

BAKERS

'Team Baklava' bakes to help those in need



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Butter and honey sizzled between each pre-cut, flaky pastry square. A sweet, spicy aroma wafted from the oven as Pat Kofakis pulled out another pan of baklava and rested it on the counter.

Mitzi Bruno drizzled on syrup steaming a sweet, citrus bouquet. The final touch is what makes baklava, baklava, Kofakis said.

"I think it's the nectar of the original Greek pantheon going on it," she said.

"Team baklava" — several members of the local Ladies Philoptochos Society chapter — spent last Saturday morning in the basement kitchen of Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church baking baklava and Greek pastries for their holiday

bake sale. There's still a little time left to place an order by Nov. 19. The Philoptochos supports several charities, including Seton House, Interfaith and the Salvation Army in Casper.

The philosophy of the organization can be tasted in its pastries, members said.

"The guiding ethic of Philoptochos baking is generosity," Kofakis said. "It's liberality in the butter. We never say it's low fat. It's our way of showing others the goodness of the Lord."

Philoptochos means "friends of the poor" and is the philanthropic arm of Greek Orthodox Church. Local chapters of the largest women's Christian organization in the U.S. contribute to a variety of local to international causes, local chapter president Cathy Roussalis said. Last year the chapter dispersed about \$6,800 locally. The women aim to be friends of poor in spirit as well, by visiting the people in hospitals, nursing homes and providing local outreach for those incarcerated, Roussalis said.

The women last Saturday loaded layer after layer of paper-thin filo dough with sticky nut crumbles, slathering melted butter atop each tier. At least a pound of butter goes into each pan of baklava, Kofakis said.

The team is as intricate a mix, each member bringing her own culture and expertise to the recipe.

Just the smell of baking baklava and Greek pastries brings back holiday memories for them, some going back to childhood for the ones who grew up with the Mediterranean basin holiday baking tradition.

Roussalis remembers coming in from freezing Canada winters to a house filled with the warm, cinnamon air of her mother's baking in a Greek community where she grew up. Her favorite pastries have always been the treats less sweet than baklava, like Kourembiedes, nutty powdered sugar cookies.

The pastries reminded Maggie Azar of warmth too, and her childhood home in Lebanon. She recalled the snow falling while women carried big trays to the community baking center to create their goods. Baking is one way to build those kinds of memories and strengthen family and cultural roots, she said.

The other thing she most enjoys about the baking is still the camaraderie and company of others, Azar said.

It's easier to bake baklava in groups, said, Kofakis, who learned the art from the Philoptochos after she married into a Greek family. The women are all glad they can buy the filo dough these days instead of making it. Kofakis recalled her grandmother-in-law spreading the dough over any surface she could find, including counters, beds and laundry machines.

But each pan still takes at least an hour, one reason it's traditionally only made during the holidays.

Baklava has been Rev. Stephen Iton's favorite holiday dessert since his childhood in an Orthodox Christian family of Syrian roots in Ohio, and the local Philoptochos' is top notch, he said.

"It has a depth of flavor," Iton said. "There are several dimensions to it between the nuts and filo pastry."

To order

The Ladies Philoptochos Society of the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church

Baklava and Greek pastries sale

To order call Pat Kofakis at 237-4470, or email patkofakis@gmail.com. Baked goods may be picked up 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. Nov. 22 at the church, 130 East C Street.

One dozen baklava: \$2

Variety tin of baklava, kourambiedes, koulouria and paximathia Greek biscotti: \$20 for only \$20. Pastries are freshly baked and packaged for gifting.

or more about the Ladies Philoptochos Society, visit <http://holytrinitycasper.org/organizations>.