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Episode Six, Birthday Treats:

Ira's Recipes

Bastichio

This one's an absolute classic and probably one of my favourite Greek dishes! Bastichio is the name that I grew up with, but certain villages in Cyprus call this dish "Macaronia tou Fournou", which loosely translated means "Baked Pasta". There is, however, a lot more to it than that! I like to describe it as the Greek version of lasagne - even nicer if that's possible, but obviously I'm biased! It's also one of those ever popular dishes that forms part of any buffet or celebratory meal. And just like my vegetarian version, this dish can be prepared up until the point of baking and refrigerated from the day before, so that all of the hard work is out of the way and you can bake it fresh on the day you're going to eat it; great for when you've got friends coming round! It goes without saying that a great big juicy Greek salad goes really well with this one together with the other usual stuff... pitta bread, dips, olives, Greek yogurt.....you know it all by now!

Ingredients

Middle Layer – Meat Sauce:

2 tablespoons vegetable oil
500g pork mince
5 tablespoons olive oil
2 medium onions, peeled and finely chopped
2 fat cloves garlic, peeled and finely chopped
1 well rounded teaspoon ground cinnamon
2 heaped tablespoons dried mint
1 chicken stock cube
A really good handful fresh flat leaf parsley, finely chopped
About 500g tomato passata
A good sprinkling of paprika
Half teaspoon sugar
Salt and freshly ground black pepper

Base Layer – Pasta

350g penne rigate
1 chicken or vegetable stock cube
A third teaspoon grated or ground nutmeg
1 rounded tablespoon butter
About 200g Greek halloumi cheese, grated
8 tablespoons of the béchamel sauce
2 egg whites from large eggs, lightly beaten

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Top Layer – Béchamel

200g butter, melted and cooled
Half teaspoon grated or ground nutmeg
Pinch of ground cinnamon
Pinch of salt
2 egg yolks from large eggs
2 pints milk
200ml crème fraîche
150g cornflour
About 100g Greek halloumi cheese, grated

Method

1. You will need a rectangular oven dish measuring approximately 33cm x 29cm and 7cm deep.
2. Even though the meat sauce forms the middle layer of the bastichio, I always prepare it first and just leave it to simmer nice and gently whilst I get on with the rest of it.
3. Begin by heating the vegetable oil in a large saucepan and then add the mince.
4. Fry the mince over a medium heat for about 5 minutes until it browns, stirring most of the time to break down any lumps and to prevent it from sticking to the bottom of the pan.
5. Now, drain away most of the fat; no need to sieve it, just gingerly tilt the saucepan over the sink and use the lid or a slotted spoon as a barrier to stop all the mince from falling out.
6. Now return the pan to the heat, add the olive oil, onions and garlic and fry for a couple of minutes.
7. Add all the other ingredients – the cinnamon, mint, crumbled stock cube, parsley, passata, paprika, sugar and a seasoning of salt and freshly ground black pepper and give it all a really good stir.
8. Partially cover with the lid, and leave to simmer on a low heat until about 10 minutes before it's time to assemble the bastichio, stirring every now and again.
9. Now bring a large pan of lightly salted water to the boil and add the stock cube.
10. Add the penne and cook according to the packet instructions.
11. For the béchamel: while the meat and the pasta are happily simmering away, in another saucepan place your cooled, melted butter, nutmeg, cinnamon, salt and egg yolks and gently whisk until well combined (a balloon whisk is best for this sauce).
12. Add all the milk and crème fraîche and whisk again to incorporate.
13. Set this aside for a few moments so that you can attend to your pasta.
14. When the pasta is ready, drain most of the liquid away reserving about 2 or 3 tablespoons. Then pour all the pasta with the reserved liquid straight into the base of your oven dish and whilst it's hot and steaming, add the nutmeg, butter and the halloumi cheese and mix really well.

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15. Set aside for a couple of minutes to cool down slightly and then stir in your egg whites.
16. Pre-heat your oven to 180 degrees C.
17. Now all we need to do is to finish making our béchamel.
18. Take the pan with the milk and add the cornflour, whisking as each tablespoon goes in.
19. Now place the saucepan onto a medium heat and start whisk well! That's the secret; don't stop whisking the sauce until it's completely ready. It will look slightly unattractive and lumpy at the start, but don't panic as it will transform into a beautiful, glossy sauce by the time it's done.
20. As the sauce starts to thicken, turn the heat down slightly and stir a bit harder, so that it doesn't catch the bottom of the pan.
21. When it starts to bubble gently, remove from the heat and stir about 8 tablespoons of the béchamel into the pasta.
22. Next, take your slightly cooled meat sauce and slowly spread all over the pasta, to cover it completely.
23. And finally, spread your lovely béchamel over the meat sauce and sprinkle generously with the grated halloumi cheese.
24. Place it in the top third of the oven for about 40 minutes until it's nicely browned. Alternatively, once it has cooled pop it in the fridge until tomorrow when you can bake it fresh! Just remember to take it out of the fridge at least a couple of hours before you're ready to bake it, and that it will require a longer cooking time: 1 hour or so, again until it's nicely browned and bubbling and making sure the mince is piping hot.
25. Leave to stand for about an hour before dishing up (or preferably a bit longer if you can resist) as it allows the juices to settle and absorb, and makes it easier to cut into pieces. It's definitely worth the wait, I promise!
26. Serves about 8 hungry people.

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Episode Six, Birthday Treats:

Ira's Recipes

Dolmades – Stuffed Vine Leaves

Okay, these are a little bit fiddly to make but are well worth it, I promise you! It goes without saying that tender, fresh vine leaves are better in flavour and texture than the preserved ones, but I realise that the fresh variety are very difficult to come by. I'm lucky enough to get fresh supplies from my mother in law. She has an amazing vine in the back of her garden which produces the most incredible huge, tender leaves. When they're ready, we pick them, roll them up in cling film in batches of about 35 and then freeze them. It's fantastic – fresh vine leaves all the year round. So if you know any one who has a vine growing in their garden, get friendly! But don't worry if you can only get the preserved leaves. You'll still end up making the tastiest 'koubebia' you've ever tried!

Ingredients (makes about 30)

200g (ish) vine leaves (about 30 – 35)
500g pork mince
1 large onion, peeled and finely chopped
About 50g fresh flat leaf parsley, finely chopped
Half cup long grain white rice, rinsed and left to drain
1 chicken stock cube
Half a 400g tin of good quality chopped tomatoes
1 very generous tablespoon tomato puree
Juice of 1 large lemon
Half a cup extra virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon dried mint
Half a teaspoon ground cinnamon
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
One third of cup cold water
1 well rounded teaspoon butter

Method

1. Whether your vine leaves are fresh, frozen or preserved, place them in a wide, shallow bowl and pour over enough boiling water to cover them. Leave them to soften and/or to thaw for 3 or 4 minutes.
2. Now drain the water and gently squeeze the leaves between your hands to remove as much liquid as possible. Remember the leaves are quite delicate, so don't squeeze too hard.
3. Wrap them in some kitchen towel to allow any excess moisture to be absorbed.

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4. The next part is nice and easy. All you have to do is to place all your ingredients, with the exception of the water and butter (and the vine leaves) into a large mixing bowl. Make sure you crumble the stock cube well between your fingers so it gets well distributed and start to knead the mixture with your hands, making sure that everything is well combined.
5. Now you're ready to stuff your vine leaves: Drizzle a couple of tablespoons of olive oil into the base of a small/medium sized saucepan. Gently unravel the vine leaves and use 3 or 4 to line the base of the saucepan to prevent any sticking.
6. I find it easiest to prepare the dolmades on a plate instead of a completely flat surface, as the plate can catch the juices, (when you've finished always pour any leftover juice either from your plate or from the mixing bowl straight over the stuffed vine leaves in the saucepan).
7. Now place a vine leaf (face side down) onto your plate.
8. Carefully spoon about one tablespoon of the meat mixture at the bottom end of the leaf, close to the stem. Now fold the two sides of the leaf (left and right side) over the filling and roll up quite tightly (but not too much) from the base, into the shape of a cylinder.
9. Place them into your saucepan one at a time as you make them, working your way around from the sides of the pan to the centre, again quite tightly packed. Depending on the diameter of the pan, you will probably have two layers.
10. Now pour over the cold water and any juice remaining on your plate or mixing bowl and dot with the butter.
11. If you are left with a spare leaf or three, layer them over the top of the dolmades.
12. Finally place a snug fitting plate over the vine leaves and place the saucepan onto a medium heat.
13. As it starts to boil, turn the heat right down, cover and leave to simmer gently for about 45 minutes.
14. About halfway through cooking, remove the lid and partially cover for the remaining time.
15. When the dolmades are ready, remove the saucepan from the heat and clamp the lid back on.
16. Always allow at least 45 minutes resting time to allow the juices to absorb fully.
17. Obviously vine leaves can vary quite a lot in size, so reduce or increase the quantity of stuffing to accommodate your leaves.
18. These are wonderful eaten with a nice Greek salad (don't forget the dips) and some warm pitta bread. Or as an alternative to your Sunday roast why not replace your veg and gravy with stuffed vine leaves and salad. They go really well with roast chicken.

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Ira's Recipes

Mahallebi (contains nuts)

This is a slightly sweeter and richer version. The idea first came about when I was trying to create a version of my Grandmother's 'Gligo dou Athashou', which literally translated means 'sweet of the almonds'. Although I think I've succeeded in the flavour, the texture is not the same. My Grandmother's 'gligo' would be more solid, almost like a hard set honey, but my version is softer and creamier. This recipe has evolved over the years from my sheer determination to try and re-create one of my Grandmother's great legacies! It's ashamed that although I can remember countless summer holidays in Cyprus where I'd be helping her make it (there was an awful lot of almond shelling, blanching, grinding and mixing involved), I never actually found out what secret ingredients went into it, and more importantly the quantities. It's interesting because my mum doesn't know either! Let's just say it was my Grandmother's secret recipe. I hope you would be proud of my version Gran!

As this sweet is quite rich, it's nice served in small espresso cups. You may prefer to halve the quantities, but as usual, and because I love it so much, I prefer to take the 'bigger' option. You'll be pleased to know that it keeps really well in the fridge for several days.

Ingredients

2 x 397ml tins condensed milk
500ml full cream milk
60g demerara sugar
150g ground almonds
Quarter teaspoon ground all-spice
60g ground rice
80g cornflour
vanilla extract to taste
200ml rosewater
A really good handful of chopped almonds or pistachios for decoration

Method

1. Combine all the ingredients (other than the vanilla extract, rosewater and the nuts for decoration) in a saucepan
2. Whisk over a medium heat until the mixture has thickened considerably.
3. Remove from the heat. At this point the mixture will be quite thick, so to loosen it add the rosewater and the vanilla extract and whisk in well.

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4. Pour the mixture into espresso cups or small ramekins and sprinkle with the nuts.
5. Allow to cool and refrigerate for at least two hours, or overnight. Prepare and cook in the same way. Add your vanilla and rosewater at the end, pour into your espresso cups or small ramekins and sprinkle with the nuts.
6. Allow to cool and refrigerate for at least two hours, or overnight.

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