

Greek Pastitsio

Ingredients for meat sauce:

- » 2 medium onions, finely chopped
- » 2 tablespoons olive oil
- » 4 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
- » 2 pounds ground sirloin
- » 2 (15-ounces) can diced tomatoes in juice
- » 3 teaspoons cumin
- » 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- » 1 teaspoon ground allspice
- » 1/2 teaspoon grated nutmeg
- » 1/4 teaspoon ground cloves

Ingredients for Bechamel:

- » 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- » 4 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- » 4 cups whole milk
- » 3/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg
- » 1/2 cup grated kefalotyri or Parmigiano-Reggiano (as a substitute)
- » 3 large egg yolks

For pasta:

- » 1 pound ziti or tubular pasta
- » 1 cup ricotta
- » 1/4 cup grated kefalotyri cheese

Make meat sauce:

Heat a 12-inch heavy skillet over medium, then sauté onions, stirring frequently, until softened, about 7 minutes. Add garlic and cook for about 1 minute. Increase heat to high, then brown meat, stirring occasionally and breaking up lumps with a wooden spoon, until meat starts to brown, about 10 minutes. Pour off excess fat from skillet, then stir in tomatoes with their juice, spices, and salt and pepper to taste. Simmer over low heat, covered for about an hour.

Timing tip: This can be made ahead and refrigerated overnight.

For Bechamel:

Melt butter in a heavy medium pot over medium heat. Whisk in flour, making roux, whisking constantly, until golden, about 5 minutes. Meanwhile, heat milk in a heavy medium saucepan until almost boiling. In a steady stream, add milk to the roux, whisking constantly until quite smooth. The sauce will thicken as you bring it to a boil over medium heat. Continue to whisk for 1 minute.

Remove from heat and stir in nutmeg, cheese, and salt and pepper to taste.

In a separate bowl, lightly beat 3 yolks. Gradually whisk in 1 cup of the béchamel to temper the egg yolks, then take the tempered yolk mixture and combine it in the saucepan with remaining béchamel. Blend until smooth, then set aside and cook pasta to al dente.

Assemble Pastitsio:

Preheat oven to 350°F with rack in middle of oven. Take drained pasta, transfer to a large bowl and stir in 1 cup béchamel and 1 cup of ricotta. In a 9 X 13 inch buttered baking dish, arrange one third of pasta lengthwise in 1 layer and add half of meat sauce, spreading evenly over pasta. Add an additional layer of pasta with the rest of the meat sauce on top, then the last third of the pasta. Spread remaining béchamel (about 3 cups) evenly over top layer of pasta. Sprinkle with additional cheese. Bake in the oven until top begins to poof up and starts to turn golden. Remove from oven and let cool for about 15 minutes before cutting and serving.

