

TROPICAL LIFE



LUSCIOUS LEGACY

FOODS FROM SYRIA BY WAY OF COLOMBIA WILL GRACE THE TABLE WHEN CHEF SAMUEL GORENSTEIN'S FAMILY GATHERS FOR THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS

As chef de cuisine for BLT Steak in South Beach, Samuel Gorenstein is a culinary star at age 27. But when it comes to Rosh Hashana, he's just another young man going home for the holidays. Next week, he'll let his mother, Tunny Mizrahi, do the cooking.

"I am so busy and tied up at the restaurant I don't have time to cook for myself. And my mother makes that holiday food way better than me anyway," Gorenstein says.

The world around, foods that symbolize sweetness and wholeness are traditional for Rosh Hashana, the Jewish New

Year. Ten days later, Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is observed with fasting.

"Our New Year is not a time to go crazy and party. Instead, our focus is on the family and yourself as a person," he says.

"It is also a chance to bring back some family traditions when it comes to food," says Mizrahi, speaking through her son, who translates from Spanish.

Those traditions go back to Gorenstein's childhood in Baranquilla, Colombia, where his mother's family was full of good cooks. His early memories include visiting his grandparents in Cali and working alongside his grandfather to make breakfast.

But it was his great-grandparents, who immigrated to Colombia from Syria, whose cooking flavors the

family traditions. "I wasn't fortunate enough to know them," he says. "They passed away when I was 4 years old."

His great-grandmother was one of the few people in town who could roll phyllo dough by hand, he's been told. "It's a skill that's pretty much disappeared," he says.

She recorded her recipes in a handwritten, spiral-bound book that his mother still uses.

"I enjoy preparing its recipes, twisting a few in-

•TURN TO ROSH HASHANA, 4E

MOTHER AND SON: Tunny Mizrahi and Samuel Gorenstein, at top, make ma'amoul cookies in his BLT Steak kitchen. Right, their stuffed eggplant.



From Syria to Miami by way of Baranquilla

•ROSH HASHANA, FROM IE

redients to make the dishes interesting," Mizrahi says.

And she has plans for it. "My mother wants to pass that book to me," Gorenstein says. "She wants me to keep the traditions alive."

Observant but not Orthodox, Gorenstein's family shared Sabbath and holiday meals with several families from their Baranquilla neighborhood. When it was his mother's turn to host Rosh Hashana, she began the meal with a navy-bean stew simmered with carrots, celery, a bay leaf, onions and garlic plus a little unrefined cane sugar or panela.

"The panela assured us a sweet year of plenty," Gorenstein says.

His mother was also known for the stuffed grape leaves she made from her mother's recipe. This time of year, she fills the brine-cured leaves with a mixture of rice and dried apricots. Although grape leaves are usually served at room temperature, she prefers hers warm, and Gorenstein likes to squeeze plenty of lemon over the fat little packets.

"I like sweets but I'm more of a savory person. I really like things tart and salty," he says.

That's why he also likes his mother's baked eggplant stuffed with ground beef and rice flavored with cilantro, garlic, cumin and toasted pine nuts. "It's one of my favorites for the holiday," he says.

Here, too, she puts dried apricots in the stuffing and uses the apricot soaking liquid as the basis for a gently sweet sauce. (If you don't like eggplant, the stuffing can also be used in peppers or tomatoes.)

A salad sprinkled with plump red pomegranate seeds and a braided challah made with raisins and topped with honey also graced the family's Rosh Hashana table.

For dessert, his mother would make ma'amoul from

a dough of fine-ground semolina molded around ground dates and pistachios. These cookies can be made in a wooden mold, but she prefers shaping each by hand and decorating it with the tines of a fork.

"My mother is a great baker but a rustic cook," Gorenstein says. "She never follows directions or goes by the book. Her food is flavorful but not refined."

On Yom Kippur, she would hide a loaf of bread flavored with za'atar and olive oil in the car so Gorenstein and his sisters could break their fast as soon as they left the synagogue. They returned home to a light meal of matzo ball soup or diced sweet plantains she would top with guava paste and fresh cheese before running it under the broiler.

Things changed when his parents (his father is of Polish descent) relocated the family to Miami soon after Gorenstein turned 14.

"All our family traditions broke apart," he says. "We fell into the American way. We didn't have friends around to celebrate with us. And as the years went by, my mother slowed down."

But while the traditions were interrupted, they weren't lost. And now that one of Gorenstein's sisters has two children of her own, "the holidays are coming back for us," he says.

This year, the family will gather with extended family in Aventura to celebrate Rosh Hashana. Once again, his mother will prepare her stuffed grape leaves and stuffed eggplant. There will be pomegranate seeds in her salad, and she'll hand-shape ma'amoul cookies.

"This is the time to enjoy what life is about," Gorenstein says. "And what better way to do it than to come together with family around a table filled with favorite holiday foods."

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LITTLE BUNDLES: Samuel Gorenstein serves his stuffed grape leaves warm.

PHOTOS BY EMILY MICHOT/MIAMI HERALD STAFF

COOKIES

MA'AMOUL DATE AND PISTACHIO FILLED SEMOLINA COOKIES

You can purchase the semolina, rose water and carved wood ma'amoul mold at Middle Eastern or Mediterranean shops including International Food Market, 420 E. Sample Rd., Pompano Beach (954-784-4990), where the staff kindly shared information about using the mold. If you keep kosher, note these contain butter and would not be appropriate for a meat meal.

DOUGH:

- 6 tablespoons butter
- 1/4 teaspoon active dry yeast
- 1 tablespoon lukewarm water plus about 1/4 cup cold water
- 6 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/2 cups very fine ground semolina plus more for sprinkling
- 2 1/2 teaspoons natural rose water
- 6 tablespoons confectioners' sugar
- Pinch salt

FILLING:

- 1/4 cup unsalted, shelled pistachios
- 1 cup soft dates
- 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar plus more for sprinkling
- 1/2 teaspoon rose water

To make dough: Melt the butter and cool it to room temperature. Dissolve the yeast in the lukewarm water.

Combine the flour, semolina and cooled butter. Add the yeast mixture, rose water, confectioners' sugar and salt. Stir in 1/4 cup cold water to make the dough. Add more water if needed to make a soft, pliable dough. Cover and set aside about 3 hours.

To make filling: In a food processor, grind the pistachios into a fine powder. Add the dates, 2 tablespoons confectioners' sugar and rose water. Process into a paste.

Cover a baking pan with parchment paper and grease the paper. Heat oven to 350 degrees.

To shape cookies by hand: With oil-coated hands, form a walnut-sized piece of dough into a ball and use an index finger to make a hole in the center. Fill with 1/2 tablespoon date mixture.

Work the dough over the hole to encase the filling. Place on a work surface and gently press to flatten a little. Use the tines of a fork to make an impression on the top of the cookie for decoration.

To shape cookies with a mold: Coat the mold vegetable-oil spray and sprinkle with a little semolina

flour. Place a walnut-size piece of dough into the mold and press it to line the mold and form a bowl shape. Place 1/2 tablespoon filling into the bowl.

Take a pea-size piece of dough and pat it out to form a flat round. Place it atop the filling and work it to cover the top of the mold. Press with your hand to seal. Hit the back of the mold sharply to remove the cookie.

Place cookies on prepared pan. Bake about 20 minutes, until golden. Let cool, and then dust with confectioners' sugar. Makes about 20 cookies.

Source: Adapted from chef Samuel Gorenstein and his mother, Tunny Mizrahi.

Per cookie: 128 calories (30 percent calories from fat), 4.4 g fat, (2.3 g saturated fat), 1.3 g monounsaturated fat, 9.2 mg cholesterol, 2.5 g protein, 20.6 g carbohydrates, 1.5 g fiber, 38 mg sodium.



SWEET END: Ma'amoul cookies.

APPETIZER

SWEET AND SOUR YAPRAKES (STUFFED GRAPE LEAVES)

Although most people eat stuffed grape leaves chilled or at room temperature, Samuel Gorenstein says his family tradition is to serve them warm. Peeling the tomato makes for a more refined dish, but he says his mother doesn't bother. Toast the pine nuts in a dry skillet over medium heat, shaking often.

- 1 cup long-grain white rice
- 1/4 cup dried currants
- 1/2 cup plus 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 2 onions, chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 1/2 cup peeled, seeded and diced tomato
- 1/4 cup fine-chopped fresh fennel fronds
- 6 tablespoons chopped fresh mint
- 3 cloves chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley
- 2 teaspoons salt
- 1 teaspoon fresh-ground pepper
- 1/2 cup toasted pine nuts
- About 46 brine-packed grape leaves, drained
- Juice of 2 lemons
- Lemon wedges

Soak the rice in cold water 30 minutes; drain. Cover currants with hot water for 30 minutes; drain.

Heat 3 tablespoons oil in a sauté pan over medium heat. Add onions and sauté 5 to 10 minutes, until tender and translucent. Add garlic and cook until soft. Add drained rice and currants, tomato, fennel, mint, parsley, salt, pepper and pine nuts. Remove from the heat.

Rinse the grape leaves. Take about 40 leaves and pat dry. Lay out on a work surface, shiny side down. Use a scissors to snip out the stems. Place 1/2 tablespoon rice mixture near the stem end of each leaf.

Working with one leaf at a time, fold in the sides and roll up the leaf from the stem end into a cylinder. Do not roll tightly, as the rice expands during cooking. Repeat.

Line the bottom of a wide pot with about three of the remaining grape leaves. Nestle the stuffed leaves in the pot, close to each other, seam side down. When the first layer is complete, cover with three or more grape leaves and place any remaining stuffed leaves in a second layer.

Drizzle with 1/2 cup olive oil, the lemon juice and enough hot water to cover the stuffed leaves. Place a heavy plate on top to weight them down. Make sure the leaves are just covered with liquid, adding more hot water during cooking, if necessary.

Bring the liquid to a simmer over medium heat, cover the pot and cook about 35 minutes, until rice is tender. Remove from heat, uncover, and remove the plate so the stuffed leaves cool quickly.

Using a spatula or tongs, transfer the filled leaves to a platter. Drizzle with 1/4 cup olive oil, if desired, and serve with lemon wedges. Makes about 40 stuffed grape leaves.

Source: Adapted from chef Samuel Gorenstein and his mother, Tunny Mizrahi.

Per serving: 77 calories (66 percent calories from fat), 5.8 g fat, (0.7 g saturated fat), 3.9 g monounsaturated fat, 0 cholesterol, 0.8 g protein, 6 g carbohydrates, 0.3 g fiber, 249 mg sodium.

MAIN DISH

EGGPLANT STUFFED WITH GROUND BEEF AND APRICOTS

Chef Samuel Gorenstein suggests making this a day ahead and warming the eggplants in the microwave or a pan of simmering vegetable broth. "That gives the flavors time to develop and blend," he says. His mother adds chopped tomatoes and herbs to the sauce described here.

- 1 cup dried apricots
- 1/2 cup long-grain white rice
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 small white onion, minced
- 1/2 cup chopped cilantro
- 1 red bell pepper, cored, seeded and diced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 tablespoons toasted pine nuts
- 1/2 teaspoon cumin
- 4 to 6 small eggplants (such as Japanese)
- Salt and fresh-ground pepper

Soak the apricots in 1 cup water overnight; drain, reserving the liquid. Chop the apricots.

Soak the rice in cold water 1 hour; drain.

In a bowl, combine the apricots, rice, beef, onions, cilantro, red pepper, garlic, pine nuts and cumin.

Cut a thin slice off the bottom of any eggplant that doesn't sit flat. Slice off the top of each eggplant and scoop out the flesh with a knife and grapefruit spoon, leaving a shell about 1/4-inch thick. Salt and pepper the cavities.

Fill each eggplant about 1/2 full with the meat mixture.

Place the eggplants upright in Dutch oven or other large pot. Pour reserved apricot soaking water over them. Bring to a boil over high heat, reduce heat, cover and cook 1 hour, until eggplants and rice are tender, adding water as needed to keep pan from cooking dry.

Remove eggplants with a slotted spoon and let cool. Return the pot to high heat and cook until pan liquids are reduced and syrupy. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Source: Adapted from chef Samuel Gorenstein and his mother, Tunny Mizrahi.

Per serving (based on 4): 516 calories (26 percent calories from fat), 15.6 g fat, (5 g saturated fat), 5.9 g monounsaturated fat, 73.7 mg cholesterol, 30.9 g protein, 68.8 g carbohydrates, 12 g fiber, 92 mg sodium.