

S Holiday Seasoning

Dishing with Viola Azar about traditions of food and family

Written by Jill Barville

Photographs by Young Kwak

Passed down from generation to generation in every region, religion and family, traditions season the passing of days. Especially the holidays. In America's melting pot, traditions mingle and merge—old with new—linking us to our past, our future and one another while expressing our values and imprinting our memories.

Almost 35 years ago, Viola Azar and her family moved to the U.S. from Jordan, a small Middle Eastern country just east of Israel and Palestine. In that time, the Azar family's original customs have melded with those they've picked up in America, creating some fun traditions—and usually healthy portions of mouthwatering food.

Sit down with Viola and her daughter Shanez over a cup of stout Turkish coffee, and you'll hear about the fascinating traditions of a family famous locally for delicious Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisine.

Viola and her brother Victor were teenagers when their family immigrated to Spokane in 1973. Now, they own D'Zaar Catering and Azar's Food Service, and other family members operate Azar's Café, Azar's Restaurant and Azar's Express.

Their Christian family's holiday traditions are a cultural mix of Middle Eastern and American, but always feature delectable dishes passed down from their late mother, Najla Azar, who collected new recipes in each place her husband worked, from Baghdad to Beirut to Amman.

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The Azars gather around the feast they have prepared. (Left to right) Juman, daughter; Shanez, daughter; Angie, daughter; Victor, brother; Viola; Najeeb, father; Asna, cousin.





Angie Azar, Viola's daughter, moves the kabseh to the dining room. Kabseh is a mixture of lamb and rice. This particular kabseh dish was prepared by Nasser Marwan (top). Viola Azar arranges the presentation of the food she prepared (bottom left) . Victor Azar, Viola's brother, flips the kabseh over from a pot onto a large serving tray (bottom right).

AN AZAR THANKSGIVING

“For Thanksgiving, we can’t get away from the turkey. We like this tradition, so we adopted it,” says Viola. “But we make the turkey and marinate it overnight with our own spices. We have the corn, mashed potatoes, gravy, and everything that comes with it, except for the cranberry sauce. We don’t really associate the sweet with the meat.”

They also make their own special stuffing—with rice, ground beef, spices, onion and garlic all cooked outside of the turkey—and stuffed grape leaves, which are rolled with ground beef, rice and seasonings. Grape leaves are “everybody’s favorite,” says Viola. “We make them at any occasion we have.”

PREPARATION IS PART OF THE FUN

“We get together and the girls help me,” she recounts. “It is fun because we are all sitting around the table. Even the boys come over and sit around with us. They try to roll, but they are not good at it and we tell them to stop.”

For dessert, which is served with strong holiday coffee, Viola makes kanfe, a light, creamy, red pastry made with shredded rice and filo dough layered with butter, goat cheese and honey syrup and sprinkled with paprika.

“We used to make our own goat cheese, but you cannot find raw goat milk anymore,” says Viola.

CHRISTMAS GROWING UP

They now have a tree with gifts under it, but as a child in Jordan, the holiday did not involve presents, says Viola. Instead, they visited.

“Everybody visits everybody,” explains Viola. “Everybody makes the traditional Middle Eastern cookies for Christmas. They take all day to make. And you have chocolates, a tray full of different kinds of cigarettes, wine, and Turkish coffee.”

Turkish coffee is like espresso, boiled over and over with ground cardamom seeds, an herb from the ginger family. They put it in a thermos always ready to pour and it is served in little demitasse cups—teacups without a handle.

Leaving someone at home to receive guests, they would wear their dressy clothes

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and go door to door, to friends and relatives, saying “Jesus was born,” as they approached each house.

“They have to offer you the cookie and the chocolate and you have to take it whether you are full or not,” Viola says, laughing. “Everyone would smoke and smoke. Then you have to have the wine and the coffee. By the end of the day, your body is just wow! It is a hospitality thing...so much fun.”

At first, they continued this tradition in the United States, but with busy lives it was difficult, says Viola. But they still visit the elders.

For the holiday meal, the Azars make the traditional Jordan dish called mansaf. Viola holds her hands three feet apart to show the platter’s size. “It would be full of rice, like a mountain.”

The rice is served with a salty yogurt broth that has soaked overnight.

Then, after everyone has dished up mansaf, the men stand around the mountainous tray and eat it with their hands, making balls and tossing it into their mouths.

“It is very sanitary,” says Viola. “They don’t touch their mouth at all. They are really good at it.”

Shanez adds, “Women can do it with them if you want. I used to. It was fun.”

Viola continues, “But we don’t settle for only that. In the olden days, they used to. That was it. But we make all kinds of stuff.”

The holidays are noisy and full of food, says Shanez. “We start cooking days before and you stop eating so you can stuff yourself.”

MOTHER’S COOKING

“There wasn’t anything she couldn’t make, even American dishes,” says Viola, adding



Viola Azar’s father, Najeeb, relaxes before dinner.

“Now we use a food processor, but we used to knead it until it was all dissolved,” she says. “You add lamb and cook it for two or three hours with spices. Then you put all these pieces of lamb all over the plate...arrange it, sprinkle pine nuts and then pour some of the yogurt.”

But before eating, in Jordan they followed an old tradition of washing hands in the yard.

“Even though they have sinks now, they like the traditional way,” explains Viola. “They have a pitcher of water with a little tub and soap and towels and everything. Somebody pours and you wash before you eat.”

that guests often said they didn’t eat for days in anticipation.

“My mom takes after her mother,” interjects Shanez. “You have to love to cook for it to come out good. She loves to cook.”

“Whatever she taught us, we make it, but hers was always better,” says Viola. “We decided maybe we should go at night and steal all her pots and pans because maybe that was the secret.”

She laughs and then shakes her head. “The secret is the love. She put it in the dish.” ■

Jill Barville is a native Spokane freelancer and technical writing consultant. This holiday season, she is looking forward to singing Christmas carols with her family—the boys belting out a boisterous melody, her

the DuCrest family



Katrina Miller

The Ceremony A Family Tradition

When Kathy DuCrest's four children were teenagers, almost 15 years ago, she wanted a holiday tradition that slowed the frantic pace and drew her family together.

They sat together in a circle and took turns talking about their memories of the year and their hopes for the coming one.

"It's taking time during the crazy, busy season to do less, reflect, learn from each other, and be grateful," says DuCrest, 59. "That first one was very powerful. It made us appreciate each other."

As it became an annual tradition, they called it simply, "The Ceremony." Soon it grew. Family members heard about the ceremony and as her children grew and had families of their own, so the circle expanded. Now, about 15 people participate each year.

Still sitting in a circle, they pass a roll of red ribbon, wrapping it once around each wrist as it makes the loop to show tangibly how connected they are to each other.

With lit candles symbolizing loved ones present and absent, they talk and listen, each person sharing according to a theme DuCrest has chosen in advance.

"I'm designated ceremony person," she says.

She also prepares small stones and cards with word prompts written on them to guide the sharing. Words like "calm, create or trust" spark reflections and make them purposeful.

"It has become a true gift of time and sharing," says DuCrest. "The tone is very accepting. It has become a very safe place for all of us."

In the intimacy of the ceremony, she says, they learn from each other, from the oldest to the youngest.

By delving deep beneath the superficial layers that make up common conversation, they nurture, celebrate, and even heal relationships.

This is why the tradition continues. And perhaps this is why DuCrest's young granddaughter once said to the circle, "I hope we have more ceremonies." ■



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