

IN PERENNIAL SEARCH OF THE TASTE OF ARARAT

By Nishan Havandjian

The lemon juice and olive oil just sat there like undisturbed, impervious sludge.

The American, so-called cracked wheat masquerading as bourghoul, and bought at a health food store, just refused to absorb any of the liquid.

Austin, Texas, circa late 70s.

I realized, much to my chagrin that repeated attempts to duplicate the much-missed tabbouli will have to be postponed. The cracked wheat as we knew had not made it yet to Texas' hill country. So it was back to mundane student life of meatloaf, ribs, grits, baked beans and mustard greens.

Fast forward to the early 80s.

Eldorado came in the form of California and to be more precise: North Hollywood and Glendale. As the years pass I have become adept at spotting stores and restaurants where Armenian food is available. I periodically scour such sites as Yelp, Chowhound, LA Weekly, to find out what is opening and who is carrying what. Our monthly pilgrimage to Los Angeles has gone unabated for 20 years. It is a well rehearsed routine, a Broadway play in several acts with long legs.

First my wife and I attend mass at a church in Glendale or Van Nuys. Our masses are sung and tend to go over two hours. We make some concessions to our assimilation to American culture by arriving midway right before the soprano, baritone or tenor accompanied a choir sings the lament "Lord Have Mercy." The voices from Armenia, Lebanon, Romania, or Bulgaria are stupendous as they swell up to the imposing crystal chandeliers. Invariably, there is not a dry eye in the church. We may be buoyant when having a feast but our hymns are far from jolly. This is a nation steeped in sorrow.

Our next stop is an Armenian restaurant in Northridge. Families are arriving after church. We order the obligatory Kebabs, fattoush salad made with purslane, diced tomatoes, diced Persian cucumbers, and toasted pita bread with lemon juice, olive oil, and sumac powder. We like to start with an appetizer of muhammara, which consists of red pepper paste, crushed walnuts, cracker meal, olive oil, cumin powder, and pomegranate molasses and scoop it all with pita bread squares. Our well-oiled routine allows us to skip the restaurant visit every other month and instead opt to have late lunch in the car with stacks of Armenian pizzas.

We come well prepared for the occasion. One of us buys a dozen Armenian pizzas called lahmajoun, which is available all over the Middle East, including Turkey. The bakery owner is from Lebanon. There is a long line of recent immigrants who are buying them by the dozen for lunch after church. The lahmajouns are relatively small, about 6 inches round, with ground lamb topping, diced tomatoes, Italian parsley, tomato paste and spices. No cheese please. We sit in the car, with paper plates, a couple of lemons which we squeeze on the pizzas and suddenly the illusion intrudes: we are on the shores of the Eastern Mediterranean and not in a non-descript strip mall in Glendale.

The last stop before heading home is the most intriguing: a stop at a mega Middle Eastern grocery store. Would they have green pistachios this time? Maybe green garlic? Or green garbanzo with the stem and leaves still on it? Is the Armenian basturma (a type of prosciutto) lean today? Did they get a new shipment of beer from Armenia? Are the Armenian cucumbers (pale green and long) out yet? How about the lamb sausage? Should we get some cheese that we can fry wrapped in philo dough? Endless culinary questions by grown-up adults reverting to wide-eyed childhood on a monthly basis.

That will be \$167 says the cashier. "You must be having a big party" she says in Armenian trying to debunk the myth of surly Armenian cashiers.

Yes, a party of two. ☺