by Steve Zaillian

My Mother Vina circa 1957

Instead of turkey, mashed potatoes, etc., stuffed grape leaves (along with shish-kabob and pilaf) is the traditional centerpiece of our Christmas dinner.

Disclaimer: Every script I've ever written is overly descriptive and too long, so no doubt this recipe will be, too. Apologies in advance.

Note: Orlando Grape Leaves are perfectly fine to use, and available in most grocery stores. Other, more exotic brands can be found in Armenian or Greek groceries. But any, really, will do.

Ingredients:

1 jar	Grape Leaves (8 oz. Drained Wt.)
1 lb.	Hamburger (semi-lean)
1 cup	Rice
4	Cans Tomato sauce (the small cans)
1	Lemon
2 tsp.	Allspice
1 tsp.	Dried parsley
1 tsp.	Salt
1 tsp.	Pepper

Mix (with your hands) in a large bowl (and the mixing with your hands part is important because it mixes well that way and it connects you to some ancient Armenian Old Country art of cooking):

The raw hamburger
The uncooked rice
½ of one can of tomato sauce opened with a church key
The juice from the quartered lemon
The Allspice
The dried parsley
And the salt and pepper

Dump the liquid from the jar of grape leaves in the sink (you don't need it).

Vina with my sister Marcia and me

Carefully extract the packed clumps of grape leaves from the jar (this requires some dexterity not to rip them), and squeeze gently to get a bit more of the liquid off them.

Set out, like an assembly line:

1. The bowl with the meat-rice-etc mixture.

2. A plate with the clumps of grape leaves on it.

3. Another plate you will construct the meat-rice mixture-filled grape leaves on.

4. And another plate to set the constructed grape leaves on.

Okay, now, to ‘build’ the grape leaves (this will take a little practice to do well):

Carefully separate one grape leaf from the rest and lay it before you vein-side up on the ‘constructing’ plate.

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