

MOUSSAKA

The nice thing about moussaka from the cook's point of view is that you have a certain liberty of choice. The meat can be fresh from the butcher or left over from a joint (the rare meat close to the bone is the best part to use). It can be made with beef or lamb, or veal, together with brains, which must always be pre-cooked whether or not the veal is. Although aubergines are the best vegetable to use, potatoes and courgettes are also popular.

Bear in mind that moussaka can be ruined by wateriness or fattiness. The first comes from too timid a cooking of the meat sauce, the second from using butcher's mince or trying the vegetables too richly; browning them lightly on one side only reduces the oiliness without ruining the mellow flavour of the dish.

The usual Greek topping for moussaka is a cheese sauce enriched with eggs or egg yolks. You can cut down labour and heaviness by using a plain custard mixture of yoghurt, milk, eggs and cheese instead.

Serves 6-8

1.5kg (3lb) aubergines, peeled or unpeeled and sliced

salt

olive oil

FOR THE MEAT SAUCE

250g (8oz) chopped onion

3 good tablespoons butter

500g (1lb) lean lamb, beef or veal, minced or chopped, or 400g (good 12oz) cooked lamb, beef or veal, minced,

or 400g (good 12oz) cooked veal, plus 125g (4oz) cooked brains

500g (1lb) tomatoes, peeled and chopped,

or 397g (1.4oz) can tomatoes

1 teaspoon rigani or dried oregano

2 cloves of garlic, crushed

black pepper, cayenne

150ml (½pt) red wine

brown sugar

wine vinegar

salt

60-90g (2-3oz) feta or kefalotiri cheese, grated, or a mixture of grated Cheddar and Parmesan cheeses

2 heaped tablespoons breadcrumbs

FOR THE CHEESE SAUCE

600ml (½pt) thick béchamel sauce, or half milk and half yoghurt

3-6 large eggs (see method below)

60-90g (2-3oz) feta or kefalotiri cheese, grated

extra grated cheese, for the topping

Spread out the sliced aubergines in a colander and sprinkle the layers with a little salt. Put a plate on top, and leave them for at least 1 hour to exude their bitter liquid. Rinse slices, then dry them in a cloth. Fry them in oil on one side only till golden and set aside.

Meanwhile, make the meat sauce.

Cook the onion gently in the butter in a large pan. When it is soft and golden, raise the heat and put in the meat, spreading it out in a layer. Allow it to brown underneath, then turn it over to brown the other side. Pour off any surplus fat. Tip in the tomatoes with their juice, add the herb, garlic and both peppers to taste. Simmer, uncovered, for 15 minutes to make a moist, rich stew. If it seems watery, raise the heat and boil off the liquid; if it seems dry, add a little water or stock.

When the meat is cooked, add the wine and boil fiercely for a few moments. Correct the seasoning with sugar, vinegar and salt. If the basic ingredients were full of flavour, you will need hardly any sugar and vinegar—such seasonings are a northern compensation. Check again for oiliness, blotting it away with kitchen paper, or pouring it off. Stir in the cheese and breadcrumbs and set aside.

For the cheese sauce, warm the béchamel or bring the milk to the boil. Beat 3 eggs into the sauce, off the heat. Or pour the boiling milk on to 6 eggs, beaten in a basin with the yoghurt. Stir in the cheese. Set the oven at moderate, 180C (350F), gas 4.

Line base and sides of a wide, fairly shallow baking dish with a layer of aubergine slices, cooked side-down, then put in a layer of meat sauce. Repeat until the two mixtures are finished (it does not much matter whether you finish with aubergine or meat). Pour the cheese sauce or custard over the top. Bake in the heated oven for about 1 hour, but check it after 40 minutes; the moussaka is ready when the top is nicely browned and set.

SPINACH PIE

(Spanakopitta)

Some of the Greek spinach pies have a béchamel or rice addition to give body to the vegetable, cheese and egg filling. I find this too heavy, particularly if the pie is eaten cold, and recommend the following version. Frozen leaf spinach can be used instead of fresh.

Serves 8

12 sheets (½ packet) filo pastry

250ml (8floz) olive oil

FOR THE FILLING

1.5kg (3lb) fresh spinach or two 500g (1lb) packets frozen leaf spinach, thawed

75g (2½oz) butter

6 large spring onions, chopped, or 60g (2oz) chopped onion

200g (7oz) grated feta cheese or grated Cheddar and Parmesan cheeses, mixed

4 large eggs

2 teaspoons dried dillweed

rounded tablespoon chopped parsley

salt and pepper

Shallow baking pan at least

20x30x3cm (8x12x1½in)



SHEPHERD AND HIS FLOCK IN THE PELEPONNISE

Lamb is eaten for Easter, cooked whole on a spit. Sheep's milk is used to make hard cheeses, as well as a soft, crumbly cheese, like feta

Make the filling first. Wash and trim the stalks from the spinach and cut the leaves into thin strips. Sprinkle with 1 tablespoon salt. Leave for 1 hour in a bowl, then rub and squeeze out the juice.

Meanwhile, heat the butter and cook in it the chopped onion until soft but not browned. Add it with the cheese, eggs and herbs to the spinach. Mix well, taste and correct the seasoning.

Set oven at moderate, 180C (350F), gas 4. Well oil or butter the baking pan.

Brush a sheet of pastry with oil and put it into the tin, which it will overlap. Brush 5 more sheets and put them on top. Put in the filling, sprinkling it with 2 tablespoons of the olive oil. Bring the overlapping pastry up over the filling. Cut the last 6 sheets to the size of the tin, brush them with oil and lay them on top. Score the top into squares and sprinkle with water to prevent it curling. Bake in the heated oven for about 45 minutes or until the top is golden brown. Serve hot or cold.

THREE-CORNERED SPINACH PIES

(Trigona spanakopittes)

Cut filo pastry into strips longways, each sheet into three or four. Brush with oil or melted butter and put one strip on another, so that for each pie you have a double strip. Put a teaspoon of filling more or less, depending on the width of the strip, at one end. Take one corner and fold it over the filling end, down to meet the long edge. Now take the corner of this filled triangular end, fold it over to meet the long edge of the strip, so that you have a straight narrow end again. Repeat this folding process until all the strip is used up to leave a plump triangular package. Repeat with more double strips of filo to use up the filling. Makes 15-18 pies.

The pies can be deep-fried, preferably in olive oil, or they can be put on to buttered trays for baking. Brush them with melted butter and bake until golden brown as above.

Many other fillings can be used instead of spinach. Try the chicken one, above, or a thick fish stock-based velouté sauce with chopped seafood and a couple of eggs beaten into it, with chopped onion or grated cheese and nutmeg added to bring out the flavour.

THREE-CORNERED CHEESE PIES

(Trigona tiropittes)

Crumble or grate 500g (1lb) feta cheese, and add 125g (4oz) kefalotiri cheese (or mizithra cheese for a mild creaminess). Mix with 3 beaten eggs. If you wish to make a large pie like the spinach pie, above, add 150ml (½pt) thick nutmeg-flavoured béchamel sauce. Then fill, fold and deep-fry or bake as for three-cornered spinach pies. Makes 15-18.