

My family's Easter tradition

ON ONE SPECIAL DAY EVERY YEAR THE CONSTANTINOU FAMILY PREPARES FOR A RITUAL FEAST.

'This isn't the right cheese,' my thea (aunt) Rita Constantinou shouts as tension rises throughout the kitchen. Our annual flaounes baking day has had a major setback and we haven't even started.

Flaounes are a traditional Cypriot pastry made only at Easter and filled with a savoury cheese mixture. Three generations of the Constantinou family gather in my yiayia's (grandmother's) kitchen at 6am to get a head start on the long process. Actually, I lie. Thea Rita prepared the cheese mixture last night as it needs extra time to combine and rise so it's light and fluffy.

Our mixture is made from four different cheeses - usually haloumi, romano, parmesan and a special flaounes cheese mixture from a Cypriot cheesemaker at Paphos, Annandale. It's all ordered pre-shredded so we don't have to spend hours struggling to do it ourselves. Mint, sultanas and eggs are added so it blends.

We always make two separate mixtures because

The production line then takes shape. My mum rolls out the pastry and cuts it into squares. I put the cheese mixture inside and fold the corners in, passing it to my younger cousin, James Vatiliotis, who coats them with sesame seeds. Thea Rita takes the final products and arranges them on baking trays that she gives to thea Betty (Constantinou), who is in charge of monitoring the cooking times, rotating the batches so they are evenly cooked, before placing them on wire racks to cool next to the windows.

When the first batch comes out of the oven the smell drifts throughout the kitchen, drawing in the children who run over to inspect the work but are reminded to "keep your hands off". The pastry, a deep golden brown, is crisp and flaky

performed since she was a girl in Cyprus and it puts the biggest smile on her face. She is the reason we do it - year in, year out - and will continue to do it. I can't wait to pass down this experience to my children as it was passed down to me.

And, while the cheesy baking aroma lingers through the whole house and I cannot wait to get my teeth into one of the soft golden falounes, I have to wait.

They are served after Easter Saturday midnight church service when I can break my fast from dairy, eggs and meat.

While at church, my other yiayia (paternal grandmother Maria Lathourakis) prepares a phenomenal feast. Traditionally, Greeks eat mayiritza, a soup made from livers, heart, brains and intestines, usually from lambs, with a lemon broth (avgolemono) on top.

Many children will not eat this and I have not grown up on it. Instead, my family enjoys my yiayia's yourvarlakia avgolemono, a soup made of a foamy lemon and egg broth, full of meatballs. It is one of her specialties.

It is 12.30am and this is only the start of Easter Sunday's feast. We sleep, wake and eat another excessive meal for lunch.

This year, lunch is at my house (we alternate with my

for a year.

Lunch isn't quite finished because there is always room for dessert.

After enjoying coffee and waiting for yiayia to read my coffee cup and tell my fortune, I bite into another flaouna. Then, I try to convince my mother we should bake falounes twice-yearly, as I have always wanted to try them fresh from the oven when I'm not fasting but she simply laughs and says: "Find someone else to help you - once a year is enough for all of us!"

The Constantinou family's flaounes baking usually takes place on Good Friday, as it's a public holiday. This year, Orthodox Easter is the following weekend, April 18-19, so the flaounes will be frozen until the big day.

Patricia Lathourakis, 21, is an architecture graduate who is passionate about food and wants to pursue a career in restaurant design.

But, as a new batch begins cooking in the oven, thea Betty begins to interrogate thea Rita about the new recipe. "Who did you get it off? Had you tried it before?," she demands.

The flaounes are burning on the outside and not cooking on the inside. "You know what this means? I don't get as many flaounes to take home and that is a problem," she adds.

We're all exhausted and can't wait to get out of that kitchen. But, starving as we are, we stay to send off the men - who have arrived for coffee - to get us some food from the kebab store down the road.

Despite all the arguments throughout the day, this is a ritual we will never stop. Yiayia watches her daughters and grandchildren keeping alive a tradition she has performed since she was a girl in Cyprus and it puts the biggest smile on her face. She is the reason we

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cause there are a few, picky, family members who detest sultanas and will not eat our flaounes if they are added. The pastry's texture is similar to short-crust but we do not follow a recipe. My yiayia (Helen Constantinou) doesn't write down recipes - it's all in her head. But, as she gets older, she has started to forget them.

So her three daughters - my mum and her sisters - work together to decide on measurements. Each has a different opinion and thea Rita has decided she wants to try a new pastry recipe she got from a friend of a friend. After much arguing they decide to make both pastries to keep the peace, even though it takes longer.

As we wait for the pastry to rise, we sit outside in the sun and enjoy morning coffee. It's the only proper break we will have all day.

and the cheese mixture is so plump and moist it looks as if it's trying to break free.

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thea Betty every second year). It is not a small affair - and I'm not talking about guests. We generally have two dining tables laden with food to feed 15 people. Lamb souvlaki, Greek salad, tzatziki, pastitio, spanakopita, oliopita and haloumi bread, baklava, daktyla and galaktoboureko are just some of the dishes we enjoy. In addition, theo (uncle) Nick (Nicholas Lathourakis) can also always be relied on to bring two kilograms of fresh prawns. I love watching my mother sweetly ask my father to peel them all for her.

During lunch we crack brightly coloured red eggs, which my yiayia always insists on giving us at least two dozen of. As children, my cousins and I devised a way to win this game by freezing them so when we hit the adults' eggs, ours would not crack. The last person left with an uncracked egg is the overall winner and has good luck

