

Pastitsio

SERVES Serves 6

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

In the best renditions of this Greek meat and macaroni casserole, the components—tubular pasta, ground meat and tomato sauce, and a plush blanket of bechamel—are impressively stratified. We started by treating ground beef with baking soda before cooking, which altered its chemistry and made it better able to hold on to moisture. We skipped the usual browning steps to avoid toughening the meat's exterior, which also saved time. Cinnamon, oregano, dried mint, and paprika made the flavor profile distinctly Greek. A minimal amount of red wine plus lots of tomato paste added brightness and savoriness. We further streamlined the method by parcooking the ziti (the closest substitute for authentic Greek “number 2” macaroni) in the hot béchamel; doing so hydrated the pasta just enough to ensure that it would be fully cooked after baking, and the pasta's starches helped thicken the béchamel. We then thickened the rest of the béchamel by whisking in cheese and an egg until it was spreadable. Sprinkling more cheese over the top encouraged the surface to brown.



INGREDIENTS

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

* Don't use ground beef that's less than 93

Meat Sauce

- ¾ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon baking soda
- 1 tablespoon plus ½ cup water, divided
- 8 ounces 93 percent lean ground beef
- 1 tablespoon vegetable oil
- ½ cup finely chopped onion
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 ¼ teaspoons ground cinnamon
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried mint
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- ⅛ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup red wine
- ⅓ cup tomato paste

Béchamel and Pasta

- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter

percent lean or the dish will be greasy. We like the richness of whole milk for this dish, but you can substitute 2 percent low-fat milk, if desired. Do not use skim milk. Kasseri is a semifirm sheep's-milk cheese from Greece. If it's unavailable, substitute a mixture of 1½ ounces (¾ cup) grated Pecorino Romano and 3 ounces (¾ cup) shredded Provolone, adding ½ cup to the ziti in step 4, ½ cup to the béchamel, and the remaining ½ cup to the top of the béchamel. We strongly recommend using a spider skimmer to transfer the pasta to the baking dish, but a slotted spoon will work. To accommodate all the components, use a baking dish that is at least 2¼ inches tall.

INSTRUCTIONS

1 FOR THE MEAT SAUCE: Mix salt, baking soda, and 1 tablespoon water in bowl. Add beef and toss until thoroughly combined. Set aside.

- 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg
- ⅛ teaspoon pepper
- 4 cups whole milk
- 8 ounces (2½ cups) ziti
- 4 ounces kasseri cheese, shredded (1 cup), divided
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten

2 Heat oil in medium saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, about 3 minutes. Stir in garlic, cinnamon, oregano, mint, paprika, pepper flakes, and pepper and cook until fragrant, 1 to 2 minutes. Add wine and cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture is thickened, 2 to 3 minutes. Add tomato paste, beef mixture, and remaining ½ cup water and cook, breaking up meat into pieces no larger than ¼ inch with wooden spoon, until beef has just lost its pink color, 3 to 5 minutes. Bring to simmer; cover, reduce heat to low, and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring occasionally. Off heat, season with salt to taste. (Meat sauce can be refrigerated in airtight container for up to 3 days. Heat through before proceeding with step three.)

3 FOR THE BÉCHAMEL AND PASTA: Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Spray 8-inch square baking dish with vegetable oil spray and place on rimmed baking sheet. Melt butter in large saucepan over medium heat. Add flour, garlic, salt, nutmeg, and pepper and cook, stirring constantly, until golden and fragrant, about 1 minute. Slowly whisk in milk and bring to boil. Add pasta and return to simmer, stirring frequently to prevent sticking. When mixture reaches simmer, cover and let stand off heat, stirring occasionally, for 15 minutes (pasta will not be fully cooked).

4 Using spider skimmer, transfer pasta to prepared dish, leaving excess béchamel in saucepan. Sprinkle $\frac{1}{3}$ cup kasseri over pasta and stir to combine. Using spatula, gently press pasta into even layer. Add $\frac{1}{3}$ cup kasseri to béchamel and whisk to combine. Whisk egg into béchamel. Spread meat sauce over pasta and, using spatula, spread into even layer. Top with béchamel. Sprinkle remaining $\frac{1}{3}$ cup kasseri over béchamel. Bake until top of pastitsio is puffed and spotty brown, 40 to 50 minutes. Let cool for 20 minutes. Serve.