

Baklava

ABOUT 4 DOZEN

Baklawa bi Jouz (buck-la-wa bee jowz)

You can find baklava in many grocery stores and bakeries. These pastries come in many shapes and sizes and are traditionally diamond shaped, available with a variety of nut fillings, walnuts being most commonly used. What separates this baklava from store-bought is the clarified butter, the homemade syrup, and the fact that it is freshly baked from your oven. This sweet, crisp walnut strudel is so easy to prepare and is a delicious addition at any gathering.



Specialty ingredients: Fillo dough, found in most grocery stores or specialty markets (my favorite brand is Apollo), clarified butter (see page 196), and mazaher (orange blossom water), found in specialty markets or online.

Special equipment: A food processor, pastry brush, and a 9- x 13- x 2-inch baking pan.

Prepare ahead: You can bake baklava up to 3 days in advance. Cool completely and store in an airtight container. It can be refrigerated prior to baking for several days or frozen unbaked for several months. When refrigerating or freezing unbaked baklava, do not cut it into pieces until ready to bake. Press plastic wrap up against the top of the baklava and seal it around the edges to keep the moisture in; then place the pan in an airtight bag. When frozen, thaw overnight in the refrigerator. Always bring it to room temperature prior to baking.

FOR THE BAKLAVA

- 1 (16-ounce) package 12- x 17-inch fillo dough (room temperature)
- 1 cup cooled syrup (see the following recipe)
- 3 cups finely ground walnuts (about ¾ pound)
- ⅓ cup granulated sugar
- 4 teaspoons mazaher
- 1¼ cups melted clarified butter (unsalted butter will do)

2 tablespoons finely ground unsalted pistachios (garnish)

To prepare the baklava

Bring the fillo to room temperature (see “Handling Fillo Dough,” page xiv). Prepare the syrup as described below and set it aside.

Combine the walnuts and sugar in a bowl. Mix in the mazaher, using the back of a spoon to press the mazaher into the walnuts and sugar until evenly blended and the nuts seem damp. Set aside.

Count the sheets of fillo dough (the number of sheets in a pound of fillo varies from box to box). Divide them, using one-third of the sheets for the bottom, 4 sheets for the center to hold the nuts, and the rest to be used on top. Keep the fillo dough covered with plastic to prevent drying.

Preheat the oven to 350°F. Brush the bottom of a 9- x 13- x 2-inch baking pan with melted butter. Place 1 sheet of fillo dough on the bottom of the tray. It will be slightly crumpled, which is no problem. Brush it with butter by starting at the corners and edges, working your way to the center. Continue layering one-third of the sheets on the bottom of the pan, making certain that you are brushing each





sheet with butter before placing the next. (Some of the sheets may tear while transferring them into the tray; it's okay, just adjust them as best you can.)

The next 4 sheets will line the edges of the pan to prevent the nuts from touching the sides of the pan and burning while baking. Place 1 sheet of fillo so that half of it is in the pan and the other half drapes over the edge. Brush the section in the pan with butter. Repeat this on the other 3 edges.

Transfer the walnut mixture to the pan. Use the tines of a fork to evenly distribute the mixture up to the corners and sides, right up to the fillo. Fold the pieces of fillo that are draped over the sides in and over the walnut mixture and brush them with butter.

Continue layering the sheets of fillo, brushing each sheet with butter before placing the next. (Always brush them from the corners and edges, working your way toward the center.) Carefully arrange the final 2 sheets so they are as flat as possible, brushing each layer with butter. Work your way around the border, using a small spatula, and tuck in any loose pieces. Brush the top and edges one final time with butter.

Place a piece of plastic wrap over the top of the baklava pan, and use a flat pancake turner to press down evenly over the entire top. (Doing this before cutting the baklava into individual pieces will ensure that the layers are even and will bake together.) Remove the plastic wrap and make 5 cuts lengthwise (from one





side to the other), about 1½ inches apart. Make 9 diagonal cuts widthwise (from one side to the other) that are also about 1½ inches apart.

Bake the baklava in the center of the oven for 50 to 60 minutes or until the top is golden brown. Evenly drizzle cooled syrup over the top of the hot baklava (oven-hot baklava absorbs syrup better), to coat each piece. (Do not pour warm or hot syrup over the baked baklava; it will decrease the crispy texture.) Set aside to cool for at least 4 hours before removing pieces.

To serve

Prior to serving the baklava, go over the cuts to loosen the individual pieces from the tray. Garnish the top of each piece with a pinch of ground pistachios. Serve at room temperature.

{ VARIATION }

You can substitute 1 teaspoon cinnamon for the mazaher. Substitute almonds, cashews, or pistachios in place of the walnuts. When using pistachios, use maward (rose water) instead of mazaher (orange blossom water). The rest of the recipe and procedure remain the same.



Syrup

Atr (utt-terr)

ABOUT 1½ CUPS

Referred to by some as simple syrup, I think of it as essential syrup. While it's very easy to make, it is important not to over-boil the syrup. The longer you boil the sugar and water mixture, the thicker the syrup will become. When it gets too thick, it will not be absorbed as well by the sweets you are preparing it for.



Prepare ahead: You can prepare this days to weeks in advance. Cool completely prior to storing it in an airtight container at room temperature.

FOR THE SYRUP

2 cups granulated sugar
1 cup water
2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lemon juice,
strained

To prepare the syrup

Dissolve the sugar and water together in a saucepan and mix well. (A word of caution: Do not use a wooden cooking utensil that you have used to sauté onions, garlic, or other foods, as the syrup will absorb that flavor.) The syrup will appear cloudy at this stage.

*Place over high heat, uncovered. Once the mixture has come to a rolling boil and the surface seems engulfed by bubbles, set the timer and boil for 2 minutes. Then stir in the lemon juice and return to a boil for an additional 10 to 15 seconds. (Do not skip adding the lemon juice, otherwise the syrup will recrystallize when stored for longer periods). Remove from the heat and set aside, uncovered. Cool completely before using. **Note:** When preparing larger batches of syrup, you may need to allow the mixture to boil a bit longer accordingly.*

{ VARIATION }

You can substitute lime juice for the lemon juice. You can add ½ tablespoon mazaher (orange blossom water) or maward (rose water) at the same time you add the lemon juice for scented syrups.

