

The World's Second-Best Baklava

Category: Stories

written by Zoran Naumovski | October 28, 2022



My parents emigrated from Macedonia to Lorain, Ohio...

In 2013, as a hospitalist, I attended the annual conference of the Society of Hospital Medicine. This meant traveling from my home base in Ohio to Washington, DC, the site of that year's conference.

The second day was winding down. Colleagues, new friends and countless strangers were scurrying to their rooms to freshen up and get ready for a night out on the town, where they'd continue to mingle, share research and professional achievements and scout out career opportunities.

I had other plans, however. I'd called up my high-school pal Jamie and made plans to meet him and his wife, Melissa, for dinner. I was longing for a chance to relax and recharge, to enjoy some casual nonmedical conversation and reminisce about the good old days.

In fact, I was still reeling emotionally from the loss of my mother, who'd died seven years earlier, in 2006, after a nineteen-year battle with uterine cancer.

During her final years, I'd spent every moment outside of work caring for her, coordinating her medical appointments and helping my father, sister, brother and extended Macedonian family to understand the complexities of her illness and treatment options.

In order to care for my mother and extended family, I had sacrificed time that I would otherwise have spent with my wife and children. And since my mother's death, my sense of pain, loss, grief and anger had only deepened.

The knowledge that our three children were growing up without a grandmother added to the pain. (My wife's mother had passed away in 1997, shortly before my wife and I married.) When my mother died, our children were five, three and one; the day after the funeral, my wife and I learned that we were expecting our fourth child. Our joy was tinged with sadness that this was a grandchild my mother would never meet.

After Mama died, I turned to caring for my father—his ailments, his grief, his depression and struggling soul.

"Zoran, I can't wait to die," he'd confide in his thick Slavic accent. "To see your Mama again...to be with her again. I can't live without her."

I counseled him, comforted him and occasionally chastised him for ignoring the gifts he still had in this world—his two sons and daughter, his two daughters-in-law, his son-in-law and ten grandchildren, all of whom loved him and Mama.

During those years, I'd had struggles of my own. Two years after Mama died, I quit my private practice and joined a hospitalist group. I enjoyed my new seven-day-on/seven-day-off schedule—but once more found myself sacrificing time with my wife and children to care for my father.

With each day, I felt more urgently that I, too, needed help—an outlet, a respite. A relaxed dinner with Jamie and Melissa seemed like just what the doctor ordered.

We met at a mom-and-pop Greek restaurant just outside DC and were greeted at the entrance by the family matriarch—a woman in her eighties who spoke broken English with a heavy Greek accent and whose warm smile reminded me of my mother's.

Scanning the menu, I noticed many of the dishes Mama used to prepare. Then I spotted my favorite: moussaka. I had to have it!

Moving a bit arthritically, the matriarch slowly approached our table.

"Here we make the best Greek dishes and pastries in America," she said proudly.

I chose not to argue the point, but told myself: *Mama made the same dishes, and I'm sure they were better than these. And we're not even Greek!*

In the early 1960s, my parents emigrated from Macedonia, in the former Yugoslavia, to Lorain, Ohio. There my brother, sister and I were born in the late Sixties and early Seventies. My parents struggled to raise us, financially and culturally. They knew almost nothing of American culture and even less of the English language. Somehow, they made it work; they raised a wonderful family and created many great memories, including some my favorites—memories of my mother's cooking and baking.

When we'd finished our entrées, the matriarch hobbled over and inquired about dessert.

"What do you have?" I asked.

"What do we have?!" she exclaimed. "Only the world's best baklava! The *best* in the world!"

I paused for a moment to compose myself.

"I'm sorry," I whispered, my voice cracking. "Only one person makes the world's best baklava...my own mother. She died seven years ago. And there will never be a better baklava. I'm sorry."

The woman hesitated, speechless. Then, in a soft, motherly tone, she whispered tenderly, "Then how about I bring you the world's *second*-best baklava?"

I stared at her. Then I answered: "I will gladly try a piece of the world's second-best baklava."

Smiling, she turned and walked to the kitchen.

Later, as I was finishing dessert and savoring the last drop of Turkish coffee, the matriarch approached again.

"And so...how is the world's second-best baklava? You like? Is okay?" she inquired, in tones of nervous affection.

Looking her in the eye, I fervently proclaimed, "Next to my mother's baklava, it's the best in the world!"

She started to cry, tentatively at first, then uncontrollably.

She hugged me. I hugged her. She kissed me three times on either cheek, as we do in our respective cultures.

"Thank you! Those are the nicest words anyone ever said about my baklava!" she said.

I thanked her and kissed her cheeks three times in return.

I was thanking her for her generous willingness to honor my mother's memory. But I was also thanking her for something deeper than that. In truth, during our whole encounter, I had felt that it was my own mother reaching out, through this kindly matriarch, to embrace and comfort my aching soul.