

Lebanese Grape Leaf Rolls

Demonstrated by Maureen Abood at the *Chicago Tribune's*
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These taste best with fresh grape leaves, picked from wild vines in the spring when the leaves are small and tender. The women in my family scout out secret places all over the city to pick their grape leaves in the early summer. They gather hundreds and freeze them. I've always wondered why they don't just start grape leaf vines in their own yards, but then that would take away the thrill of the challenge! Since most of us don't have the luxury of using fresh grape leaves, jarred grape leaves are a fine substitute. Find them at Middle Eastern markets such as Al-Khyameih Grocery, 4738 N. Kedzie, Chicago, Illinois 60625.

50 grape leaves, medium size

½ cup long grain rice

¾ pound ground lamb or beef (90% lean)

¼ cup (½ stick) butter

½ tablespoon salt

½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper

½ teaspoon ground cinnamon

2 lamb or pork neck bones, 2 bone-in pork chops, or 6 chicken wings

6 large grape leaves

Juice of 2 lemons

If using fresh grape leaves, wash thoroughly and remove the stems. Soak in hot salt water for 15 minutes. Remove from water and squeeze out moisture.

If using jarred grape leaves (which are prepared in brine), rinse the leaves thoroughly in cold water and squeeze out moisture.

Rinse rice with cold water.

For filling:

In a medium-size bowl, combine rice, ground beef or lamb, butter, salt, pepper, and cinnamon. Mix well with your hands.

Prepare an 8 quart dutch oven by lining the bottom with lamb or pork bones, pork chops, or chicken wings. Spread 3 large leaves over the top of the meat.

To stuff:

Place grape leaf facing vein-side up on work surface with wide end toward you. Drop 1 tablespoon of filling across the leaf, shaping like a finger and leaving at least ½ inch of leaf on either side of the meat. Fold each side of leaf over the meat like an envelope and roll tightly away from you.

Arrange stuffed leaves in rows in pan, alternating the direction of each row. Cover with 3 large leaves. Place a plate face down over the top layer to prevent the rolls from floating.

Fill pot with lemon juice and warm water up to the plate. Cover and bring to a boil. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 30-40 minutes, until rice is tender.

Serve warm or cold. Delicious with labne (thickened Lebanese yogurt) or laban kiyar (Lebanese yogurt, cucumber, and mint salad).