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Moussaka

A good moussaka—a baked casserole of eggplant, zucchini, tomatoes, and minced lamb or beef under a lush layer of béchamel sauce—is one of the most fabulous things you can eat. And it takes time. In Greece, when we think of this dish, we remember our mothers and grandmothers, who often labored for hours to prepare it. (I learned to make moussaka from my own well-organized mother, who often started the preparations the day before, frying the eggplants, preparing the meat and tomato sauce, then assembling the dish the day it was to be served.)

But for a dish with such a strong grip on our memories, moussaka as we know it in Greece today has a short history: Though a similar casserole had existed previously, the added layer of Frenchified béchamel was popularized by the chef and cookbook author Nicholas Tselementes in the late 1920s. Now, I have a hard time with Tselementes. He was an admirer of French cooking, reworking Greek recipes to fit his idea of classical cuisine, and his influence nearly wiped out traditional Greek cooking for generations. But every time I taste moussaka, with its perfect balance of flavors, I think it's his atonement: Perhaps moussaka makes up for the rest. —*Aglaia Kremezi, author of Mediterranean Hot and Spicy*

http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/B006CDL7FQ/ref=as_li_ss_tl?ie=UTF8&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=B006CDL7FQ&linkCode=as2&tag=saveur-20 (Clarkson Potter, 2009)

SERVES 12 to 16

INGREDIENTS

2 cups plus 3 tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
6 bay leaves
2 sticks cinnamon
1 large yellow onion, finely chopped
2 lb. ground beef
¼ cup tomato paste
1½ tsp. ground cinnamon, plus more for dusting
½ tsp. freshly grated nutmeg
¼ tsp. ground cloves
1 tbsp. red wine vinegar
1 tsp. sugar
1 (28-oz.) can whole peeled tomatoes in juice, crushed
1½ tsp. kosher salt, plus more to taste



Credit: Todd Coleman

Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
8 tbsp. unsalted butter
1 cup flour
4 cups milk
4 eggs, beaten
3 large eggplant, cut into 1/4"-thick slices
5 medium russet potatoes, peeled, thinly sliced crosswise
1 cup coarsely grated graviera or Gruyère

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Heat 3 tbsp. oil in a 6-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Add bay leaves, cinnamon sticks, and onion; cook until soft, about 5 minutes. Add beef; cook until all liquid evaporates and meat is browned, about 30 minutes. Add tomato paste, 1 1/4 tsp. ground cinnamon, 1/4 tsp. nutmeg, and cloves; cook until lightly caramelized, about 2 minutes. Add vinegar, sugar, tomatoes, and 2 cups water; boil. Reduce heat to medium-low; cook, covered partially, until almost all liquid is evaporated, about 1 1/2 hours. Remove from heat; discard cinnamon and bay leaves. Season with salt and pepper; set meat sauce aside. Heat butter in a 2-qt. saucepan over medium-high heat. Add flour; cook until smooth, about 2 minutes. Add 1 1/2 tsp. salt, remaining cinnamon and nutmeg, and milk; cook until thickened, about 10 minutes. Remove from heat; pour into a blender with eggs. Blend until smooth; set béchamel aside.
2. Heat oven to 350°. Heat remaining oil in a 12" skillet over medium-high heat. Dust eggplant with cinnamon; working in batches, fry in oil until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Transfer to paper towels to drain; set aside. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add potatoes; cook until barely tender, about 10 minutes. Drain; transfer to a bowl of ice water to stop cooking. Drain; set aside.
3. Spread 1 cup béchamel on bottom of a 10" x 14" baking dish; sprinkle with 1/3 cup graviera. Spread potatoes over cheese; top with eggplant. Pour meat sauce over eggplant; spread remaining béchamel over meat sauce. Sprinkle with remaining graviera; bake until golden brown, about 1 hour.

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