

BAKED EGGPLANT AND POTATOES WITH MEAT SAUCE AND BÉCHAMEL

Moussaka

GREEK FESTIVAL RECIPE

Moussaka is one of the most popular dishes served at the annual Greek Festival in Anchorage and always goes quickly. Over the years, the recipe has evolved and changed, depending on who has the primary responsibility for making it. Since the spices are always added to taste and without measuring, and since some cooks prefer more cinnamon or oregano or allspice than others, the seasoning preferences of the cook inevitably shape the final flavors of the dish. The béchamel is another source of debate: some prefer it thick and others, like Spiro Bellas, the cook who has made the Festival Moussaka in recent years, prefer a lighter béchamel. Spiro also adds Panko (packaged Japanese bread crumbs) to the meat sauce to absorb the juices and add deeper flavor to this dish. The hottest debate is about the role of potatoes. Spiro insists the potatoes should simply be boiled to reduce the amount of oil in the dish and because boiled potatoes better absorb the sauce's flavors. Other local cooks are adamant the potatoes must be deep fried, and say boiled potatoes are too bland for Moussaka. In this recipe, which is mostly Spiro's, I have compromised by quickly baking the potatoes, which intensifies their flavor but still leaves their surface soft enough to absorb Moussaka's rich juices.



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Meat Sauce:

2 pounds ground beef or lamb
3 1/2–4 cups diced yellow onion,
1/4" dice
2 Tbsp. minced fresh garlic
1 5-ounce can tomato paste
1 1/2 cups red wine
1 tsp. salt
1 Tbsp. freshly ground black pepper
1 tsp. allspice
2 cinnamon sticks
1/4 cup minced fresh Italian parsley
1/2 cup Panko or dried bread crumbs

Vegetables:

2–3 large eggplants (3 pounds)
Olive oil
Salt
Freshly ground black pepper
2 large baking potatoes

Béchamel:

1/2 cup butter
1/2 cup all-purpose flour
5 cups whole milk
4 egg yolks
1/2 tsp. nutmeg
Salt
1 tsp. freshly ground white pepper
1 cup freshly grated kefalotyri or
parmesan cheese

Brown the meat, lightly seasoned with salt and freshly ground black pepper, in a large pot. Add the onions and continue browning. When the onions have softened and begun to turn golden, add the garlic and cook for another minute. Stir in the tomato paste, wine, salt, pepper, cinnamon sticks, and allspice, and cook for one hour, until the sauce is thick and rich. Stir in the minced parsley and Panko or bread crumbs. Taste and correct the seasoning as needed.

While the sauce is cooking, preheat the oven to 450°F. Slice the eggplant lengthwise 1/2" thick. Brush both sides of each eggplant slice with olive oil, and season lightly with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Bake eggplant slices for 15 to 20 minutes, turning them over after 10 minutes, or until the slices are golden brown.

Peel and slice the potatoes lengthwise 3/8" thick. Brush both sides of each potato slice with olive oil, and season lightly with salt and freshly ground black pepper. Bake potato slices for 10 to 12 minutes in a preheated 450°F oven until they are just tender. The potatoes should not be cooked all the way through.

Warm the milk over low heat or in the microwave. Melt the butter in a large saucepan, mix in the flour and cook for two minutes, stirring constantly. Slowly stir in the warm milk and cook, stirring, until the sauce is thick and smooth. Add the nutmeg, salt and white pepper to taste. Quickly whisk one cup of hot milk sauce into the egg yolks, and stir this mixture back into the sauce. Cook over very low heat for two minutes, stirring constantly, and being careful not to let the sauce get hotter than a low simmer. Remove the sauce from the heat and whisk in 1/2 cup grated cheese. Taste and correct the seasoning as needed.

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

To assemble the Moussaka, lightly brush the sides and bottom of a 9" x 13" pan with olive oil. Place a layer of potatoes on the bottom of the pan. Spread half the meat sauce evenly over the potatoes, and sprinkle 1/4 cup grated cheese over the meat sauce. Layer half the eggplant over the cheese. Cover with the remaining meat sauce, and sprinkle with 1/4 cup more cheese. Cover with the remaining eggplant. Pour as much béchamel as possible over the eggplant. Bake for 50 to 60 minutes, or until the béchamel is puffed and golden brown. Let cool for 15 minutes, cut into large squares, and serve.

Serves 8 to 12