

TABOON



SWEET & SAVOURY
DELIGHTS FROM THE
LEBANESE BAKERY

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Baklava Asabea'

Baklava fingers

Baklava is an umbrella term – so many types of sweet treats go under it. Most of them, if not all, feature a form of dough with one type, or a mixture, of nuts as a filling. In this chapter, I have chosen to feature a few types that are less common – ones that you might not find on every Middle Eastern, Levantine, Turkish or Greek restaurant menu.

For a beginner, this is a perfect baklava to start with. Asabea' means "fingers". Typically, in sweet factories the filo (phyllo) pastry sheets used can be huge and rolling them by hand can be as tedious as rolling a large carpet. They fill part of the sheet with the nut mixture, then roll the sheet onto a thin metal rod, which makes rolling it straight much easier and faster. The sides are squeezed in along the rod, which crimps the whole roll into a thousand crinkles. The rod is then removed and the roll placed in the baking tray. This baklava is not usually baked but fried in ghee, then drowned in aromatic syrup for sweetness, but I bake it in the oven for ease.

Preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F/gas 6).

In a food processor, or in a sealable bag with a rolling pin, crush the nuts, sugar and rose water to a very fine rubble.

Take out the filo pastry sheets and lay them on the work surface. Cover them with a damp cloth while you work. Take one sheet of filo and fold the side closest to you in by a third. Spoon a sixth of the nut mix onto the pastry, arranging it along the folded edge. Roll the pastry into a sausage to cover the filling, folding in the sides as you go to hold the filling in place and keep rolling gently until the whole sheet is used. (If using larger sheets, cut them to appropriate sizes before rolling – you don't want a large thickness of pastry.) It can help to insert a thin skewer on the first fold to assist with the rolling, then take it out.

MAKES UP TO 48 PIECES

300 g (10½ oz) pistachios (or a mix of cashews/almonds/walnuts)
4 tablespoons icing (confectioners') sugar
60 ml (¼ cup) rose water
200 g (7 oz) filo (phyllo) pastry sheets (mine come in a 23 cm/9 in square stack and I use about 6 sheets)
100 g (3½ oz) butter or ghee, melted
80–125 ml (⅓–½ cup) regular simple syrup (page 103) (or runny honey), either cold or at room temperature

Gently move the roll to a lipped baking sheet that fits the roll snugly. Squish the roll a bit from the sides inwards to create a crinkled wave in the pastry – this creates a better crunch. Continue to fill the rest of the rolls.

Cut the outer edges of each roll with a sharp knife (I leave them in the tray to bake, they make a great cook's treat), then cut each roll into 8 pieces (or fewer, depending on your preference). Spoon over the melted butter or ghee to cover the rolls.

Bake for 20–25 minutes until slightly browned.

Take out of the oven and generously drizzle with the syrup (or honey) and leave to cool completely. They can be stored in an airtight container for 2–3 weeks.