

DOLMEH DAYS

KEEPING A TASTE OF LITTLE
IRAN ALIVE, FROM LONG ISLAND
TO MEXICO CITY

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Friday morning: my grandmother, mother, and aunt buzz around the kitchen. The sweet smell of onions frying in turmeric fills the air, and my mom shouts at my grandmother in Farsi to turn down the flame. They jockey for position in front of the stove, where beef is braising in tomato broth and a pot of jeweled rice steams away.

We are in Long Island, in the house my grandparents bought as a weekend getaway for their family the year their first grandchild (me) was born. When our tribe of Persian Jews left Iran in the 1950s, most of the family built their lives in the well-established Iranian communities of Beverly Hills and Great Neck, setting Sabbath dinner tables for dozens of relatives every Friday night. My mom and her siblings were outliers: they married “white” people—Jewish, but not Persian—and landed in Manhattan, where dinner tables were retractable and conversations happened only in English. The summer house, where nearly 20 of us gathered together around a big marble table, was our little Iran.

On Fridays, the women kept dinner warm until my father and uncle arrived, shirtsleeves rolled up, on the train from New York City. While we waited, my grandfather took us to feed carrots to the horses over the fence of the farm across the road. When the dads pulled into the driveway, it was time for us to elbow our way around the table. My grandfather blessed the meal, and it was all over in less than an hour: the women washed dishes faster than we scarfed the piles of rice, pots of stew, and herbed pancakes they had spent the day preparing.

One summer, my grandfather, a deep-voiced anaesthesiologist fond of pulling us into his chest for “neshama” (Hebrew

for “soul”), planted grapevines by the wooden fence around the pool in homage to my grandmother's childhood home in Iran. Two summers later, the vines had crawled all the way up the fence, decorated with clusters of tiny green grapes.

My grandma sent all the kids out to pick leaves. We challenged each other to eat the sour fruit—in the 30 years spent in that house, the grapes never sweetened—and picked as many leaves as our little hands could hold. They weren't very tender, but she boiled them anyway, supplementing our damp pile with the jars of preserved grape leaves she had stashed in the pantry.

That was the first summer of *dolmeh*.

Preparing *dolmeh* (stuffed grape leaves) is an hours-long commitment. Like most Persian food, they're even more delicious a day or two later—if there are any left. The filling is sweet and sour, flecked with herbs, and spiced with turmeric.

I made myself sick the first time my grandmother served them; I must have had 20. That night was cause for celebration—we started eating them early, when the adults were drinking wine by the pool. At the dinner table, I piled my plate with more grape leaves, then spent the remainder of the night groaning on the couch. The next morning, I forgot my pain and ate a half dozen for breakfast, cold from the fridge, the flavors melded together in a sweet-sour symphony.

I begged my grandmother to make *dolmeh* again and again, but since they're so time-consuming, they were reserved for special occasions. Years later, when I got engaged and my par-



ents held a party at their apartment in the city, I ordered food from a Middle Eastern restaurant. My grandmother showed up early, carrying a huge pot of *dolmeh*.

I turned 30 this year in Mexico City, where my husband and I moved last year. It's a place as exciting as it is distant from our little Iran on Long Island. It was the first birthday I'd spent in a foreign country, and all I wanted was my grandma's *dolmeh*. I asked my parents to send me a video of her demonstrating the recipe.

She'd first taught me how to make them the summer I turned 11, when I marched into the kitchen and announced I was ready to learn to cook. She laughed, and agreed to let me help her make *dolmeh* for Shabbat. I stood on a stool at the sink by her side and washed the brine off grape leaves, picking out the largest, thinnest ones that would make the best wrappers. I watched her make a filling of soaked rice, sabzi (a mix of chopped dill, cilantro, leeks, and parsley), prunes, raisins, barberries, spices, and tomato sauce. The version she made was vegetarian, a concession to my modern (to her, foreign) preference for avoiding meat.

"How do you know how much sabzi to add?" I asked. "Until it looks like this," she replied, putting a spoonful of the filling in my hand. "And turmeric?" I asked. "Until it smells like this!" She held the bowl to my nose.

She showed me how to fill each leaf, dolloping a small scoop of the mixture into the middle and folding in the edges one by one to make a little square packet that you'd press between your palms to seal the edges. When I squeezed too hard and the wrapper tore, she patched it up with one of the tiny leaves I'd discarded.

She lined a large pot with the toughest leaves, poured in great glugs of oil, and gingerly tucked our little packets in in concentric layers. More tomato sauce went in on top, with water poured into the emptied sauce can to make sure none of it went to waste. The pot was then left to steam on low for hours until the packets expanded, a sign that the rice was fully cooked.

After a day in the kitchen, I was exhausted. When my mom came in and lifted the lid to taste one, declaring them finished and plopping two more on a napkin to eat, I was furious. "Do you know how long those took us to make?" I said. "You have to wait until we can all eat them together!" She laughed.

After that first lesson, I always helped wrap the *dolmeh*—I was never entrusted with the filling—and rationed myself at

dinnertime. It was a little less celebratory than the moments when a gigantic pot filled with party food appeared out of thin air, but I felt a camaraderie with my grandmother. We were the alchemists, and they the plate-piling heathens.

Over the years, the house became less and less central to our family gatherings. My grandfather died, my cousins and brothers started using the place as a crash pad for friends, and my mom and her siblings talked a lot about how expensive the property taxes were.

But a few years ago, I brought my boyfriend out on the train, and watched him fall in love with parts of the house I'd ignored for years: drinking hot, dark tea on the patio with my grandmother while the birds sang; the way each section of the garden my grandfather had planted burst into bloom at a different time of year, left to right. The spring before he proposed, he said simply, "It'd be nice to get married here, don't you think?"

The house wasn't big enough for a Persian wedding, but we had the rehearsal dinner on a Friday night in the yard by the pool, where the grape vines had long since shriveled. We set up tables in a U-shape, and the chef of the restaurant where I'd worked made tons of Mexican food. I'd asked my grandmother not to make *dolmeh*, because I knew the kitchen would be occupied and I didn't want her to spend the day cooking. "It was a beautiful night," she said later, "but there should have been Persian food."

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They sold the house this year, three decades after my grandfather bought it. I wasn't there to help pack it up, to say goodbye to the horses or to watch the neighbors bulldoze the land for tennis courts. Fragmented memories flooded in: the color of my grandmother's turmeric-stained fingertips, the piercing pain in my heel when I stepped on a bee at age nine, the smell of wet earth turning in the vegetable garden, the appreciative sound my grandfather made when he took a first bite of food.

The day before my husband and I threw a housewarming party on the roof of our apartment in Mexico City, I prepared a big pot of *dolmeh*, rewinding the video my parents had recorded for my birthday over and over again to get my grandma's measurements right.

The next night, surrounded by the small group of expats and locals who were becoming our new friends, we had an eclectic Middle Eastern and Mexican feast: little tacos of grilled beef and spring onions, heaps of crunchy crudités with feta dip, and creamy baba ghanoush with toasted pita. It all looked good, but I wouldn't know—my plate was piled with *dolmeh*.

PERSIAN DOLMEH

STUFFED GRAPE LEAVES

Makes 40 to 50 pieces



THE AUTHOR'S GRANDMOTHER CONDUCTS A COOKING CLASS IN HER HOME KITCHEN.

- 1 cup rice, soaked for at least an hour (up to overnight) and drained
- 2 lightly packed cups sabzi (recipe below)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt, to taste
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper, to taste
- $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon ground turmeric, to taste
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pitted prunes, quartered
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup raisins, soaked in warm water for 10 minutes and drained
- 2 tablespoons barberries
- 2 cups tomato sauce
- 1 16-ounce jar grape leaves
- 6 tablespoons olive oil, divided

Strain the vinegar solution from the jar of leaves. Select approximately 45 of the thinnest, most tender leaves for your dolmeh, plus approximately 5 of the largest, thickest leaves to line the bottom of the pot. Soak the leaves in warm water for 15 minutes, then strain.

Mix the first 8 ingredients, rice through barberries, in a large bowl. Add 2 tablespoons oil and 1 cup tomato sauce to the mixture. The mix should not appear dry; it should be fairly saucy. Taste the filling for salt, pepper, and turmeric—add more as needed.

To fill the dolmeh, place a leaf shiny side down in the palm of your hand. If the leaf is very large, you may want to tear off a piece of it so that you don't end up with more leaf than filling. Put 1 tablespoon filling in the middle. Fold the bottom of the leaf over the filling to cover, then fold in the sides tightly, to form a square. Press down lightly on the packet with your other palm to seal and expel excess liquid. Place the square on a baking sheet, seam side down. Repeat with the remaining leaves and filling, setting aside any torn pieces for the next step.

Add 2 tablespoons olive oil to the bottom of a large pot. Line the bottom with 5 or so of the thickest grape leaves plus any torn leaves that were set aside, and drizzle an additional 2 tablespoons

oil on top of those leaves.

Tightly pack the stuffed dolmeh into a single layer at the bottom of the pot, then start a new tightly packed layer atop it, until all of the leaves are stuffed into the pot. Pour 1 cup water over the top of the leaves, and drizzle in 1 cup tomato sauce. Cover the pot with a lid.

Cook on medium-low until you hear the leaves coming to a low boil, and then immediately turn down to a very low simmer. Cook gently for 3 to 4 hours, checking the pot every hour or so. If the dolmeh seem very dry or smell like they are burning at the bottom, add more water ($\frac{1}{4}$ cup or so at a time).

At 3 hours, taste one of the dolmeh—it should be tender and easy to bite into, with no give in the grains of rice. Continue cooking for an additional hour if not tender enough.

Eat immediately, or refrigerate and serve up to 2 days later, cold or at room temperature. I think they're best the next day.

SABZI

Makes more than 2 cups

- $\frac{1}{2}$ bunch dill
- $\frac{1}{2}$ bunch cilantro
- $\frac{1}{2}$ bunch flat leaf parsley
- 2 leeks, well cleaned to get rid of grit

Quarter the whole leeks top to bottom, then dice finely. Remove any especially thick stems from the dill, cilantro, and parsley—tender stems are fine. Finely chop the herbs and add to the diced leeks.