and simmer, covered, about 40 minutes or until tender. Remove. Add mushrooms, scallions and parsley to the stock, simmering, uncovered, about 20 minutes more to reduce sauce. Skin and bone the chicken and return to sauce. Cool in refrigerator until ready.

Combine 8 cups of the flour, salt and 8 tablespoons of the shortening in a bowl. Add the water and stir until the ingredients come together in a ball. If needed add more water. Roll out ball of dough in a square about ½ inch thick.

Spread about 8 more tablespoons of the shortening all over the square as you would puff pastry. Sprinkle flour over the shortening and fold square, making two horizontal folds. Spread 1 tablespoon of the shortening at each end and sprinkle flour over the shortening. Fold one end over the other like an envelope. Let pastry sit in the refrigerator for 30 minutes.

Roll dough into a square again and repeat steps given in above paragraph; do not set aside. Cut dough into 12 equal squares. Cut individual squares in half and roll each one at a time in a circle of dough, filling with 1 heaping tablespoon of filling. Fold edges. Use tines of a fork to press dough together.

Combine egg yolks and a little water. Paint the pies with the egg mixture so that they will bake golden brown. Freeze on a cookie sheet, then wrap individually. To bake, heat oven to 400 degrees and bake from 20 to 30 minutes or until brown.

Filling:

4 tablespoons Crisco or oil
6 tablespoons flour
1 large diced onion
three 2½ pound chickens, cut up
salt and freshly ground pepper
to taste
3 stalks celery, chopped
1 bell pepper, chopped
two 4-oz. cans mushrooms,
drained
1 handful chopped scallions
1 handful parsley

Crust:

8 to 9 cups all-purpose flour
1 tablespoon salt
1¾ cups Crisco (about
28 tablespoons)
2½ cups cold water
3 egg yolks