

# For Starters

## *Labneh can be an overnight success*

My grandmother Sitto kept three staples in her refrigerator in Lansing, Michigan: black olives, *kimaj* (pita bread), and labneh—a tart, creamy spread made from homemade yogurt. Even if the fridge was filled with the other, more elaborate Lebanese foods she'd prepared, it was the labneh we always reached for first.

Later, I yearned for to have labneh as a staple in my own refrigerator but never found the time to make it properly, from scratch.

“You can always just thicken some Dannon,” Sitto told me one day on the phone. Shamefaced but desperate, I tried it. The flavor was insipid; I threw the batch out and called Sitto.

“Come over,” she said. “Bring a gallon of whole milk, and plan to spend the night.”

When I arrived, a massive pot called a *tunjara* sat gleaming on the stove. Sitto had taken a cup of *laban*—homemade yogurt before it is drained and made into labneh—from a bowl and placed it on the counter to bring it to room temperature. This was going to be the *rawbi*, or starter.

My grandmother rinsed the *tunjara* with cold water. “That’s going to keep the milk from scalding,” she instructed. “Now pour all of the milk in.”

She then set a burner to medium heat, dipped a finger in the pot for a quick stir, and left the kitchen. “Let’s go talk,” she said.

After half an hour, Sitto asked me whether I could smell the milk. We went to the kitchen to see that the milk was undulating and frothing up. “Just wait a minute now,” she whispered, “and watch it closely.” In a moment the milk rose like a bubble bath. Just when I thought it would boil over, she lifted it off the burner and set it on the counter to cool.

When you can put your finger in and keep it there for a count of ten, then it's ready for the rawbi." I plunged my finger in, and after two short counts, I had to pull it out, stinging hot.

After the milk was finally cool enough I noticed that a thin skin had formed on the top of the milk. "That is the best part," Sitto said. We stirred the rawbi and the skin, put the pot in the oven, keeping the oven light on to provide just enough warmth to encourage the rawbi to take, then went to bed.

The next morning we hovered over the tunjara like two women fussing over a newborn. Sitto scooped out a taste. "Thank God it took!" she said.

The laban was drained until it turned into a thick, white spread. Labneh. "Sallem dayatek," Sitto said in Arabic, then repeated the prayer in English, "Bless all the hands that made this."