

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

THE PEOPLE AND PLACES OF NORTHWEST WASHINGTON

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Festival is labor of love, heritage for Greek women

By **LINDA LOMBARDI**
Current Correspondent

The line snaked around the church courtyard and out to the parking lot on Saturday evening as patrons waited to order food at the Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church festival. Many return every year, but few probably have any idea what it takes to mount the three-day festival that has been a fixture at the 16th Street church for 49 years.

On a morning before the festival, two women punching at a big ball of dough in the church basement are wearing blue aprons bearing the motto "It's Chic to be Greek." This morning, though, it is hard work to be Greek, at least if you're one of the dozen or so women gathered to make pastry.

The women of the women's auxiliary have been gathering since June to prepare one menu item per week, and today's assignment is diples, a fried pastry coated in honey. The morning began with 15 dozen eggs mixed with enough flour to make a dough of the proper texture, and this large bowl is only one of several. The others are out in the church hall, where dough is being cut into balls and patted down, then taken to a pasta machine to be rolled thin.

Two of the machines are electric, but Dina Papoulias says she



likes to use the one you crank by hand, and after 38 years of making diples, she's had plenty of time to decide her preference. After four passes through the machine, the strip of dough is almost paper-thin and at least 4 feet long.

Suzi Raptis takes it, drapes it over two hands held in the air, and spreads it out on a well-floured table, where another woman uses the width of her hand



Bill Petros/The Current

Dina Papoulias, top, was one of about a dozen women who baked for hours in preparation for last weekend's Sts. Constantine and Helen Greek Orthodox Church festival. The group makes everything from scratch: "We've used the same recipes for over 40 years — we've cultivated them to where we think they're perfect," said festival coordinator Andrew Recachinas.



to measure where to cut it into squares. Raptis is helping out for the first time. When her family

made diples at home, "my mother would say 'Honey, look,' but I wouldn't pay attention," so now she's learning how.

The square sheets of dough, about the size of a paperback

book, are next laid out on trays and rolled back to the small kitchen, where three women are elbow-to-elbow at the stove. Dropped into hot oil, the pastry quickly becomes covered with little bubbles, and

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Spanish classes for toddlers? Si!

By **STEPHANIE KANOWITZ**
Current Correspondent

You could teach a child that the Spanish word for "red" is "rojo" by using flashcards and repetition. Or an actor dressed as a 16th-century Spanish artist could point out the red in one of his most famous works while telling the artist's life story.

Pilar O'Leary and Alexandra Migoya prefer the second approach — experiential learning. That's why they started Isabella & Ferdinand, a Spanish language immersion program for children ages 1 through 9.

Wait. Spanish lessons for a 12-month-old?

Research shows that it's much easier for children to become fluent in a language when they begin learning it early, explained O'Leary, a Palisades resident who is fluent in English, French, Italian and Spanish.

"It comes much more viscerally to them,"



Courtesy of Pilar O'Leary

Alexandra Migoya, left, and Pilar O'Leary are launching a Spanish language school in Northwest offering experiential learning.

she said. "They don't have to think about it. They're not translating."

See **Isabella**/Page 22

HOME & GARDEN

Aid and save with local startup group

By **CHRIS BARYLICK**
Current Correspondent

Your folks always used to remind you when you left a room. Now you can get discounts and deals for doing so.

Local startup firm Earth Aid introduced a first-of-its-kind energy-savings reward program at an event on the Georgetown waterfront this month. The company runs a Web site where residents can save toward special offers at local businesses by going greener in their daily lives.

The premise is relatively simple: Create an account at earthaid.net, enter your current utility information, and the site begins to track your energy use while creating a base-

line for comparison based on your past use (such as gas, water and electric bills). Subscribers then receive points that can then be used to get discounts or deals at approximately 30 local businesses including Treet online bakery, Love Cafe coffee shop and Balance yoga



Chris Baryllick/The Current

Council members pose with Earth Aid CEO Ben Bixby and Agraria owner Dan Simons.

studio.

Representatives from participating businesses as well as D.C. Council Chairman See **Earth Aid**/Page 22

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FESTIVAL

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before it gets stiff, the cook, using a long two-tined fork in each hand, skillfully folds over the two sides toward the middle. Now the traditional shape, the pastry is fried a moment longer to become golden, then removed to an enormous colander to drain.

The process is complicated and the quantities impressive, but it all goes smoothly, a result of their years of experience putting on the largest and oldest Greek festival in the D.C. area. The long tables covered with diples waiting to be coated in honey, which is warming in large electric cookers, are just a hint of the bounty.

To give an idea of the quantities, Nina Alexiou, who has worked for the festival for more than 30 years, says that on the Saturday prior to the festival, she made 150 pounds of sugar into syrup for all the pastries, like baklava, waiting to be baked and finished.

Festival coordinator Andrew Recachinas gives part of the shopping list just for sweets: "We use 120 pounds of butter, 500 pounds of honey, 300 pounds of walnuts."

And what looks like a large metal shed out behind the church

is actually a walk-in deep freezer, filled with dishes waiting to be defrosted and cooked to feed a crowd that some years is as many as 5,000 over three days. A peek inside reveals 5-foot-tall carts

and grilled on the days of the festival and some dishes like chicken livers and sausage prepared at the last minute. And there's no delegating to professional cooks or vendors. "Everything is made here.

We don't bring anything in," said Recachinas. "We've used the same recipes for over 40 years — we've cultivated them to where we think they're perfect."

The Greek name of the women's group, Philoptochos, means "friends of the poor," and much of the proceeds from the festival go to programs for the needy, as well as into a building fund for the church. They also support the church's youth activities, including a Greek dance troupe that visits nursing homes. The troupe performed at the festival, as did a band that provides Greek music for participatory dancing. Even if you haven't done it before, said Recachinas, "it doesn't take much to get people Greek dancing."

The church also holds a sale of baked goods the week before Greek Orthodox Christmas and Easter each year; check the parish calendar at schgoc.org for dates. Its Greek Taverna night fundraiser will take place on Oct. 3. Tickets are on sale on the Web site.



Bill Petros/The Current

Dina Papoulias, top, rolls out dough until it's paper-thin. Then another cook cuts it into squares before frying the pastries, called diples.

filled with trays of moussaka (an eggplant casserole) and pastitsio (something like a Greek lasagna).

Despite all the advance preparation, church members don't relax and enjoy themselves when the crowds arrive. Meats are roasted

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