



# Culinary Corner

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## FEATURE



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

For spanakopita, thin strips of phyllo dough brushed with butter are wrapped around a mix of spinach and feta cheese, then folded up and over the filling, just as one would fold a flag.

## Phyllo: demystifying a finicky dough

Thin-layered pastry dough makes sweet, savory seasonal specialties

by Heidi Billotto  
[heidi@thecharlotteweekly.com](mailto:heidi@thecharlotteweekly.com)

At the request of several regular readers, this week's food feature focuses on techniques for working with phyllo (pronounced *fee-low*) dough. Also spelled "filo," this paper-thin dough is used primarily in Mediterranean dishes. Many who would like to try making homemade baklava and spanakopita have an innate fear of working with phyllo. Intricate wording in traditional cookbooks makes the process more complicated than it needs to be. Breaking the process down and remembering that you are smarter than the dough will help interested cooks to see just how user-friendly this pastry dough can be.

### Patience is key

Phyllo dough comes frozen and is available in most supermarkets. Unfortunately, there is no quick way to defrost phyllo. It won't thaw quickly under hot running water like a package of frozen vegetables, and the microwave will cook it faster than you can spell spanakopita. In a pinch, I once placed the package on the heating vents on the dashboard of my car as I drove home from the grocery store – it got me nowhere fast.

The best way to defrost frozen phyllo is to place it in the refrigerator the night before using it. If preplanning isn't your strength, put the frozen box on the kitchen counter away from any direct heat. Defrosting at room temperature will still take several hours, but if pulled from the freezer in the morning, the phyllo will be ready for use in

the afternoon.

Enclosed in the long narrow box will be one or two rolls of dough, depending on the brand, and each roll will be enclosed in a sealed plastic bag. Snip off the end of the bag and slide the dough out. Save the bag for any unused dough, which is easily refrozen for use another time. Unfold the dough to reveal a stack of thin pastry sheets. Place the stack flat on a clean, dry work surface. If the dough won't unroll or unfold easily, it is not completely defrosted. Don't force it. Carefully roll it back as it was, slide it into the plastic bag and allow it to defrost a bit longer.

### Beating the elements

Besides impatience, the two factors that make phyllo difficult to work with are air and moisture. Exposure to the air for too long dries the dough. If the dough gets damp or wet, the stack of thin sheets will stick together. To avoid prolonged exposure to air, many cookbooks suggest covering the stack of phyllo first with a sheet of waxed paper and then with a damp cloth, but I think this is more trouble than it is worth. Leave the sheets of phyllo uncovered but work diligently through the recipe. In the time it will take to create one of the following recipes, the fragile sheets of dough will not dry out enough to impede the process.

Melted butter, generously brushed across the dough, yields richly flavored, crispy results. Because speed is important, use a pastry brush two or three inches wide with natural bristles to slather the butter. The wide brush will help cover the entire sheet of dough with butter in just three or four strokes.

Watching the fat and calorie intake? Don't dismay; extra virgin olive oils, particularly flavor-infused ones like lemon oil, hazelnut oil or orange oil, work equally well to coat and flavor the phyllo dough. Brush them on just like the butter or transfer the oil to a spray bottle and mist the oil over the dough, applying enough to saturate each layer. The final flavor is not exactly the same as butter, but it's a close second.

### Tricks of the trade

Use parchment paper to cover the work surface to ease the folding and cutting of the buttered phyllo. A real kitchen basic, parchment comes in a roll like foil or waxed paper and is available in most grocery stores and specialty kitchen shops.

Tear off a sheet of parchment slightly larger than the size of the phyllo and use it to cover the work surface. Lay the phyllo on the parchment and brush with butter. There is no need to brush pastries with extra butter after they are folded or to butter the baking sheet. Individual phyllo pastries are best baked on a baking sheet with sides to ensure that butter or oil does not drip over the sides.

Almost any phyllo dough pastry or casserole can be frozen after preparation but before baking. And many fillings may be used interchangeably like the two recipes featured here. The spanakopita filling may be layered in a casserole as described in the choclava recipe; and the filling for choclava, my adaptation of the traditional baklava recipe, may be piled on thin strips of phyllo and folded, as in the spanakopita recipe. Once baked, the sweet chocolate- and nut-filled pastries may be gently dipped in the warm syrup in the choclava recipe and allowed to dry on a cake rack before serving.



Folded phyllo are baked and served warm or at room temperature. The melted butter gives the crispy pastries a golden finish.

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## SPANAKOPITA

2 boxes frozen chopped spinach, defrosted  
1/2 lb. feta cheese, crumbled  
1 egg  
2 Tbsp. dill weed  
14-16 sheets of phyllo dough, defrosted  
according to package directions  
1/2 lb. butter, melted

Squeeze cooled, defrosted spinach to remove as much moisture as possible. Place in a bowl with feta, egg and dill weed. Blend well to combine. Reserve. Lay two sheets of phyllo on the work surface. Brush generously with melted butter. Use a sharp paring knife to cut the sheets of phyllo into six long, narrow rectangles. Place a tablespoon of the spinach filling at the end of each rectangle. Fold the phyllo up and over the filling just as if it were a flag. Place the folded triangles on a baking sheet. Bake in a preheated, 375-degree oven for 20-25 minutes or until golden brown.

## CHOCLAVA

*For the filling:*

3 cups finely ground walnuts  
1/2 cup sugar  
3 Tbsp. cinnamon  
Dash of ground nutmeg  
2 cups semisweet chocolate chips  
1 lb. phyllo dough, defrosted  
1 lb. butter, melted  
Whole cloves

*For the syrup:*

3 cups sugar  
1-1/2 cups water  
1 cup honey  
Juice of one lemon

Combine walnuts, sugar, cinnamon, nutmeg and chocolate for the filling. If necessary, trim the phyllo to fit in a 13-by-9-inch pan. Place two sheets of phyllo dough in the bottom of the pan. Brush generously with melted butter. Repeat the process with four more sheets of dough, buttering between every two sheets. Layer on a sprinkling of the chocolate chip filling, then top with two sheets of dough and butter. Continue layering the filling alternately with two sheets of buttered phyllo until the pan is almost full. Prepare the top layer of the choclava with six sheets of phyllo, buttering generously between every two sheets of dough.

Allow the buttered phyllo to firm up a bit, then cut the unbaked dough in the pan with a sharp knife to form diamond-shaped pieces. Place a whole clove into the center of each piece. Bake in a preheated, 300-degree oven for about 90 minutes. While the choclava is baking, make the syrup by combining sugar, water, honey and lemon juice in a saucepan. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer 10-15 minutes. Pour the warm syrup over the warm choclava. Allow to stand at least 45 minutes before serving. □