

Kamloops This Week

My big Greek cooking lesson

By Darcie Hossack - Kamloops This Week

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In spite of my butter-and-eggs upbringing, I'm taking a leap of faith this week that neither are required in the making of a sweet so satisfying I might very well have a conversion experience to all things olive oil.

And, upon what basis do I leap?

Well, I will either credit or blame Teri Vlassopoulos, a member of my flung-across-the-country writer's group, who's been editing her first collection of short fiction, *Bats or Swallows and other stories*, for publication by Invisible Press this fall.

And, while editing, Teri has been eating and cooking her way through Greece this summer.

I know.

Let's all pause for a moment and feel badly for her.

But, it gets worse, as Teri says of her living situation there that "Stella, a neighbour and dear friend, constantly supplies us with food."

Ah, well. Maybe next year she'll go someplace better, with nicer, more generous, people.

People who don't "knock on the door with a plate of halvas."

Says Teri, in regard to the hardships of eating said halva:

"So many countries have their version. The Greek is of the slightly gelatinous type [rather than nut-butter based] and I've spent many years of my life avoiding it. It just didn't appeal to me – the texture looked strange and I mistakenly thought it was honey-based (which I thought would be too sweet).

"But, then this summer, I actually ate halva, and it's so delicious! Sweet and toasty, not too cloying, soft, but with nuts for texture.

"A few days later Stella called me over to her apartment so that she could teach me how to make it myself."

Sob.

If only I had been there to help my poor friend through her trying, trying time.

But there's simply nothing for it except to track down a measure of "coarse" semolina for myself and share in her sufferings from afar.

Greek halva

Teri's notes: Halva is one of those 1-2-3-4 ratio recipes, so you can scale it up or down as you wish. We used a juice glass to measure out the ingredients and ended up with halva that fit in an eight-inch bundt pan. It's a ridiculously simple recipe — you barely have to do anything and it's hard to mess up.

1 part olive oil

(You can also use another oil if you don't have olive on hand. Also, halva has the tendency to be oily, so if you want to use a little less than one part, go ahead.)

2 parts coarse semolina

(NOTE: Semolina is a by-product of durum wheat. Use coarse semolina for this recipe, which is distinctly grainy. Fine semolina will be more flour-y and won't work.)

3 parts sugar

4 parts water

Optional: as many nuts as you want

Step 1. In a medium pot, add the sugar to the water and bring to a boil for about five to seven minutes until the sugar is dissolved. Skim off any foam that might develop on the surface of the water. Set the water mixture aside.

Step 2. In a large pot, heat the oil and add the semolina. This is the only step that requires a bit of work. Keep stirring it around so that the oil is incorporated by the semolina. The semolina will start getting fragrant and toasty. Do this for a few minutes until it's golden, and don't let it burn.

Step 3. Add the water mixture to the pot with the semolina. It will hiss and steam, so don't be alarmed. Stir it around a bit and then let the pot sit. If you want nuts, throw a bunch in now (and you probably do; almonds and walnuts are especially good.) The mixture will thicken into a porridge-like consistency and you'll see satisfyingly big, slow, fat bubbles coming up to the surface. It will smell very good.

Step 4. Pour the thickened mixture into a pan or a mould — bundt pans are good for this. When it's cooled and set, turn onto a plate and sprinkle with lots of cinnamon. Then, slice and serve.

Darcie Hossack's recipes are available online at nicefatgurdie.wordpress.com.