

MOUSSAKA

Serves 8 to 12.

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from a recipe
in a restaurant trade journal.

Moussaka is a Greek eggplant dish made with a meat sauce, potatoes, and a béchamel sauce that can contain yogurt. I love eggplant and saw this as a good opportunity. The original recipe had several problems, but after those were solved the final moussaka was delicious. (I think of this recipe as a Greek version of shepherd's pie.) It's elaborate and complicated, but worth the effort for a special occasion.



Ingredients:

For the Meat Sauce:

Optional: ½ cup (60g) dried currants
1 cup red wine
Olive oil for frying (not extra virgin)
½ pound (227g) lean ground beef
½ pound (227g) lean ground lamb
1 large (10 to 12 ounces/285 to 340g) onion; finely diced
2 to 4 (depending on size) cloves garlic; finely minced
1 28-ounce (794g) can Roma tomatoes
1 tablespoon ras el hanout Moroccan spice blend (see below)

For the Ras el Hanout (you can mix your own):

2 teaspoons ground ginger
2 teaspoons ground coriander
1½ teaspoons ground cinnamon
1½ teaspoons freshly ground black pepper
1½ teaspoons ground turmeric
1½ teaspoons ground nutmeg
1 teaspoon ground allspice
½ teaspoon ground cloves
Combine all ingredients and store in an airtight container.

For the Moussaka:

2 medium eggplants, about 1½ pounds/680g total weight
4 to 5 Russet potatoes, about 4 pounds (1.8kg) total weight
Olive oil for frying
2 to 3 tablespoons grated Parmesan or Romano cheese

For the Béchamel:

3 tablespoons butter
3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
½ teaspoon white pepper
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
1½ cups (355ml) milk
1½ cups (355ml) heavy cream
Salt to taste
½ cup (128g) Greek-style yogurt

Directions:

For the Meat Sauce:

If using currants, place them in a bowl and add the wine. Allow to soak half an hour or until needed.

Heat 2 tablespoons cooking olive oil in a large skillet and sauté the ground meats over medium heat until lightly browned and any juices that escape the meat are evaporated. Transfer to a bowl and set aside.

Add 2 tablespoons oil to the skillet and sauté the chopped onion until tender and translucent, 8 to 10 minutes. Add the garlic and cook an additional minute. Drain the currants, adding the wine to the skillet and setting the currants aside (or add 1 cup dry red wine). Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until nearly all the liquid has evaporated.

Crush the canned tomatoes with your hands and add to the skillet with the juice. Cook 8 to 10 minutes. Add the cooked ground meats and combine. Add the currants, if using. Season with ras el hanout. Cook over low heat 20 to 30 minutes, adding a little water if the skillet appears dry. Adjust for salt and let cool.

The meat sauce can be prepared a day or two in advance.

For the Eggplant:

Cut the eggplant, either across or lengthwise, into ¾-inch (1cm) slices. Sprinkle each slice generously with salt and place in a large bowl. Cover with plastic and set aside for about an hour.

For the Béchamel:

Melt the butter in a medium saucepan and add the flour. Cook 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from the heat and let cool a few minutes. Stir in the nutmeg and the pepper. Add the milk and cream. Combine well. Return to the heat and bring to a boil, stirring constantly. Reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring the whole time, for 10 minutes. Remove from the heat and adjust for salt. To prevent a skin forming on the surface, carefully press a piece of plastic wrap onto the surface of the béchamel. Set aside to cool. When cooled, stir in the yogurt and combine until smooth.

For the Vegetables:

Rinse the eggplant slices thoroughly under running cold water to remove the salt. Place on several layers of paper towels to drain.

Peel and slice the potatoes about ¼-inch (0.6cm). Place half in a large microwave-safe bowl with about ¼ cup olive oil. Turn to coat evenly. Microwave 2 to 3 minutes, turn the slices and microwave again. Do the same with the remaining potato slices. Set aside to cool, preferably in the refrigerator.

Fry the eggplant slices, enough for one layer in the bottom of the skillet, adding more oil as needed, until lightly browned on both sides. Transfer to a paper towels to drain. Continue until all the egg plant is fried.

Fry the potatoes, enough for one layer in the bottom of the skillet, until lightly browned on both sides. Transfer to paper towels to drain.

For the Moussaka:

Heat the oven to 350°F (177°C).

Arrange a single layer of fried potatoes, overlapping them a little, to fill the bottom of a 9 by 14-inch (23 by 36cm) rectangular baking dish or springform pan. You might not use all the potato slices. Arrange the eggplant in two layers on top of the potatoes, again overlapping the edges. Spoon the meat sauce over the top, distributing evening and smoothing the top to a flat surface. Spoon some of the béchamel sauce on top to form a thin layer. (Reserve the remaining béchamel for garnish when serving). Sprinkle the top of the moussaka with the grated cheese.

Baked the moussaka until bubbling around the edges and heated through, 25 to 35 minutes. During the last few minutes the moussake can be placed under the broiler to slightly brown the top surface. Remove from the oven and let stand 10 minutes before serving.

Cut squares of moussaka and plate, garnishing the top with some of the béchamel sauce set aside earlier.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



These are the ingredients for the meat sauce (minus the meat). I am showing fresh Roma tomatoes and canned tomatoes here. They are a small part of the flavor; therefore, I think canned would work well.

2



Soak the currants, if using, in some of the wine purchased for this dish. I am using up the last of my marsala. Set aside to soak for about 30 minutes.

3



If using fresh tomatoes, cut them in half and arrange on a baking sheet. Roast at 400°F (200°C) for about 30 minutes. Remove from the oven and allow to cool. Crush them with your hands and retain the juices. The skins can be removed and discarded.

4



You can purchase the ras el hanout spice blend in some stores (see below) or look on the Internet for recipes to blend your own.

5



This is the ras el hanout I purchased in the store. It has some of the same spices I used when I mixed my own. Some are different. Look on the Internet and you'll find there is no one standard recipe for this spice blend. (You might also learn that the name supposedly means "head of the class.")

6



Sauté the ground beef and ground lamb in a skillet until lightly browned. Then transfer to a bowl and set aside.

7



While the meat is cooking, peel and dice the onion.

8



Sauté the onion until tender and translucent, about 10 minutes.

9



Add the wine to the skillet, bring to a boil, and then simmer over medium-low heat until most of the liquid evaporates.

10



Add the tomatoes and their juices. Blend well and cook about 10 minutes.

11



Add the currents and ras el hanout. Cook about 10 minutes. Adjust for salt. If the sauce seems a little dry, you can add a little water or marinara sauce to it.

12



The original recipe called for peppers (although it didn't say which variety or how many). These are optional. Most moussaka recipes do not include peppers. This photo also shows a small block of Romano cheese.

13



Slice the eggplant (peel it if you prefer—I don't) and salt the slices. Arrange in a large bowl and let stand for about an hour.

14



These are the ingredients for the béchamel sauce, per the original recipe. I knew the butter-to-flour ratio would be wrong, and it was, so I adjusted later. The béchamel ingredients listed above are correct.

15

Melt the butter in a medium saucepan and add the flour. Cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from the heat, allow to cool a while, then stir in the white pepper and nutmeg.

16

Add the milk and the cream, blend well, then return to the heat. Bring to a boil and then lower the heat to low. Simmer gently, stirring constantly, 10 minutes until thick enough to coat a spoon or spatula. Let cool and then add the yogurt and blend.

17

After the eggplant has sat for an hour, rinse the slices well in cold water to remove the salt. Arrange on layers of paper towels to drain. Set aside until needed.

18

Slice the potatoes and place in a large bowl with $\frac{1}{4}$ cup olive oil. Turn to coat evenly. You might need to do this step in 2 or 3 batches, depending on the size of your microwave oven. Microwave on high for 2 to 3 minutes. Turn the potatoes and microwave again 2 to 3 minutes. Set aside to cool, preferably in the refrigerator.

19



When the potato slices are cool, fry them in a skillet with a few tablespoons of cooking olive oil until golden on both sides. You'll need to do this in batches so as not to crowd the pan. Transfer the browned potatoes to a plate or tray lined with paper towels to drain.

20



These are Anaheim chilies. If you are using peppers, slice the green portion, discarding the stems and white membrane with the seeds. Fry until tender and lightly browned.

21

Arrange a layer of potatoes in the bottom of a rectangular baking dish or springform pan. Overlap the edges a little. You might not use all the potatoes.

22

Fry the eggplant slices, a few at a time so as not to crowd the pan, until lightly browned on both sides. Transfer to layers of paper towels to drain.

23

Layer the fried eggplant on top of the potatoes. You'll probably need two layers to use up all the eggplant. I really like eggplant; so I used all of it.

If using fried peppers, arrange those on the potatoes first before adding the eggplant. I used only a few in this experiment to test the flavor. I am not fond of peppers in some foods, so I chose to leave them out of the ingredients listed above. However, feel free to cook with them if you like them. They are not traditional, but they do add additional flavor. The Anaheim chilis added a very mild chili flavor that I actually enjoyed.

24

Cover the eggplant with all the meat sauce made earlier, distributing evenly, and then finish with a thin layer of béchamel sauce. Reserve the remaining béchamel for garnish when serving. Before placing the moussaka in the oven, sprinkle the cheese on top.

Bake 25 to 30 minutes until heated through and bubbling around the edges. You can place the moussaka under the broiler to brown the top lightly. Let stand 10 minutes before serving.

25

Cut a square of moussaka and plate. Garnish lightly with a little additional béchamel sauce.

Conclusion

Although elaborate, this dish makes a delicious meal. Like a shepherd's pie, the meat and vegetables are all in one dish. For a side, you could include a green salad or sliced tomatoes garnished with a little extra virgin olive oil.