

Culinary Delights for a Rollercoaster-like Ph.D.

In 2018, I began an unforgettable rollercoaster ride that would consume the next five years of my life: I joined a Ph.D. program at UD. I kissed my parents goodbye and flew from Athens, my hometown, to Newark, my soon-to-be new home. I remember sitting in the airplane, dreaming of all the possibilities and opportunities that UD will offer to me. I was so excited and anxious to start my Ph.D. in mechanical engineering as I was keen to learn, to meet people, to attend conferences, and to savor every moment of my graduate career.

My first summer was quite a start to the ride, a truly “amusement-park-like” experience. I joined the ITA program and interacted with other students in the pedagogy classes, where we learned how to be lecturers in an American class. I also attended social events, where I met my new friends over pizza, karaoke nights, and ice cream afternoons at the UDairy Creamery. Each day, I discovered something new, whether it was a building on campus, how to access the university’s resources, or learning how everything worked from the library to the gym.

However, like all good rollercoasters, my ride was about to be bumpy. The semester started, and I was taking classes, TAing, and doing research. Week after week, it was getting so busy, I could barely get a good night’s sleep. My greatest challenge was that I couldn’t keep up with everything. I was spending long hours in the lab and library studying, reading research papers, and preparing for my exams. My only consolation was that I knew where I wanted to be and I was prepared to face the academic challenges. However, like many other international students, I experienced the unique challenge of culture shock. I felt lonely and started missing my loved ones back home. The American way of life, the quick everyday pace and rigorous routine were taking a toll on me. In addition, struggling with homesickness

was tough, especially when there is a big difference in time zones, making it hard to find quality time for family and friends.

To battle my stress, pressures, and loneliness I tried to find a balance between work and life, and what really worked was cooking Greek cuisine. I inspected every corner of the supermarket to find the ingredients, or the closest ones to what I needed, to recreate my mother's Greek dishes. The flavor, the taste, and the aroma reminded me of my Greek home. It was like I never left. I started with φακές, a lentil soup with carrots and apple-cider vinegar, and φασολάδα, a white-beans soup with carrots and parsley. Afterward I challenged myself with κόκορας λεμονάτος, a roasted chicken with lemon and potatoes in the oven, and γεμιστά, stuffed veggies with rice. Cooking helped me make time to meditate and reflect while I was mixing ingredients over the kitchen counter. It was comforting, and it helped me cope through the difficult times of my Ph.D. program. Cooking not only helped with reconnecting to myself; it also helped me connect with colleagues and friends. I arranged evening dinners, which I called Greek Dinner Parties, and they were my favorite little breaks from work. Although I'd worry whether my cooking was good, those evenings are my most cherished memories. I'd start with a παστίτσιο (pastitsio, famously known as the Greek lasagna) in the center of the table, a χωριάτικη σαλάτα (horiatiki salad) with cucumbers, tomatoes, kalamata olives, and feta on the right, a bowl of τζατζίκι (tzatziki) on the left, and grilled bread with olive oil and oregano. All around the table were my friends, each from a different country, eager to connect through food. We shared stories from back home, laughed, and had wonderful evenings together.

Unfortunately, the pandemic came and put a stop to these gatherings. Remember our rollercoaster and its steep slopes? Well, this was a really steep slope. It was hard, as

everything changed but the work. To distract myself from what was going on, I decided to learn how to bake. I started with a simple vanilla cake, and it kept falling apart. After a few tries, I got the hang of things and started baking every month. Chocolate, lemon, and cinnamon cakes are just some of the few cakes I have made. My favorite being the one I baked for Thanksgiving last year. It was for a dinner among eight friends, who came together and cooked an international dinner of Spanish, Italian, Mexican, and Greek food. Over fine wine and music, we enjoyed the first flurry of snow and ended the evening with my sweet orange cake. No matter the challenges, these dinners and wonderful friendships fueled my motivation and academic performance.

Of course, every good rollercoaster has some suspense before its thunderous finale. As of writing this essay, I'm at the end of my Ph.D. journey. I thought it was the end of sharing delicious dishes and cakes with friends. Luckily, this summer, I met a wonderful friend from Lebanon and we hit it off by talking about every delicacy from our countries. I learned about the rich textures of fattah, the delicious fish dish of sayadieh, and the sweet dessert of namoura. But we didn't stop there; we started sharing the dishes we would make. I baked her my sweet orange cake, and she returned the favor with cranberry and orange oatmeal cookies; as she put it: "cranberry orange is perfect for fall."

At UD, I have had a wonderful time learning, attending conferences, and being part of the international community. But, what makes it all worth it are the friendships, the laughter, and sharing stories from back home around the dinner table while sharing delicious food and wine. As our ride on this rollercoaster comes to an end, let's meet on Main Street and have dinner together, because as we say back in Greece: "Where is the fun in eating and drinking without a friend in your company?"