

BAKED EGGPLANT AND POTATOES WITH MEAT SAUCE AND BÉCHAMEL

Moussaka

GREEK FESTIVAL RECIPE

Serves 8 to 12

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 spices are always added to taste and without measuring, and since some cooks prefer more cinnamon or oregano or allspice than others, seasoning preferences of the cook inevitably shape Moussaka's final flavor. Béchamel topping is another source of debate: some prefer it thick and others, like Spiro Bellas, the cook who made Festival Moussaka for many years, prefer a lighter béchamel. Spiro also adds Panko (packaged Japanese bread crumbs) to the meat sauce to absorb the juices, thus adding deeper flavor. The hottest debate is about the role of potatoes. Spiro insists potatoes should be boiled to reduce the amount of oil and because boiled potatoes better absorb the sauce's flavors. Other local cooks are adamant potatoes must be deep fried, and say boiled potatoes are too bland for Moussaka. In this recipe, which is mostly Spiro's, I've compromised by quickly baking potatoes, which intensifies their flavor but still leaves their surface soft enough to absorb Moussaka's rich juices.



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. ground nutmeg
Salt
1 tsp. freshly ground white pepper
1 cup freshly grated kefalotyri or
parmesan cheese

Brown meat, lightly seasoned with salt and freshly ground black pepper, in a large pot. Add onions and continue browning. When onions have softened and begun to turn golden, add garlic and cook for 1 minute. Stir in tomato paste, wine, salt, pepper, cinnamon sticks, and allspice, and cook for one hour, until sauce is thick and rich. Stir in minced parsley and Panko or bread crumbs. Taste and add salt, pepper, or cinnamon, as needed.

While sauce is cooking, preheat oven to 450°F. Slice 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 slices are golden brown.

Peel and slice 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're just tender. Potatoes should not be cooked all the way through.

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

Preheat oven to 350°F.

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