

To Greece in a Speedboat

SHORTCUT MOUSSAKA

Time: 2 hours

- 2 medium eggplant (about 2 pounds), cut into 3/4-inch cubes
- 1 tablespoon plus 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 1/4 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 1 1/2 pounds Yukon Gold potatoes, peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes
- 1/3 cup whole milk
- 1 large egg yolk
- 3/4 cup grated kefalotiri or Parmesan cheese
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter, at room temperature
- 1/4 teaspoon grated nutmeg
- 1 pound ground lamb (or beef)
- 1 very large onion, finely chopped
- 2 cinnamon sticks
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 1/4 teaspoon ground clove
- 2 medium tomatoes, cored and chopped
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 3 tablespoons bread crumbs.

1. In a colander, toss the eggplant and 1 teaspoon salt. Drain in the sink for 15 minutes.

2. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Toss the eggplant with the oil and spread on a large baking sheet. Roast, turning occasionally, until golden and tender, about 40 minutes. Reduce oven temperature to 400 degrees.

2. Bring 6 cups water, the potatoes and 1

tablespoon salt to a boil in a large pot over high heat. Lower heat and simmer until potatoes are tender, about 20 minutes; drain and return potatoes to the warm pot. In a small bowl, whisk together milk and egg yolk. Mash potatoes with milk-egg mixture, 1/2 cup cheese, butter, 1/4 teaspoon salt and nutmeg. Taste and adjust seasonings if needed.

3. In a very large skillet over medium-high heat, brown the lamb, breaking it up with a fork as it cooks. Season with 1/4 teaspoon salt. Push the meat to one side of the skillet and spoon off all but a thin layer of fat from the skillet. Add the onions and cinnamon sticks to the skillet. Cook until the onions are soft, about 5 minutes. Stir the lamb back into the onions and add the garlic and ground clove. Cook 2 minutes more. Stir in the tomatoes, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and pepper. Cook until tomatoes are soft and the mixture is thick, about 10 minutes. Stir in the eggplant.

4. Spoon into a 9-inch baking dish. Spread the mashed potatoes over the lamb. Sprinkle with bread crumbs and the remaining 1/4 cup cheese. Bake until top is golden brown and slightly crusty, about 30 minutes. Cool 10 minutes before serving.

Yield: 6 servings.

CLASSIC MADE EASIER An express version of moussaka subtracts béchamel sauce but adds mashed potatoes.

MY friend Sonia, an inventive and gifted cook, splits her time between Hell's Kitchen and the isle of Syros in the Cyclades. Whenever I want to whip up anything Greek, she is my go-to source. So when I had a hankering for moussaka, I called her.

Analyzing the proper composition of the dish, including a thoughtful digression about whether potatoes belong in the pan (her family likes them but they are probably not traditional), Sonia

methodically detailed the laborious salting, frying, draining, whisking, straining and baking that was required. My head was spinning.

I knew that if I followed her guidance, I'd have a stunning, authentic, béchamel-blanketed masterpiece, but I also would have given over hours of my life, and be left with a major olive oil-splattered cleanup from all that frying.

I asked her in a whisper if she ever took any shortcuts.

"Well," she admitted, "when I'm rushed I make a version with mashed potatoes and no béchamel, but it's not authentic."

After fully comprehending the work involved for authenticity, that was fine with me.

Her recipe was born, as some of the best recipes are, out of a combination of hunger, ingenuity and a lack of time.

Instead of frying everything in batches and making a béchamel, she

roasted the eggplant in cubes. While it was roasting, she sautéed ground lamb with tomatoes and aromatics, and mashed some potatoes with kefalotiri cheese, milk and egg. Then she layered it all in a pan, sprinkling the top with bread crumbs.

It wasn't exactly a quick recipe, she cautioned, but easier than the classic dish. It sounded like moussaka meets shepherd's pie, and I couldn't wait to try it.

I wasn't able to find the kefalotiri

cheese at my supermarket, but Sonia said Parmesan was a fine substitute.

The casserole emerged from the oven browned, bubbling and fragrant with cinnamon and clove, and had all the meaty, eggplant-happy flavors I was looking for.

When I called the next day to thank her, I asked what her friends in Greece would say about this shortcut version.

"They might argue with you if you called this moussaka," she said, "but I'm sure they would like it anyway."

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