

Pastitsio (Greek Lasagna)

Pastitsio (Greek Lasagna) may not be as well known as Moussaka, but as far as Greek dishes go, it is irresistible! A regular in Greek households, Pastitsio is as crowd pleasing as it is comforting!! I'm talking about luscious layers of rich tomato based meat sauce, pasta and a creamy bechamel. Traditional to a tee!!!



Wholesome home-cooking Greek Style, that's Pastitsio (Greek Lasagna) in a nutshell. There're no bells or whistles, just a list of simple ingredients with easy to follow steps. You might have a pot or two to clean up afterwards, but you won't

mind the effort once you've experienced your first Pastitsio.





In a traditional Pastitsio, you should be able to see the 3 distinct layers; the creamy bechamel, the rich meat sauce and the pasta. Allowing the Pastitsio to cool down after baking really helps keep these layers well defined.

Pastitsio always evokes warm feelings of family, tradition and the love that the women in my family would pour into making this dish. And I'm just happy to share it with you!!

Danielle

Preparation Time: 1 – 1 1/2 hours

Cooking Time: 40 mins

Servings: 6

Ingredients

When the meat sauce is almost ready, I begin boiling the pasta and preparing the bechamel sauce (simultaneously). This helps me to be more time efficient. All that's left is to assemble the Pastitsio.

The Meat Sauce

- 500 g / 17.5 oz beef mince/ground beef
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 2 garlic, chopped
- 1 tbsp tomato paste
- 1 x 400 g / 14 oz jar of passata/tomato puree
- 1/2 cup water
- salt & pepper to taste

The Bechamel Sauce (note 1)

- 60 g / 2 oz plain/all purpose flour
- 60 g / 2 oz butter
- 3 cups milk, room temperature
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- 1/2 cup parmesan cheese, grated, plus extra
- pinch of nutmeg
- salt to taste, 1/4 tsp white pepper

Pasta

- 250 g / 9 oz tubular pasta e.g penne
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Instructions

The Meat Sauce

1. Heat the olive oil in a medium saucepan over moderate heat. Add the chopped onion and saute until soft and golden.
2. Turn the heat up to moderate – high. Add the beef mince/ground beef and saute until most of the liquid released by the meat has evaporated. Break up any clumps with a wooden spoon.
3. Add the garlic and tomato paste. Stir. Saute until the rawness of the tomato paste has been cooked out (about 1 min).
4. Add the passata, 1/2 cup water, salt and white pepper. I usually add 1 tsp salt and 1/2 tsp white pepper. Stir.
5. Bring to the boil then turn down to a low simmer for 45 mins. You should see little bubbles rising to the surface during simmering. Stir every now and then. Place the lid half on, half off (in case the sauce splatters during simmering).
6. Continue to simmer until you see little craters forming on the surface of the sauce. This sauce needs to be thick, so if need be, simmer longer. Check that there's enough seasoning. Set aside.

The Bechamel

1. Melt butter over moderate – low heat in a medium saucepan. Add the flour and stir continuously (1 minute). You will end up with a sandy-coloured paste.
2. At this point, I switch my wooden spoon for a whisk. Add 1 cup of milk and stir vigorously to prevent any lumps from forming. You will feel it thicken quickly. It will loosen as you add more milk (1 – 2 mins).
3. Turn the heat up to moderate – high. Add another cup of milk and stir until well incorporated (1 min).
4. Add the final cup of milk and continue stirring until

the sauce starts to boil. Then reduce down to moderate heat. Make sure you stir to the edges of the saucepan and across the base to prevent the sauce from sticking.

5. Continue stirring until a smooth, thick sauce forms (5 – 8 mins). If you feel your sauce is too thin, continue cooking until it thickens.
6. Remove from the stove. Add the parmesan cheese. Use the whisk to stir through the lightly beaten egg.
7. Season with salt, white pepper and a dash of nutmeg. Set aside (note 2).

The Pasta

1. Fill a medium – large size saucepan with water until 3/4's full. Bring to the boil.
2. Add the pasta and cook until almost cooked (you don't want it to be too soft as it will continue cooking in the oven). The timing will depend on the pasta you choose. I use penne and cook it between 9 – 10 mins. Drain. Set aside.

To Assemble

1. Place the pasta in a medium size baking dish. My dish measures 24 cm x 24 cm / 9.5 " x 9.5"
2. Add 1/2 cup of bechamel sauce to the pasta and stir through. This will help the pasta stick together.
3. Spoon the meat sauce over the pasta. Spreads it evenly.
4. Pour the bechamel sauce over the meat sauce. You may need a spatula to spread it evenly (note 3).
5. Place the baking tray on the lower rack of a preheated oven 180 C / 350 F.
6. Bake for 40 minutes or until it develops a golden crust. Cover with parchment/ baking paper if your pastitsio colours too quickly. I often have to do that!!
7. Remove from the oven.
8. Slice the Pastitsio once it has cooled down (give it 20 minutes). This way, you will retain the 3 distinct

layers. Don't forget the [Greek Salad](#) on the side!!

Notes

1. For a traditional Pastitsio, a lightly beaten egg is added to the sauce once it has been cooked. The egg doesn't scramble, instead it gives the sauce a beautiful glossy sheen.
2. If you make your bechamel ahead of time, make sure you cover it with cling film, ensuring that the surface of the sauce comes into contact with the plastic. This will prevent the sauce from forming a skin. When you are ready to use the bechamel, don't panic if it seems very thick. It will loosen when placed in the oven for the final stage of cooking.
3. For extra cheesiness, you can sprinkle extra parmesan cheese on top of the bechamel sauce.