

“A bite into the baklava of life”

By Samantha Matta

Baklava--a delectable, savory Middle Eastern dessert. Life--a bittersweet, rocky challenge that everyone endures (enjoys?).

As I sunk my teeth into the sweet, crunchy, and sticky piece of baklava, I thought about what my friends were doing at that moment. We had made plans to go see the new movie *Philomena* then go to dinner at my favorite restaurant, Paradise Bakery. I had begged my mother to let me join them, but fate (also known as my mother) had other plans for me. There I was, sitting at the annual Lebanese-American Festival for the eighth year in a row, scarfing down that piece of baklava during my break between my photography gig and my folk dancing group's big Saturday evening performance.

As I ate, my mind switched gears from my friends to my own life. Growing up in America, the first child in our family history to do so, was sweet yet hard, rocky yet beautiful, and challenging yet smooth—strangely similar to the piece of baklava I was eating.

Baklava has three layers—one layer of chopped nuts sandwiched between two sweet layers of filo dough and honey. But there is one problem—I hate nuts. I simply detest the taste, the texture, and the appearance of them. After tasting the first crispy, sugary, delicious layer, it is a struggle to bite through the layer of chopped nuts to get to the second, honey-soaked layer of filo dough, just as it is a struggle to balance the two beautiful worlds that are mine.

Not being able to spend time with my friends that weekend was a repetition of the countless number of occasions where my family's cultural events or different values have taken precedence over my adolescent social life and even my American life in general. My parents mentality and the mindset they implanted in me since birth was always work hard now, then play when you have a stable career, just like all your cousins in Lebanon are doing. As a committed and determined student, this outlook brought me far, but I also realize that it is both layers of the sweet filo dough with the nuts that make the baklava the delicious and balanced delicacy that it is.

I have learned that in order to truly enjoy my baklava, I have to eat the nuts in the middle. But when they are combined with the two scrumptious layers of filo dough, the nuts are not all that bad—in fact, they make the overall taste even better. The burden of high family expectations that come with growing up as an Arab-American in America seem minuscule compared to the benefits of growing up in a bicultural Lebanese and American home. Truly, the baklava would not taste as wonderful with either of the layers missing. The adversity and beauty of the two separate cultures combined to make something unique and beautiful, something that has shaped me into the person I am today. Life as an Arab-American is not a piece of cake—I guess it's more like a bite of baklava.