

## *Scooping the Memories*

Dmitra Khoury, fifty, is originally from Lebanon. She lives in Roslindale, Massachusetts, with her husband and two children. The family makes frequent trips to the nearby Arnold Arboretum to collect grape leaves during the months of June and July every year.



WHILE DMITRA, HER MOTHER, AND her husband, Farid, pick grape leaves off vines that grow along this stone wall enclosing the southern portion of the Arnold Arboretum, her children play on the sidewalk nearby. Nine-year-old George chases his twin sister, Jessica, and when they get too close to the street, Dmitra tells them to stop. It is an exquisite Friday evening in June, and the late-afternoon sun casts a pale orange light on the wall, the grapevines, and this family of five. They arrived several minutes earlier, each carrying a canvas bag, and Dmitra and Farid, who is also from Lebanon, are now stuffing theirs with leaves they've gently torn from the vines. They speak to each other quietly in Lebanese, pointing to spots where the vines look particularly prolific, while the sounds of George and Jessica shouting to each other in English are heard from afar. Seventy-nine-year-old Najla, Dmitra's mother, stands several feet away and pushes at the undergrowth with her cane, checking the vines that run along the ground. She doesn't pick anything but surveys the area quietly with large, discerning eyes that seem unsatisfied with the prospects. When George and Jessica finally come after Dmitra has called for them several times, they grab their bags they'd left in the grass and begin to pick, too.

*Opposite:* Dmitra and her son, George, pick grape leaves in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts.

“Georgie, please. It looks like a goat was here!” Dmitra reprimands, showing him how to pull the leaves more gently from their vines while his sister stands next to him, intently picking away. Several ancient oak trees tower above us, their branches swaying in the gentle spring breeze and shading this section of the wall. Dmitra tells me she prefers grape leaves that grow in the shade, because they tend to be thinner and therefore more delicate to the bite when they are blanched and stuffed. They will be filled with a mixture of rice, mint, parsley, tomato, and lemon, a combination of light, refreshing flavors that plunged me immediately into summer when I first tried them on a damp, gray afternoon this past winter.

Each year, she and the family come here to collect the leaves she’ll need to fill the thirty or so jars she puts up every summer. It will take several outings, but she guesses that they’ll eventually pick three or four thousand among them. When they get home, these will be organized by size and texture, the larger, thicker leaves reserved for her brother in Pennsylvania, who needs them for his restaurant, and the others, divided between those that she’ll blanch and store in jars in her pantry and the ones that will be directly frozen after she’s rinsed them in water and vinegar.

The leaves are used for other dishes, too, Dmitra explains, including the sandwiches Jessica likes for school, made with homemade pita bread, lettuce, and the grape leaves. We begin to move along the sidewalk searching for another area where the vines grow thick. As we walk, Dmitra and Farid pinch leaves from the vines on the wall, as if it’s impossible for them to pass anything that might be suitable for cooking. When Dmitra turns around, she says something quickly to her husband and points in the opposite direction. We all turn and watch Najla scramble across the road. She leans heavily into her cane as she waits for a truck to go by before crossing with determination to the northern side of the arboretum. She doesn’t look back when Dmitra shouts after her.

“She’s going to give me a heart attack!” Dmitra cries, shaking her head at me. “I swear to God, that lady, she’s going to run the marathon one day!” She calls to her mother again, and this time Najla looks over for a moment and then continues on her way.

“When we look, she says, ‘I’m tired,’” Farid explains, nodding toward the receding back of his mother-in-law. “When we don’t look, she’s gone,” he shrugs. Dmitra beckons for her mother one last time—with a loud whistle now—and then turns toward Farid and says, “Okay, let her go.”

I first witnessed Najla's independent streak earlier this year when she and Dmitra were preparing a Lebanese dinner of stuffed grape leaves, hommus, tabbouleh, homemade pita, and *riz bie dhjage*, a rice dish made with chicken, lamb, beef, and pine nuts. We were in Dmitra's kitchen, and she occasionally asked her mother to do something a certain way or to wait, perhaps, before filling the leaves with the rice and vegetable mixture until more spice had been added. Sometimes, Najla would acquiesce, leaning back in her chair with a shrug. At others, however, she'd continue rolling, mixing, or chopping as if she hadn't heard.

It is Najla, after all, who first taught Dmitra to cook back in Lebanon, where they'd pick the grape leaves that grew on the arbor in the yard. There, Dmitra would help her mother make the 150 pitas they needed each week to feed their family of six. After making the dough at home, they would carry it to Dmitra's aunt's, who had the only oven in the village. When Dmitra first told me this story, she stopped to ask her mother something to make sure she'd gotten it right. Behind her, twelve pitas—far fewer than the 150 of years past—sat on trays that had been placed on the kitchen heater to rise.

Rolling the grape leaves in Dmitra's kitchen that afternoon, the women fell into a comfortable rhythm, sipping their tea as they spooned the rice mixture onto flattened leaves to form the thin cylinders that would later be steamed in a pot and seasoned with garlic, mint, oil, and fresh tomatoes. This is something they do together quite often, in order to keep up with demand. Dmitra brings her grape leaves to family weddings, baby showers, and even to events at George's and Jessica's schools. Usually a plate is made up for the neighbors, too. In Lebanon, she explained to me, more people were always around to help. "You'd call the nieces or aunts, and they would come," she said. "But here, women don't have the time."

Now, as we walk back to the family's minivan, having collected enough grape leaves for the evening, Dmitra stops at one last vine cascading down from the large iron gate by the entrance. She pops a small leaf into her mouth and says, "I love it!" explaining that they have a slight lemon flavor when eaten off the vine. She and Farid begin to unload their sacks, making piles on the hood of the van and discarding any leaves that have been chewed by caterpillars or sprayed by cars passing on the road. George and Jessica run through the parking area, laughing and tossing a stuffed animal they found into the air and pretending not to hear their parents' calls that it's time to go. In a moment, Najla, who disappeared more than an hour ago, comes from around the corner, walking resolutely with her own bag

filled with leaves harvested from somewhere else. She slips into the passenger seat and waits quietly for the others.



That's how we communicate back home—with food. I cook for everyone now: my husband, my kids, my brothers and their families. Sometimes I cook for my cousin and his family. Oh, my goodness, their boy, Patrick, loves it when I come. Everything I have left over, I leave it with him. I feel like that is life's secret. My friend tells me I have the ability to make friends through my table, that I make them happy with my food. I've always said that if you want to discuss something with your husband, don't ever do it on an empty stomach. There is power in eating together, in sharing. So I cook for everyone about once a month. I tell my cousin's wife, my brothers' wives, "Your mother-in-law is not here, so I'm your mother-in-law," and we'll all spend a day together in the kitchen.

We're a food family. My brother owns a business in Boston called Sami's. He started it as a food van, and he sold all the specialties—the *hommus*, the *baba*. It was the first in Boston to serve Lebanese food. When he first opened, in 1977, we'd have customers coming from New York, Rhode Island, you name it. I worked there for about seventeen years, and we used to have regulars that came every day. We'd always know their order; they'd never even have to tell us what they wanted. We'd prepare their coffee the way they liked it and say, "Good morning, sir. How are you this morning?" or "Have a lovely day, sir." I remember some of the customers wouldn't even answer us. One day, I asked one of the guys in the van, "Why do you bother saying 'good morning' and 'have a lovely day' if he doesn't even look at you?" And he told me, "We are here in America, and they are coming to us. They don't know us. You have to teach them how to be nice and let them get used to it. If you bring it out, one day they'll say something." And, you know, he was right: after three or four months, that guy was smiling and talking with us.


Everybody's so busy here. It's weird. I'm not blaming them, but it's something about American culture. Nowadays in Lebanon it's the same, but when I grew up, it was different. When I was little, my mom used to take care of everything—our school, washing, everything. When we'd come home, she'd always be cooking. "Okay, go wash your hands," she'd say, and then she'd feed us. Always there were people over, always someone to share the food. My father's family would come. Friends would



Dmitra (right) and her mother, Najla, rolling the grape leaves.

come, neighbors would come, and my mother would cook. She cooked from her heart. And me, too, not just [from] my heart, but from the bottom of my feet! And my family loves it now, my neighbors, too. I do it because sometimes it seems like no one has time to cook.

When I first came this was confusing to me. I'd see people eating on the street, getting take-out, and I'd think, oh, she doesn't have time to make a chicken sandwich for herself at home, or a man would come to the van and I'd wonder, why didn't his wife make him something to eat? But my brother would always say, "That's why we have a good business; don't complain!" I was a lot younger then—only twenty-four when I first came—and everything was different: no communication, no social life. The language was not easy. We learned Shakespeare English in my country. It's not like spoken language. I remember one time when I was working and one of the guys came to the window and said, "What's up?" I looked up and saw the cigarettes and said, "Cigarettes!" He was




laughing. But you know, Shakespeare never said, “What’s up?” So I started to talk like them on the street.

It’s easier now. I still have memories of Lebanon—especially when I eat certain things, like the breads, the *manoushe*, the *knefeh*. When I was living in Beirut, I used to sneak out of school to get the bread for breakfast. And after all these years, I still crave the same foods. I think it’s in your genes. The other night we were out to dinner with my friend, and guess what she ordered? Kale and cornbread. She’s from the South. When she was eating, I thought, she’s not scooping the food, she’s scooping the memories. I was watching her, and I felt like she wasn’t with us. It was like she was thinking about how her mom used to cook. It’s just like the bread for me. It still reminds me of the time I lived in Beirut.

That was during the war. Just before it started, I went there to finish school. My mom and dad were in the northern part of the country then. It was very dangerous. When they started bombing, there were a few months when my family didn’t know if I was alive or not. At my parents’, people would come to the door and ask questions all the time. “Where are your kids? Where is your daughter? Do you have a gun?” they’d say. So we were really tired. I didn’t know anything about my parents, and they didn’t know anything about me. We were not like a family. A family is together. Sometimes, though, we had contact through my uncle. He had a taxi and drove from Tripoli to Beirut, so my mother would send food for me when he came. But it was a frightening time: you didn’t know when you were going to die. One day my father said, “Would you like to go to America?” And I said, “Yeah.”

Now, I’m cooking for my mother. It’s not always easy when we’re in the kitchen together. “No, we do it this way,” she’ll say. Like if I add something to the food, she’ll ask, “Since when do we put cumin in the *kibbeh*?” I tell her, “If you don’t like it, Mama, send it back!” “No, no, I ate it,” she’ll say. But I appreciate her. She’s never told us no. And I appreciate the time she spends with my kids. She’s almost eighty years old and she’s healthy. Well, when she wants to be.

And my kids, they cook with me, too. My daughter, Jessica, she loves to eat. I always tell her she’s a little girl with a big stomach. I make anything she and her brother want. If they want meatballs, I make meatballs. The other day they wanted pizza, so I made pizza. They helped with the dough. They do other things, too. I always take them to the park so they can help pick the grape leaves. They know I’m going to save them for the winter instead of having to pay four or five dollars for the ones in



the store. And I'll make them for their teachers and friends at school. I know they like the grape leaves. The *hommus*, too. I send it in as a treat sometimes, and then, when I go to the school, all their friends will say, "Miss Khoury, I love your *hommus*! Miss Khoury, I love your grape leaves!"

My dream is to write a book about the food with recipes like the *hommus* and *baba*, even the grape leaves, things that won't be too difficult to make. Women won't have to say that they don't have time to cook, because I'll explain how they can plan ahead to make it easier. And it will have healthy recipes, recipes that they can prepare for their families. I'm not going to say I don't let my kids eat other things—they do like McDonald's as a treat sometimes—but they really love my cooking. They'll say, "Mommy, you are the best chef!"