

MOUSSAKA

A delicious dish in either summer or winter as it is normally served just above room temperature.

INGREDIENTS

500g minced beef or lamb
3 large aubergines
Fine sea salt and black pepper
4 tbsp olive oil
1 large onion
4 garlic cloves
2 tsp cinnamon
2 tsp dried oregano
1 bay leaf
2 tbsp tomato purée
400 gm tin plum tomatoes
150ml red wine
1 beef stock cube
1 small bunch flat-leaf parsley, picked and chopped

FOR THE BÉCHAMEL

500ml milk
60g butter
60g plain flour
50g parmesan
2 eggs, beaten
Nutmeg, to grate

INSTRUCTIONS

Cut the aubergines into roughly ½cm- thick slices, put in a colander and salt lightly. Leave to sit for 30 minutes, then rinse and pat dry. (This step isn't essential, especially if you're in a hurry.) Meanwhile, heat the oven to 200C (180C fan).

Brush the aubergine slices with half the olive oil on both sides (seasoning them too, if you skipped the salting in step 2), then arrange on a baking sheet (or two, if need be). Bake for about 25 minutes, until soft and golden. (If you have a barbecue handy, it's an even better way to cook the aubergines.)

While the aubergines are roasting, peel and finely chop the onion and garlic, and put two tablespoons of olive oil in a large frying pan over a medium-high heat. Cook the onion until soft and golden, but not browned, then stir in the garlic, cinnamon and oregano, and fry for a couple of minutes more, just until the garlic loses its raw smell.

Turn up the heat slightly and add the meat, stirring to break up any lumps. Cook until the mince is well browned and the mixture is fairly dry, then season to taste.

Add the wine and cook for a few minutes to burn off the alcohol, then add tomatoes (break them up with a fork) and the tomato puree. Dissolve the stock cube in a small amount of hot water and add, together with the bay leaf.

The amount of water used depends on how you are cooking the meat sauce. If you are using a slow cooker (as I usually do), you will need very little water. But if you're cooking on top of the stove, bring to a simmer, then turn the heat right down and leave to cook gently for 30-40 minutes, until most of the liquid has evaporated and you have a thick meat sauce. Add more water to stop it from drying completely. Check and adjust the seasoning again.

(Note: If I decide not to cook in the slow cooker, I would be tempted to put this in a low oven – about 160 for a couple of hours. It all depends on the quality of the mince meat, but I prefer a longer, slower cook.)

Finally, make a béchamel sauce. Pour the milk into a small pan and, on a low-ish heat, bring to just below a boil. Melt the butter in a medium saucepan over a medium heat, and stir in the flour. Cook for a couple of minutes, until it begins to smell toasty, then whisk in the hot milk bit by bit, and cook, stirring often, until the sauce thickens.

Grate the cheese and stir it into the white sauce, then take off the heat and leave to cool slightly. Heat the oven back up to 200C (180C fan). Beat the eggs into the white sauce and season to taste with salt and plenty of nutmeg. Stir the chopped parsley into the meat sauce and season again to taste.

Arrange a third of the aubergines in the base of a lightly greased oven dish and top with half the meat. Repeat these layers, finishing with a layer of aubergine, then top with the béchamel. Grate on a little extra nutmeg and add a sprinkle of cheese. Bake for about 45 minutes, until well browned, then leave to cool to just warm before serving. Trust me, the cooler serving temperature makes all the difference.