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Kitchen Confessions of a Greek-American Housewife

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There were certain pastries our family did not make. There were just too many nuts involved. Take kourampiedes, for example, that delicious almond flavored butter cookie topped with confectioner's sugar. It's called the wedding and baptism cookie because it is so delicate and sweet, like marriage and life. Kourampiedes can be made without nuts, but back in Greece, only poor people did that.

Some kourampiedes have nuts in the middle and so when you take a bite, you find a nut-honey-cinnamon or nut-honey-brandy filling inside. It takes a lot of skill to insert those nut stuffings just right and to shape the dough into little crescent moon shapes or perfectly rounded balls or circles. But in the '50s and '60s, when my mother and I made kourampiedes, we didn't make them like the yiayias and the women from Greece did. We made them the "easy" or "short-cut" way: imperfectly shaped circles with the nuts distributed throughout. But just as with the baklava, if you put in too many nuts, kourampieda would fall apart.

One solution was to add more flour and sugar, to give the nuts more substance to stick to. But a little too much extra flour or sugar made the cookie too heavy. And a heavy kourampieda is not a kourampieda. A kourampieda is supposed to be light. Kourampiedes tend to fall apart easily anyway, so even the tiniest excess of nuts - or any other ingredient for that matter - could cause a whole batch of kourampiedes (that is, an entire Saturday afternoon's work) to be for naught.

Kourampieda crumbs were some of the best to be had, but they soon disappeared from the children's crumb bowls. My mom decided to abandon this little cookie. Our buffet table would just have to be without them. This was a major omission, for it was expected that a good hostess would have kourampiedes, sometimes two or three types, on the table. (These were the days of homemade Greek pastries, when purchasing Greek pastries was unheard of.)



When guests asked why there weren't any kourmapiedes, my mom would fake it and say, "Oh there aren't? I guess I forgot. I'll have them next time." Hopefully by the next time, the guests would forget. Some did. Some didn't. Once a koumbara arrived at one of our parties early, carrying a large plate of kourampiedes. "I hear the last few times you had a party, you didn't have any kourampiedes. People are talk-

ing about it," she told my mother. "I know you aren't from Greece and have problems with all those nuts. So I brought you a platter. Tell everyone you made them, that way you won't be criticized."

After that, some of my mother's other friends took turns bringing kourampiedes to our family's parties in order to spare her from being criticized. You can see, now, what kind of pressure there was on women to produce beautiful and tasty Greek delights.

Another pastry that we never made was melomakarona. The reason we gave people for not having melomakarona was that we were from a part of Greece that didn't make that pastry. The real reason was that this cookie was a real trip. First you had to make a dough mixture and shape it into circles or ellipses, stuffing each cookie with chopped nuts, nutmeg and other spices in the middle. Then you had to bake the cookies - but not completely. After the baked cookies were removed from the oven, you had to dip them one by one in a hot honey-sugary syrup, which might also have oranges and brandy and cinnamon sticks in it.

There were lots of ways of messing up melomakarona. For example, you had to get the nuts right in the middle or they would spill out of the cookie when you baked it or dipped it in hot honey sauce. If the nuts spilled out, it would look like the cookie was hemorrhaging.

The next problem was baking the cookies just the right amount of time. If you baked the cookies too long, they were too dry to absorb the honey syrup; if you baked them too little, they would definitely absorb the honey, but they would also turn into mush. The cookies would also turn out dry or not sweet enough if you waited too long after baking to put them in the hot honey. Cookies that were too cool couldn't absorb the honey. But cookies which were too hot when dipped might fall apart once they hit the syrup. The cookies could also fall apart if you let them linger too long in the hot honey syrup. But if you didn't immerse the cookie in the hot honey syrup long enough, it wouldn't adequately absorb the honey syrup and not turn out sweet enough.

If you survived all these steps, the last step was to lay out each cookie individually to dry then sprinkle on chopped nuts right away, so they could stick to the honey while it cooled. If you waited too long to sprinkle on the nuts, they wouldn't stick to the cookie.

And that, is the melomakarona story.

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