

Baqllaawe

Deb Wain

My mother spread out cashews, pistachios, and walnuts in a single layer on a baking tray. She told me it was important not to mound them up, important that they were toasted evenly. She picked through, looking for small broken pieces, especially of walnuts, and removed them so they wouldn't burn. Small pieces of burnt walnuts could spoil the flavour of the whole baqllaawe because, once they were ground up, the flavour would go throughout the whole sticky dessert. The oven ticked as it heated up and would continue to tick for hours after it had been used as it cooled down again. While the nuts toasted in the oven, she cooked up water, sugar, and a little lemon juice. She held the temperamental ignitor down as the stovetop clicked into life with a *whoomp* of flame that settled into a more well-behaved, gentle burn on medium. The numbers around the dial were long ago cleaned off by an overly enthusiastic use of Jiff or Handy Andy.

The enamel in the bath was thin owing to the same enthusiasm. There was a rust stain below the tap. The house, our new Australian home, was well worn by the time we arrived. It sat glumly on a street of similarly glum-looking houses in Heidelberg—cream brickwork cracked by shifting earth, settling. I liked to run my fingers along the cracks and peer into the wider ones but there was never anything there. A matching brick fence, low enough for me to climb onto easily, even when I was small, held the street away from the house.



The syrup settled to a simmer and my mother turned the flame down cautiously. Taking it as low as it could go without it making a quiet pop and going out completely. It had happened before. The women who had gathered to cook together—building a community in their new place, rebuilding the safety of women together had not noticed the pot cooling on the extinguished gas ring until Farquan had come in from the fresh outside air and smelt the gas. The women had laughed nervously and joked at the idea of gassing themselves in their own kitchen, but it made them cautious with the gas burners after that. They hadn't used such kitchen appliances at home in Somalia. At first they had been excited at the reduced time needed for cooking—the gas burners meant they didn't need to light a cooking fire well ahead of time. But after that day I saw fear when they peered at the burner beneath the pot.

My mother used a mortar and pestle to grind the nuts.

I use a food processor in my kitchen and everything is quick—instant gratification, no waiting. Nothing is languid or laboured any more. There is no time for contemplation. I think of my mother and aunts briefly, while the blades of the food processor rattle the toasted nuts in the canister, filling the kitchen with a noise that clatters inside my head. I miss the melodious laughter of the women.

My mother ground the toasted nuts a handful at a time, spilling them in a cascade from her hand into the mortar. When they were ground, she emptied the nuts into a mixing bowl, and refilled the mortar with another handful of the still-warm nuts. She allowed each handful to fall from her palm. The image of the nuts now appears as a waterfall in my memory. Then she turned to the pot containing the syrup. She measured orange water into the syrup after it had been simmering in a sea-foamy frenzy for ten minutes. And the kitchen filled with the scent of sweet, sticky citrus. My mother crushed more nuts beneath the action of her pestle. I was allowed to measure out half a cup of icing sugar, one quarter of a teaspoon of cardamom and half a teaspoon of cinnamon with a pinch of salt; to retrieve a clean wooden spoon from the second drawer; and to stir the nuts, sugar, and spices together, but only if I was careful. "Remember," Mama said, "the more filling you put on the floor, the less baqlaawe there will be to eat." I stirred very carefully.

I still do the stirring by hand. I suppose I could add it all to the food processor but I don't. When my daughter is home from kindergarten, she helps me the way I

helped my mother. I use the same warning to make sure she's careful with her stirring. And I wonder if my mother was told the same by her mother—the grandmother I never got the chance to meet. She was left by the side of the road to Dadaab. When you are fleeing there is no time for grief, and barely time to pile some stones and keep moving. There are too many piles of stones on that road. I have been back to retrace those steps I could not remember. When I was just married and my daughter not yet born, I walked again the road I had stumbled along as a child and I saw the piles of stone beside the road. Too many of those simple mounds of stones and dirt were small.

When we cooked baqlaawe, I was allowed to paint the first coat of browned butter into the baqlaawe tray but Mama added the layers of filo and took the brush from me to add more butter between the layers of pastry. Her filo sheets were so thin I could see through them. Today my pastry comes in a packet. Frozen. In one generation, the art of making our own filo pastry has been lost. My mother showed me as a child, but I never practised it as an adult. You can probably buy the sugar syrup too but I try to draw a line somewhere.

Mama layered the filo and the nuts in the tray and once the top layer was on she asked, "What shape today?" I pretended to think hard about it, before saying, "Diamonds."

"Okay," she nodded and started cutting. I chose diamonds most often but sometimes I suggested squares or rectangles just to allow Mama some variety. Her knife made careful parallel lines in the tray of pastry and nuts then she spun the tray around and cut more parallel lines on the diagonal, making the sharp pointed diamonds of my favourite baqlaawe. I waited impatiently at the oven door for the tray to cook. Every time we cooked it, I asked if I was old enough to pour the syrup over the hot pastry when we took it from the oven. Mama always said, "Not yet." She was still saying *not yet* when I was sixteen but it had become a joke by then. And then she was gone and would not be able to say anything to me again. The suddenness of it was a claw in my stomach that made me crumple to the floor. The doctor said there was nothing that could have been done—even if he had known. She had been quietly sick for a long time, hiding her pain so that she was alone in her dying.

Before my mother's funeral, I poured the syrup for the first time. The tears splashed onto the bench top as we prepared the food for the wake and the aunties, the circle of women my mother had surrounded herself with while she was alive, hung back waiting for my sobbing, and the syrup, to be finished. They had made the filo for me but had allowed me to do the rest alone. It was a kind of prayer. The syrup hit the top layer of crunchy filo in a squiggling drizzle before thinning with the heat of the pastry and seeping down between the diamonds and into the crushed and roasted nuts. The aunts took the glass jug from me when I was finished; one of them rinsed it straight away in the sink. Another got me a hard kitchen chair and let me collapse onto it, my face in my hands. Another smoothed my hair, one patted my shoulder. They didn't say anything.

When my daughter asks to pour the syrup, I guide her hand and we do it together. The rippling drizzle melts through the layers and sinks to the bottom.

DEB WAIN is a poet and short story writer who is passionate about food, culture and the Australian environment. She has generally been employed in jobs where she talks or tells stories for a living. When not writing or talking you can find Deb dancing in the garden, drinking coffee, or learning new things.