

Karpathian Baklava: A Tale of Cultivating Culture Through Food

by Aphrodite Matsakis, Ph.D.

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(The characters in the following story are fictional. Any resemblances to persons living or dead are purely coincidental.)

Once upon a time there was a Greek-American family whose *Yiayia* (grandmother) and *Papou* (grandfather) had never heard of Thanksgiving. Trapped inside Hitler's Greece, they hadn't heard of Valentine's or Columbus Day either. When the war finally ended, they came to live with their son, Tasos, in Baltimore. By now, Tasos, who had risen from dishwasher to the owner of a deluxe diner, was also the Papa of two school-age children.

When the Papa told his parents about Thanksgiving, the *Yiayia* wondered which saint Thanksgiving was named after. Thanksgiving had nothing to do with saints, the Papa explained. It was simply an American holiday where families gathered together to give thanks for all their blessings.

"That's-a-nice," she replied. "How long do we have to fast?"

"No fasting," replied the Grandson (Tasos' son), age ten. "You just have turkey."

Yiayia went white. "You mean we have to invite Turks to dinner?"

"No," the Grandson continued. "You just have a big dinner with lots of food, like turkey, pumpkin pie, corn, and other foods the Indians used to eat." As he tried to explain about the Pilgrims and the Indians, all his grandparents could understand was that the Pilgrims, like themselves, were immigrants grateful to have made America their home.

The *Papou's* face lit up. "I'll make the lamb, and *Yiayia* can fix the *pastichio*."

"No lamb! No *pastichio*! No Greek nothing!" growled the Papa. "This is an American holiday, so we're going to do everything American style. We're Americans now, not Greeks." Although the Papa dearly loved Greek music and traditions, he had experienced so much poverty in Greece, he never wanted to return.

“But what’s a holiday without lamb? And why can’t we have both – turkey and lamb?” asked the *Papou*. But the Papa wouldn’t hear of it.

They argued for hours. The *Papou* couldn’t believe that his son refused to serve lamb on a holiday. Even worse, his son was trying to reverse the traditional order of things, where fathers, not children, ruled the roost. Eventually the *Papou* gave in. After all, his son had brought him and his wife to America and was supporting them too.

Meanwhile, the Mama was in the kitchen busily creating a Thanksgiving disaster by trying to persuade her meek sister to help her defy her *sitherokefalo* (iron-head, stubborn) husband. “This is America,” the Mama whispered on the phone. “Women don’t have to listen to their husbands all the time. No matter what that husband of mine says, at the last minute, I’m putting feta and olives on the table. What’s he going to do? Throw them at me in front of his parents?”

“I’m making Karpathian *baklava* too,” she snapped. “There will be so much food on the table, he won’t even notice it. If he does, I’ll just tell him it’s a new kind of glazed donut. He’s never been to Karpathos, so he’ll never know the difference.

“When can I come to your house to make it? I’ll need one whole day, maybe more, and all the help you can give me.”

The island of Karpathos, located between Crete and Rhodes, features a uniquely flavored and shaped *baklava*. On Karpathos, the various types of *baklava* most people are used to are referred to as *xeniko baklava* (foreign *baklava*). Making Karpathian *baklava* is a long involved process which begins by rolling out dough, then cutting it into one inch strips. The strips are then folded into a crisscross, diagonal, oval shaped design where one oval shaped ring is surrounded by another, with some space in between. Today a pasta machine might be used to press the dough into the right size strips, but in the olden days, women used their hands.

The strips of dough are then held together with cloves, fried in oil, and covered in a honey based syrup. Cinnamon and sometimes powdered sugar and chopped almonds or pistachios are sprinkled on top, which stick like glue to the thick honey glaze. The challenges are many: for example, making the strips the correct length and width, arranging them in the right

shape, and then frying each *baklava* long enough so that it's cooked sufficiently, but not so long that it falls apart.

That Thanksgiving, the Mama placed the feta, olives, and a small platter of Karpathian *baklava* at the end of the table furthest away from where the Papa was sitting. But he spotted the Greek food immediately. "Remove it," he barked.

She acted like she hadn't heard him. When he told (ordered?) her a second time, she just smiled sweetly at him and said, "Happy Thanksgiving."

In an effort to contain his anger, the Papa started fumbling with his *komboloi*. But then his father chuckled: "*Kala na patheis, yie mou.* (You deserve it, my son). See what happens when you become so American that you don't listen to your father and teach your wife how to drive? Your wife snuck out of the house and drove to her sister's house to do this to you."

The Papa pointed his finger at the Mama. He was about to call her a *vre gynaiika* (a darn woman), when his Daughter, age 8, burst into tears. "Why can't we have a nice quiet Thanksgiving like the Americans do? How come there's always fights about Greek stuff? How come we're so American that we can't have feta, but so Greek that I have to go to Greek school?"

With that, the adults held their tongues, and soon the evening took on a festive air.

In the years to come, the Papa relaxed his "only American" policy, and Thanksgiving featured all kinds of foods. Over time, however, the Mama started buying *pastichio*, *kourampiedes*, and other time consuming Greek holiday specialties instead of making them. But Karpathian *baklava* was nowhere to be found; and the Mama, who years before had risked the wrath of her husband by making Karpathian *baklava*, was now groaning at the thought of all the work involved.

Eventually Karpathian *baklava* disappeared from the Thanksgiving table, as did the older generation and, in time, she and the Papa too.

By now the 10 year old who had tried to explain Thanksgiving to his immigrant grandparents was a Papa himself. As Thanksgiving approached, his daughter, Anna, announced that she didn't want lamb or turkey. While away at college, she had become a vegetarian and some of the cousins coming to dinner were vegan.

Her parents promised to provide a vegan Turkey and substitute vegetarian lasagna (with tofu cheese) for the traditional *pastichio* (the so-called “Greek lasagna”). Hence the matter was quickly settled – except for the issue of desserts.

Since the vegans couldn’t have dairy products (like milk or eggs), Greek holiday sweets (like *galatobouriko*, *koulourakia*, and *kourampiedes*) and even most American cakes and cookies were out of the question. Regular *baklava* was off limits too, because of the butter used between layers of phyllo. Then Anna remembered her *Yiayia* telling her about how when she was a little girl, her parents had had a fight on Thanksgiving over Karpathian *baklava*. Anna also recalled her *Yiayia*’s stories about Karpathians taking their *baklava* with them on long trips. Because it was made with wheat flour, it was quite sturdy; and because it contained no milk, eggs, or other dairy products, it could last for six months or more without refrigeration.

“Karpathian *baklava* is vegan!” Anna announced with glee. She was determined to make it, but the old-timers didn’t really use recipes. They made their *baklava* “*me to mati*” (they eyeballed it), and it was hard to find any Karpathian Americans who made it anymore.

Undaunted, Anna combed the Internet and tracked down every Karpathian she could find until she learned how to make this ancient form of trail mix. That Thanksgiving, she adorned the table with a huge tray of Karpathian *baklava*, decorated Karpathian style with colorful bows and ribbons.

That Thanksgiving, as always, the table was loaded with food, traditional Greek and American dishes, as well as vegan, vegetarian, low-fat, and sugar-free delights. But there will be empty spots. The *Yiayias* and *Papous* are missing, and some of the younger generation can’t make it back from college. Others need to spend the holiday with in-laws.

But come Christmas or Easter, they’ll be back. They always come back, not for the food but for what the food represents – that sense of family unity.

Should the *Yiayias* and *Papous* of old be looking down on this year’s Thanksgiving table, surely they will smile, but not just because Karpathian *baklava* will now be the table’s centerpiece. They’ll rejoice because they see that despite all their family tensions due to personality differences and assimilation pressures, they succeeded in creating a strong sense of family among their descendants. Despite the forces of fragmentation in today’s society, their

children and grandchildren are grateful, not only for their many material blessings, but for the simple pleasure of being together – no matter what's on the table.