

# BAKLAVA

Makes 30 to 40 small pieces.

By Dennis W. Viau; from a friend's recipe.

If you've ever tasted Baklava you know how uniquely delicious it is. Flaky and chewy, layered with honey and walnuts, it is a sensuous and delicate confection. Its origin is obscure, although most *foodologists* believe that it comes from the Ottoman Empire, the center of which was Turkey. If you have the patience to work with fragile sheets of phyllo dough, this recipe is easy to prepare.



## Ingredients:

1½ pounds (680g) walnuts, finely chopped in a food processor  
½ cup (3½ ounces/100g) granulated sugar  
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
⅛ teaspoon ground cloves  
Zest of ½ lemon  
Zest of ¼ orange  
1 box (1 pound/454g) phyllo dough sheets  
1½ cups (350g) butter; melted

### For the Syrup:

¾ cup (5 ounces/150g) sugar  
¾ cup (175ml) water  
¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
Zest of ½ lemon  
Zest of ¼ orange  
½ cup (120ml) honey (5.3 ounces/150g)

## Directions:

Combine the walnuts, sugar, ground cinnamon and cloves, and both zests in a bowl.

Lightly grease, or line with parchment paper, a 9x13-inch (23x33cm) metal baking pan. (I don't recommend using glass; it might crack when you pour on the syrup.) Place a sheet of phyllo in the bottom of the pan and brush lightly with melted butter. Arrange another sheet on the first, crossing the grain, and brush again with butter. Continue until you've used about 8 sheets.

Sprinkle 2 or 3 tablespoons of the nut mixture evenly over the dough in the baking pan. Layer another phyllo sheet on top, again lightly brushing with butter. Continue layering the walnut mixture and phyllo sheets, brushing with butter, until all the walnuts are used up. Finally, layer another 8 phyllo sheets on top, buttering as before. I find that pressing down gently all the way around to condense the layers gives me a firmer finished baklava. Brush the top surface with butter.

Cut through the layers of phyllo, scoring about 1½ inches (about 4cm) apart to section into diamond shapes. Bake at 350°F (175°C) for 45 minutes to 1 hour, until browned. Remove from the oven.

While the baklava is baking, combine all the syrup ingredients in a saucepan, stirring until the sugar has dissolved (the liquid should look dark and clear under any foam that might rise to the top). Set aside.

When the baklava is ready to come out of the oven, warm the syrup until hot. Pour evenly over the hot baklava, letting it settle into the grooves cut earlier. Let cool completely. Cut again and serve.

The **Step By Step** guide begins on the following page.

## STEP-BY-STEP

1



Assemble your *mise en place*. The walnuts shown here are sold as “walnut pieces” and they are too coarse for making baklava. I’ll pulverize them in the food processor. Phyllo (fillo here) is typically sold in the frozen food case at the store. Thaw 24 hours in the refrigerator before using.

2



Use a microplane grater or citrus zester to remove the zest from all the lemon and half the orange. Divide each in half between two small bowls. You’ll use one half in the walnut mixture for the filling and the other half will become part of the syrup you’ll use later.

3



These are the walnut “pieces” after I chopped them further in a food processor. The best way I can think of describing this texture is similar to corn meal.

4



Combine the walnuts,  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup (100g) sugar, cinnamon, cloves, and the zest from  $\frac{1}{2}$  the lemon and  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the orange.

5



I prefer to line my baking pan with parchment paper. I'll be using a knife to cut through the layers later and parchment paper will help protect the nonstick coating. I am using binder clips to hold the paper in place. The clips will be removed before the pan goes into the oven.

6



Here's a trick for really dry locations or when the humidity is very low. Phyllo dough dries out quickly. Dampen a piece of fabric to place over it. The cloth should be barely damp. A wet cloth will soften the phyllo and cause it to stick to itself.

7



Begin by placing a sheet of phyllo dough in the bottom of the pan, lengthwise end to end. It might be slightly larger. Brush carefully with melted butter. It will tear easily at this point. The butter doesn't need to be dripping; a light covering will suffice. Lay a second sheet over the first, turning it 90° so that it crosses at a right angle. The extra will hang over the edge of the pan. That's okay for now. Lightly butter the sheet, then fold the overhanging section into the pan and butter again. Do this with about 8 pieces, alternating each layer by 90° to form a sturdy bottom crust.

8



As the bottom crust builds up it will become quite strong because you crossed the grains when turning each sheet.

9



Sprinkle about 2 heaping tablespoons of the walnut filling onto the dough, spreading it around evenly. As you can see above, it does not need to completely cover the dough, filling in all the empty spaces. Just a moderate sprinkling will suffice. Cover with a sheet of phyllo dough and gently brush it with melted butter. Add another sprinkling of filling and cover again with more phyllo and brushing with butter. You are building up the baklava in layers.

10



Continue alternating between layering a thin coating of walnut mixture and another sheet of phyllo until all the filling is used up. There should still be plenty of phyllo sheets unused. Build a top crust by layering sheets of phyllo dough, turning 90° and brushing with melted butter as you did for the bottom crust. Continue for about 8 or 9 sheets. Before brushing the topmost sheet, press down with your hands to squeeze the layers together. This will give you a denser baklava that is less likely to fall apart later.

11



Cut down through the layers with a sharp knife, cutting all the way down to the bottom. It doesn't need to be cut through perfectly at this stage because you'll be cutting it again after it has baked and cooled. Finish by brushing it light with melted butter. Heat the oven to 350°F (175°C) and bake for 45 to 60 minutes. I find that it needs a full 60 minutes in the oven to brown well.

12



While the baklava is in the oven, combine your syrup ingredients over medium heat and bring just to the boil, stirring often. This will dissolve all the sugar. The syrup should be dark and clear under any foam that might rise to the surface. Set aside. You'll heat this syrup again later.

**13**

The baklava should be a rich golden color when it comes out of the oven. A few minutes before removing it from the oven, heat the syrup almost to boiling. Remove the baklava from the oven and evenly pour the syrup over it, letting it settle into the grooves.

**14**

This is the most difficult step for me: Allow the baklava to cool thoroughly, which takes about two hours. With a sharp knife, but through the grooves again, separating the pieces and arrange them on a tray or plate for serving.



15



The baklava should be dense and chewy with a flaky and delicate top surface. One friend describes the flavor as “decadent.” I couldn’t agree more. Honey sweet with the tang of citrus, along with the richness of butter and walnuts. It is no wonder that this confection is a favorite among many who love sweets.

## Conclusion

Baklava is such a unique treat, it’s not easy to describe it. Is it a cookie? A confection (like a candy)? A pastry? It is so delicious, there is little wonder why this treat has remained popular for centuries. As a gift, it can’t go wrong.