Moussaka

Serves 8

A classic casserole of Greek and Turkish cuisine, moussaka combines two of the most popular ingredients in Mediterranean cooking: lamb and eggplant. The layer of creamy custard and the rich meat sauce balance Merlot's strong tannins.

Eggplant:

- 3 large firm and unblemished globe eggplants, or 3 pounds
- Olive oil
- Salt and pepper

Meat sauce:

- 4 tablespoons butter or oil
- 2 onions, chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 1 pound ground lamb
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 1 cup canned tomato puree or 1½ cups diced peeled canned tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 cup dry red wine
- Salt and pepper to taste
- ¼ cup chopped flat-leaf parsley

Custard:

- 2 cups milk
- 4 tablespoons butter
- 4 tablespoons flour
- ½ teaspoon freshly grated nutmeg or to taste
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 4 eggs, lightly whisked
- 1 cup ricotta cheese

To assemble

- ½ cup grated kasseri or Parmesan cheese
- ⅓ cup dry breadcrumbs

Instructions: Peel the eggplants completely or peel lengthwise in a striped fashion, removing every other strip of peel. Cut crosswise into ⅓-inch thick slices. Sprinkle the slices with salt and layer them in a large colander. After 30 minutes or so, pat them dry with towels. Press out excess moisture as you pat them dry.

Pour enough olive oil in a large saute pan so that it is ¼-inch deep and fry the eggplant in batches over medium heat, turning once, until translucent and lightly colored on both sides. Add oil as needed. After frying, set eggplant aside on a double thickness of paper towels to absorb excess oil. Repeat until all the eggplant is cooked. (Or you may arrange eggplant slices on baking sheets, brush liberally with oil on both sides, sprinkle with pepper and bake in a preheated 400° oven until cooked through and totally translucent, turning once.)

To make the meat sauce: Melt the butter or heat oil in a large saute pan and cook the onions and garlic over moderate heat until translucent, about 8 minutes. Add the meat and cook until the meat loses it redness, breaking it

up with a fork or wooden spoon, about 8 to 10 minutes. Add cinnamon, oregano, tomato puree or tomatoes, tomato paste and wine. Stir well and simmer over low heat for about 15 minutes, until most of the liquid is absorbed. Season with salt and pepper, stir in the parsley and set aside. (If you like to break recipes down into stages, you can make the meat sauce the day before and bring it to room temperature or warm it just slightly before assembling the moussaka.)

To make the custard: Warm the milk in a small saucepan. Melt butter in a larger saucepan. Add the flour and cook this mixture, stirring constantly for about 2 or 3 minutes. Add hot milk and stir until mixture thickens and comes to a boil. Stir in nutmeg, salt and pepper to taste. Don't be timid with the nutmeg. You want to taste it. Remove from heat and beat in the eggs and ricotta cheese.

To assemble: Preheat the oven to 375°. Combine the grated cheese and breadcrumbs in a bowl.

Lightly oil a 9 by 15 by 2½-inch baking dish. Sprinkle the bottom

with some of the breadcrumbs and cheese. Place a layer of eggplant slices atop the crumbs. Add a layer of meat sauce, crumbs, a layer of eggplant, a layer of meat sauce. If you have enough slices of eggplant, make another layer. Top with remaining crumbs. (Even if it is only a partial layer, use what you have. The custard will cover it all.) Then pour the custard sauce over all. Set the baking pan atop a baking sheet, just in case it bubbles over.

Bake for about 45 to 60 minutes, until golden and bubbly. If the moussaka is browning too quickly, cover with foil. Let moussaka stand for 15 minutes before cutting into squares. Use paper towels and blot up any excess oil that may rise to the top or edges of the pan.

Moussaka can be prepared a day ahead and refrigerated. Then reheat in a moderate oven until hot, about 15 minutes. Or heat in the microwave for about 3 minutes.

Per serving: 525 calories, 24 g protein, 33 g carbohydrate, 32 g fat (14 g saturated), 188 mg cholesterol, 312 mg sodium, 7 g fiber.