

BAKLAVA

- An incredibly sweet and wonderful Balkan dessert
Baklava is claimed by almost every Balkan state as its own invention; most people in the United States first encounter it in Greek restaurants. If the truth were known, it's probably the Turkish who invented it, as is the case for many other "typically Greek" dishes. This recipe comes from my Bulgarian grandmother, and follows Bulgarian tradition, in that the filling is very simple.

INGREDIENTS (Makes two small pans)

DOUGH

- 1 lb *strudel dough* (or fillo leaves)
- 1 lb *unsalted butter*, well melted. Salted butter or margarine are *not* acceptable.

FILLING

- 1 lb *walnut meat*, chopped medium fine
- ¼ cup *sugar*
- 1 tsp *vanilla* (or use vanilla sugar)

SYRUP

- 4 cups *sugar*
- 2 cups *water*
- 1 tsp *lemon juice*

PROCEDURE

- (1) Heat oven to 300 ° F to 325 ° F.
- (2) Make the syrup first. Boil the water and sugar for 15 minutes. Add lemon juice, boil 10 more minutes, set aside to cool.
- (3) Make the filling: Mix all ingredients well. I prefer the walnuts fairly coarse; some people like them quite fine.
- (4) Cut the dough with scissors to the size of the tray. Handle the dough very carefully; do not press hard on it at any time. Cover with wax paper and damp towel.
- (5) Take out one sheet of dough at a time and place it in the pan. Brush the dough with melted butter between each layer. Continue until you have about 12 sheets buttered. Small and broken pieces of dough can be used in the center, but there *must* be butter between every two layers.
- (6) Spread walnut filling across the tray.
- (7) Put on a sheet of dough, brush on butter, and continue until all the dough is used up.
- (8) Cut into diamond shapes: cut into quarters with cuts parallel to the long axis, then cut diagonally across. Don't press hard!
- (9) Bake for about 1½ hour, until golden brown. Be careful not to burn the bottom or the walnuts, especially with a glass pan.
- (10) Let cool on rack for 5 minutes. Add syrup which should have cooled to room temperature. Let cool for at least two hours before eating.

NOTES

Probably the hardest thing about this recipe is waiting those last two hours!

Depending on where you go, you'll hear the name of this dish pronounced different ways. I pronounce the name with all /ah/ sounds, with accents of equal intensity on both the first and third syllable. The second syllable is quite faint. Greek-speaking persons typically put a heavy accent on the second syllable.

Many variations on the filling are to be found. A simple one was mentioned above, regarding the coarseness of grind of the walnuts in the filling. They may even be ground. Spices such as chopped cloves or cinnamon may be added, and the filling may be included in several layers instead of just one.

A large (14×10 inch) pan is almost too big to handle. I typically make this recipe in two 7¾×11 inch pans, which is just about the size of a half sheet of the dough I buy. By the way, if you can make your own strudel dough, it will be even better ... but much more effort.

It is best to have a partner help you prepare the pans. One person handles the dough and places it in the pan, while the other applies the butter. It is very important that sufficient butter be placed between layers so that each layer gets flaky, rather than having them stick together. Pay particular attention to the edges and corners.

In case you haven't noticed, this is very sweet stuff. It goes great with a fine cup of coffee, espresso, or Turkish coffee, even with sugar. Two pieces will probably fill anyone up; it refrigerates and freezes quite well. This recipe requires a lot of effort, but it's well worth it.

RATING

Difficulty: moderate to hard. *Time:* 1½ hours preparation, 1½ hours cooking, 2 hours cooling. *Precision:*