

## Dolmades, Constantinopolitan style

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This is a traditional dish found across Greece and the Diaspora. Dolmades, stuffed vine leaves and other vegetables were always a favorite in my home. My mother and grandmother made these for special occasions, company food, and celebration food.

As with all of my family's cooking, the recipe is oral history, tradition and improvisation. Characters are described as a list of ingredients, the action of measurements based on the hand or the eye: this much, holding the palm cupped, or just a little, one finger indicating the tip of the other. Asking my mother or grandmother for a recipe resulted in a kind of story map: a list of ingredients with measurements based on her hand or her demitasse coffee cup. Technique based on touch and feel, look and smell. Cooking times based on sound or smell, texture. Cook it on low heat till it's done. A matter of taste.

I have the recipe for stuffed grape leaves noted on a small post-it.

- Grape leaves. 1/2 jar = 37 leaves.
- Onions
- Parsley
- Dill
- Mint
- Salt
- Pepper
- Rice

Olive oil's not on the list, but without it there's no cooking.

The story goes like this - For tender dolmas you need a LOT of onions and plenty of olive oil. And enough salt. And being sure that whatever you're stuffing is tender - firm, ripe tomatoes; tender vine leaves; fresh, vibrant cabbage. After arranging the rolled leaves in snug layers in a pot, the trick is to place a plate on top to keep them from floating up, and simmering covered, at a low temp. How long? Until they're done. Years after my yaya had died, I asked my mother who said sure, you can add some lemon juice at the end when they're done.

The filling for stuffed cabbage leaves is similar, but has some measurements. Kind of.

- 1 cup rice
- 3/4 cup olive oil
- 4 large onions

Sauté onions (don't let them brown, they should be soft)

Add

- Pine nuts
- Currants
- Cinnamon (little)
- Pepper
- Salt
- Mint

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Add rice and stir.

1/2 cup water cook a little

For the stuffed tomatoes pictured here, the ingredients are adapted a little bit.

First, slice the bottoms off of the tomatoes and save them. With a teaspoon, clean out the inside of each tomato and save in a bowl, along with all of the juices that run out.

Check your pan. You want the tomatoes to fill the pan snugly, side by side with the openings on top. The pieces you sliced off will be the lids. Go ahead and fit a couple of peppers in also. There will be too much filling for the tomatoes so adding the peppers will help use it all up. Trim out the stem end for a cap. Clean out the insides and discard those seeds. Fit them into your pan side by side with those tomatoes.

- 2 - 3 large Onions. Minced.
- Olive oil

Sauté the onion in olive oil, adding a little water, so that the onions reduce, and are soft and sweet. Don't let them brown. Season with salt as you go.

Add -

- A bunch of parsley (the most, be generous) (minced)
- Dill (a little less than the parsley (also minced)
- Mint (less, about half a bunch of fresh) (also minced)
- Add -
- The insides of the tomatoes, chopped
- Small handful pine nuts
- Small handful currants
- A little bit of cinnamon
- Salt and pepper

Stir to incorporate. Add the rice and stir.

Add about 1/2 cup water plus the tomato juices.

Simmer about 5-10 minutes so that the rice absorbs the liquid and is partially cooked.

Fill each tomato with the rice filling, allowing a little space at the top, and cover with the matching lid. Fill each pepper and snug their lids on top.

Add water to the pan, about 1/2" of it.

Cover and bake in oven till rice is cooked and vegetables are nicely lightly browned. Most of the liquid will have been absorbed. Take off foil at end to be sure that they are slightly browned. The idea is that the rice cooks inside till its tender and done. There will some delicious savory juices in the bottom of the pan. Spoon these over the tomatoes and peppers when you serve them.

Serve at warm/room temperature. Not hot.