

Dolma, The Taste Of Kurdistan

Francesca Recchia

I have been living in Southern Kurdistan or Northern Iraq for more than six months and day after day, week after week I discover the multitude of doors that allow for perceiving the nuances of a different society.

Cooking and tasting food while sharing stories is to me a privileged access point that reveals much more than what it seems to tell.

The story I am telling here wouldn't have been possible without a wonderful Friday afternoon of laughter, storytelling and discovery with Anna and Kamaran in Erbil.

In order to properly make dolma you need a lot of time, dedication and patience. Here families eat it at least once a week, but for us foreigners it is quite an unusual treat. The preparation time is about four hours so the advice is to find nice company and take advantage of the kitchen to share good stories! The list of ingredients is long but simple: rice, minced lamb, beef, aubergines, courgettes, onions, vine leaves, kale leaves, tomato paste, dill, salt, pepper, sumac. Obviously the same list without lamb and beef works for the vegetarian version.

Dolma is basically stuffed vegetables with rice and meat, but in fact it is something you don't forget once you have tasted it.

The whole process begins with carving the veggies. You need a sharp knife with a thin, short blade. Aubergines and courgettes have to be cut in halves on the length side and then carved. An experienced hand can carve even three layers out of half an aubergine – for a beginner, being able to carve a thin one without breaking the skin is already quite an achievement. But no worries, you will not waste anything: the leftovers of the carving can be used later to dress the rice. Once you are done with the carving, sprinkle the inside of the “little boats” of aubergines and courgettes with salt – which you will rinse off before starting the stuffing. Now it is time to peel the onions. Take off top and bottom and make a deep cut in the in the opposite direction of the rings. Put the onion in your hand, cross your fingers and squeeze: the layers of the onions will magically come out one after the other... Vine leaves often come pickled in a jar: you therefore need to rinse and soak them. The same goes for the rice (that has to be the one with short, round grains): while finishing the preparation of vegetables soak it in cold water.

Now you cut the beef in big chunks and marinate it with lemon, salt and sumac.

When you are done with this it is time to prepare the stuffing. Fry in a pan the minced lamb – apparently you need seed oil... I am not totally convinced, but I guess there is not much to discuss about it! – with thinly chopped dill, loads of lemon, salt, pepper and tomato paste. When the minced meat is ready, it has to be mixed with rice – that by now you have drained. Yes, rice has to be raw: it seems that this is one of the big secrets... or maybe it is just obvious, but I still want to think of it as a big secret!

And now comes the fun part: the stuffing! You need a large, deep pot for it. On the bottom you prepare a layer of beef chunks – you might want to clean them of some of the sumac seeds beforehand.

The vegetables have to be stuffed by hand and not with a spoon, and you start with aubergines and courgettes. The “little boats” have to be only half full and you don't have to push the stuffing inside. Now every half needs to find its partner: they don't need to be homogeneous – so it is not that one half aubergine can only meet another half aubergine. The only thing that is important is that the half veggies are “closed” through a precise matching game. Every vegetable needs to find a missing half in order to construct a new whole so that while cooking they won't lose the stuffing. If some of the veggies are resistant towards finding a partner than you can use some of the leftovers of the carving as a lid.

When the first layer of aubergine and courgettes is complete, then you move on to the onions – which are the really friendly bit: you just put a little stuffing in the middle and they will automatically wrap themselves around it. The vine and kale leaves are the most complicated – I confess here my total ineptitude towards this bit of the job. You put the open leaf on the palm of your left hand while the right one picks a bit of the stuffing, then with both hands you roll the leaf around the stuffing and fold the edges as in a small parcel.

It is important that they come out properly wrapped, otherwise they will break while cooking. With the leftovers of kale leaves you can make a kind of lid on top of all the different layers.

Now you put the pot on the stove and cook dolma on a slow fire. You cover the pot with a frying pan where you have put water, salt, lemon and sumac seeds that you will use to moisten the dolma throughout the stewing. The cooking time is one, one and a half hours: there is no specific rule for it. What comes out is a timeless delicacy as well as a micro-portrait of Kurdish women.

In the form of a footnote: Sumac is a spice that is commonly used in Middle Eastern cuisine, it looks like a lentil and has a lemony taste. It is defined as a subtropical plant, but my dad told me that it also grows in the mountains around my hometown in Italy and it was used by shepherds to dye fabric for its purplish colour.

"Dolma" is part of a weekly bulletin which can be found at:
<http://www.veleno.tv/bollettini/?lang=en>

