



Me with calf hooves to make khash.

So, You Think You Can Cook?

—January 23, 2006

A recent note from my mission friend Marcia, who's now back home in Florida, made me chuckle. A couple friends wanted to know what she ate while here. Well, I guarantee you that neither Marcia nor I ever went hungry or wanted for (just about) anything we craved. If we wanted it – and we could find it – we splurge and bought it. Sort of.

Let me share with you a few of my own cooking adventures while here.



Student Mariam's table all from scratch.

when I arrived, and even though I'd been here before, I just wanted the “easy” way out and brought the sugar with me.

But what is brown sugar? I found a cooking substitute list and discovered we could mix white sugar with molasses to make brown sugar. How do you explain molasses to folks who think the “brown sugar” we're talking about is brown cane sugar? And, in the store, there are shopping assistants every three feet, but none of them speak English. So how do you explain brown sugar?

So my next challenge was baking powder. I wanted to make banana bread and the recipe called for baking powder. Everyone said I could substitute baking soda, which is pretty easy to find at the bigger shops. But not being a big baker, I felt more secure trying to find baking powder. The substitute

I think it all started when Marcia wanted to make peanut butter cookies and ginger snap cookies. Our oven, which looks much like a microwave, only works on the lower heating coil. Our baking pans are the shelves that fit into the oven.

Marcia needed brown sugar. Having paid \$5 for 500 ml last year, I knew to bring my 89-cent stuff from home. I wanted to make apple crisp (or, as they say, pudding) for folks again. I knew I'd find apples, flour, gercules (like Hercules... which is what children eat... oatmeal) and butter. But brown sugar is priceless. Being more athletic than I, Marcia did scrounge around to find some brown sugar. I really did feel bad about not offering mine, but I also knew she could do it. In that way, she got around a lot more than I ever could have



Mariam in my kitchen helping.



Anush Davtyan (far right) family table. are. Meat, tomato sauce, spices, maybe a little green pepper and celery. You get celery from where? So we found barbecue sauce and mixed it with tomato juice and put other stuff in there. It really turned out pretty good. At least the other expats were willing to take home the extras...the other ex-pats being Prof. Daniel Dunn, along with Prof. Verne House and his wife, Nancy.

During the holidays, I wanted to make peanut butter balls. I found a limited supply of Skippy and Jif – about \$5 a jar – at the store three blocks away near the Metro. Since the balls would be “presents,” I splurged. Honey isn’t a problem and I only ran into trouble with powdered sugar once – during the holidays. There was none to be found. So, what is powdered sugar but sugar that is made into a powder? Right? I don’t know, but I pulled out the landlady’s mortar and pestle, and I proceeded to spend about an hour grinding, grinding, grinding the cane sugar until it was powdery. Marcia had already figured out which corn flakes were good, so I knew the package to look for in the store. But I wanted to dip my peanut butter balls in chocolate. How do you make chocolate from cocoa to dip things into? The answer: I still don’t know. Instead, they have all kinds of imported chocolates (from Russia) and it’s cheap. So I figured out a double-boiler with the few kitchen supplies in the apartment and melted the nice chocolate. It worked and the peanut butter balls are “shat hamov” (very tasty).



Birthday party table for Alek’s Tamaryan’s son.



Probably our biggest challenge was trying to come up with a substitute for sage for the Thanksgiving turkey we made when I visited Marcia at Thanksgiving in Tbilisi, Georgia, with Michael Cooney, a 73-year-old from Rhode Island who’s been working here for two years. We picked up some Italian seasoning mix, and the

Good borscht with Christy Malakyan’s (standing) husband, daughter, mom and sister.



A birthday table for Vahan Amirkhanyan.

stuffing was very tasty. Then Dr. Daniel Dunn, my “boss” at the Agribusiness Teaching Center, was leaving for Christmas in Wisconsin followed by a trip to Africa. As a parting gift, he presented me with sage! The Christmas stuffing was even better than Thanksgiving – and I didn’t feel bad for Marcia missing it because she was already back in Wales, meeting her husband who flew in from Florida and they were enjoying a beautiful service in an Anglican church.

I have had people send over Jell-O, pudding, white cake mix, lemon pie filling and pumpkin pie filling. Jell-O and even instant pudding can be found, if you shop at enough stores and don’t need it right now. Sometimes, getting to the stores can take a few days and then you have to worry about supply. Because it was there last week doesn’t mean it will be here next week.

There’s one store where I even saw Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. I didn’t buy it, even though this week I’m having Armen, Zara and Anahit over right after work and we’re going to have hamburgers, mac and cheese, and maybe some pork and beans. Just a plain, American dinner. We haven’t gotten together since one of my first weeks here when we had tacos.

Other than these challenges to make something American, I have eaten wonderful foods. And I’ve even cooked or prepared a few of them!

The most exotic thing I’ve made is khash. That’s right. That calf hoof soup I talked out back in November...I made it. Along with the hide from the calf belly area. When I went to wash the hooves, the sales people were amazed that an American likes khash AND was going to cook it. After soaking the hooves and hide in pans in the tub for a week, it took a huge pot and about 12 hours to cook it down to a sticky, gelatin soup. Served with garlic and dry lavash (bread) along with some salt – and plenty of vodka – it’s a feast once reserved for only the poor and now eaten at restaurants for quite a sum.

My student Mariam came over before the holidays and helped me make dolma (stuffed cabbage leaves), a red bean dip, carrot salad and beet salad. She also brought along some of her mother’s delicious dried fruits and a rope of dried fruit juice in walnuts. We also put together a potato salad that is much more interesting than the stuff we eat back home. Here, it had potatoes, browned beef, pickles, peas, carrots, eat and a mixture of mayonnaise and yogurt. She spent the night and we worked hard. It was nice to cook together. She and her family were going to visit later in the week (after New Year) but it snowed in Bhrakahn and they couldn’t make it to Yerevan.



A simple, delicious breakfast table at Gohar Grigoryan’s house with Kara Harutyunyan..



A big deal for many folks to make during the week between New Year and Armenian Christmas was ham. I love ham! Lots of people bought their hocks and cured them at home. They were very tasty, but more of a cooking job than I am able to handle at this point. I just buy the little half-pound packages by Bacon Inc. They're not bad.

Students ready Zhanna's table (she and her sister prepared it since her mom, a doctor is in the U.S.)

sometimes recognizable, sometimes not – along with a basket of white bread and the flat, unleavened lavash. There's a plate of greens and a plate of Lori (strong and salty) cheese. People eat both by the lavash-slice full, laying the greens and cheese on the slice and rolling it up like a burrito or crepe. The UMCOR table will also include two of the following: buckwheat, rice, noodles or potatoes. Then there are usually three salads. And homemade lemonade to drink. We pay \$1 a day to offset the cost of the meal.

At people's homes, a meal can be as simple and tasty as borscht soup or as elaborate as baked fish in lavash or a whole table so filled there's hardly room for your own plate. There are always plenty of pickled vegetables, some types of salads, lavash, several kinds of beverages. Some places have a horavats (grilled meat) and often there's always a fish served about 30 minutes after you think you're done eating. Then everyone starts reaching for the fresh fruit that's elaborately mounded up in a bowl in the center of the table. Sometimes, there's a little dessert, too.

And never, never should you eat everything on your plate. I'm guessing I lost about 15 kilos (30

pounds) already, but it wasn't because of the food. Thankfully, I get quite a bit of walking in...more so than at home, that's for sure. At a meal, no matter where, you eat...and eat...and eat. No matter how much you protest, people put more food on your plate. I hate it, but I understand it. Though I also know that sometimes there are

Armine (standing) made sure all the students also got to dance while dining at her table.

Typically, an Armenian meal consists of...lots of food. At the UMCOR office, I always eat the soup. It's interesting and I like soup. We have one meat—



Tatev added music to her table!



people here who put too much status into their table and fail to remember that it's the stories and laughter around the table that are most important to me.

So I remember the system Marcia and I designed...leave stuff on your plate so there's no room for more. Except, sometimes, they take your plate away and serve you even more on a clean plate. Or, you think you're just having a few salads and then you find out more food is coming because people only have a small hotplate on which to cook.



Ani (smiling at camera) had her father serve special sweet wine from his winery.

But it's good and nutritious food, grown or preserved by their hands. Always made from scratch. Often people genuinely are honored by your visit. Not to partake would offend, and that's a cardinal rule for Individual Volunteers in Mission...you do so as not to offend. The day after, I walk up and down the UMCOR stairs to my third-floor, attic office a few extra times to work off all that food.

Holiday tables are even more elaborate, if you can imagine. They are important, a culture and tradition all unto themselves. It's a whole other story, but I will just let the photos of these tables speak for themselves. Much is put into them, but I want the joy and laughter to sustain me more than worrying about the abundance of food put out.

I treat each meal invitation as a great honor and I always try everything put before me. There are so many people – co-workers, students and staff, friends from church, and others I've met – who have asked me to their table. I cherish every morsel of food and each moment of sharing our lives together. And I thank God for putting so much abundance – food and friends – into my life.

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