



# Roll Me a Grape Leaf

## Dolmades make for mighty vine eating

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

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The history of the grape is as old as the history of humankind. The climbing shrub originated in Mesopotamia as early as 6,000 BC, where hunter-gatherers were probably the first to enjoy its wild fruit. From there it spread eastward to Phoenicia and Egypt, where it was so revered that pictures of it decorated the walls of ancient burial tombs. By 2,000 BC, Phoenician sailors were carrying grapevines across the Mediterranean to Greece, Turkey, Western Europe, and, ultimately, the New World.



PHOTOS (TOP) BY MEGAN HALEY

What makes the grapevine unique is that its leaves are also edible, and nowhere are they prepared more deliciously than as stuffed grape leaves. According to ancient Greek legend, the origin of the dish stems from the time of the siege of Thebes by Alexander the Great. Food became so scarce that



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the Thebans cut what little meat they had into bits and rolled it in grape leaves, thus staving off starvation. Both *The New York Times* and [My Global Cuisine](#) food blog mention the legend that stuffed grape leaves were enjoyed by the gods atop Mount Olympus.



While the original stuffed grape leaves may have served as the main meal for the famished Thebans, today we see the bite-sized treats more often as appetizers, served on mezze platters. Popular throughout the Middle East, the Mediterranean, and the Balkans, the names and recipes of these singular hors d'oeuvres vary by country. Traditional Greek dolmades avgolemono are filled with minced lamb, rice, and herbs such as mint, parsley, or dill. When

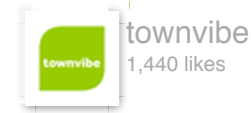
served as a main dish, they are often covered with an egg-lemon sauce (that's the avgolemono). In Turkey, the nibbles are called yaprak, a generic name for meals made of grape leaves. Those stuffed with meat and rice are called yaprak sarma or yaprak dolma. Sephardic Jews (with origins in Spain) call them yaprakes de parra. In a different spin on the iconic dish, Persians usually incorporate more rice than meat in their version, and also include pine nuts and currants. This mix provides both flavor and texture.

A wonderful summertime activity to consider: Head out on a summer a morning, basket or bag in hand, and forage for wild-grape leaves. You don't have to live next to a vineyard to take advantage. Found growing along many Berkshire County roads and fences, they are at their best in late spring and early summer. In fact, leaf aficionados claim that wild leaves are more tender than those from cultivated vineyards, and thus are better for stuffing.

A few tips for finding the best ones: Leaves should be light green and tender, and are best from the top of the plant. Look for leaves the size of your palm so that there will be enough leaf to wrap around your filling. Make sure they are pristine, with no holes or bumps. Finally, the leaves should come from vines that are pesticide-free.

When you're done harvesting, set aside the ones you plan on using and freeze the rest. To do so, remove the stems with a sharp knife or kitchen shears and lay one leaf on top of the other. Pack 50 leaves per plastic freezer bag. Press to remove as much air as you can, close, and freeze flat. Label bags with the date and number of leaves.

Come winter, you can prepare a batch of dolmades or yaprakes for a fond remembrance of summer days. Or, pour a glass of your favorite beverage, close your eyes, and pretend you are basking in the Mediterranean sun.



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If you plan to use them right away, rinse well under cold, running water and again, using a sharp knife, remove the stems. Blanch the leaves by placing them in a large pot and cover with boiling water, letting them sit for 4-5 minutes. Drain them well and pat dry with white paper towels to remove excess liquid.

As for the filling, that is entirely up to you. This texture-loving writer eschews white rice for its tendency to become gluey, and instead opts for a blend of wild and brown rices, currants, pine nuts, onions, and allspice.

In the meantime, if you want the real deal in foods of the Aegean, attend the [Greek Festival](#) on August 19 and 20 at St. George Greek Orthodox Church of the Berkshires, at 73 Bradford Street in Pittsfield. There will be a variety of activities, including Greek dancing, live music, and a marketplace, but it is the food that is the main attraction. A group of men and women of the parish are now working tirelessly in two separate industrial kitchens to prepare hundreds of trays of Greek delicacies—including dolmades.

*Carol Goodman Kaufman writes about food and travel for several media outlets and her blog, [A Moveable Feast](#). She is also at work on a food history/cookbook that looks at how food has traveled through the centuries and been adapted by various cultures around the globe. Kaufman conducts cooking workshops and caters themed feasts.*

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## Where to Find



If foraging for your own grape leaves is overwhelming, and even using bottled leaves seems too much to undertake, you can find stuffed grape leaves year-round on several menus in Berkshire County. All offer vegetarian, rice-stuffed leaves, while Naji's also makes a meat version.

### [Guido's Fresh Marketplace](#)

1020 South St., Pittsfield

Monday-Saturday,

8 a.m.-7 p.m. and Sunday,

9 a.m.-6 p.m.

### [Naji's](#)

405 Stockbridge Rd., Great Barrington

Open daily, 11 a.m.-4 p.m. and 5-9 p.m.

### [Pera Mediterranean Bistro](#)

60 Spring St., Williamstown

Sunday-Thursday 11 a.m.-9 p.m. and Friday-  
Saturday 11 a.m.-10 p.m.

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