



RECIPE OF THE WEEK: 07/06/2021

Imam Bayildi

(Baked Aubergines filled with Tomatoes, Onions and Garlic)

This is a summary, traditional dish which uses a lot of olive oil. It is delicious, moreish and iconic dish, full of character. This dish has Ottoman connections, although it is also made widely in the Middle East, Greece and Cyprus.

There are a few myths surrounding this dish. It was reputed that an imam found it so delicious that he ate it in excessive amounts eventually fainted as a result. This is what is literally meant by 'imam bayildi'; 'the man fainted'. Less romantic historians have suggested that he actually fainted on hearing how expensive the ingredients were and on hearing how much precious olive oil had gone into the dish.

The third version of the story is that the imam married a very rich, well brought up girl in a dowry. He was given twelve of the finest, very expensive cups of virgin olive oil. His wife was cooking imam bayildi every day because he liked it so much but on the thirteenth day, there was none left and so he could not have any and all the dowry was gone!

This dish is delicious and not very expensive to make. It makes a splendid first course or part of a meze.

Serves 6

Ingredients

3 large aubergines, about 250g each, about 15cm long 6 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
4 medium onions, peeled, thinly sliced 6 large garlic cloves, finely chopped
500g fresh, ripe tomatoes, peeled seeded and finely chopped or 400g canned tomatoes with their juices, chopped
1 tbsp tomato puree
A small bunch of fresh flat-leaf finely chopped parsley 1 tsp oregano
2 tsp sugar
250g feta, crumbled
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Method

1. Preheat oven to 190°C/170°C/ gas 5.
2. Wash the aubergines, leaving the stalks on. Peel each aubergine length ways, leaving 4 evenly spaced 2cm wide strips of peel intact. Make 3 or 4 10cm long lengthwise slashes, 2cm apart, on the top side.
3. The aubergines which are sold today do not need the bitter juices to be removed. If you think that you need to do this, follow this procedure:
Sprinkle the peeled flesh of the aubergines with 3 teaspoons of salt and place them in a colander to drain for at least half an hour to eliminate the bitter juices. A heavy plate can be placed over the vegetables to quicken the process.
An alternative way is to sprinkle the aubergines with salt and arrange them in a large, flat pan, covered by 2cm depth cold water, under the weight of a heavy casserole and left at room temperature for at least half an hour. Then drain, rinse and pat dry.

4. On medium heat, in a large frying pan, heat 4 tablespoons of olive oil until hot but not smoking and fry the aubergines for 3-4 minutes, turning them over a few times until they are soft. Take out with a slotted spoon and arrange side by side in a large baking dish, with the slit side up seasoned generously with salt and pepper.
5. Over medium heat, heat the rest of the olive oil in a heavy frying and fry the onions for 2-3 minutes, until soft but not brown. Add the garlic and stir for a minute or two until they are aromatic. Add the tomatoes, tomato puree, half the parsley, oregano, sugar and 100ml water if you are using fresh tomatoes.
6. Lower the heat, cover the pan and simmer for 15- 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. Season to taste and cover the pan and let the mixture cool.
7. With a spoon, place the onion and tomato mixture on top of the aubergines and sprinkle with crumbled feta. Pour into the baking dish 250ml cold water all around the aubergines.
8. Bake uncovered in a pre-heated oven for 40-45 minutes until very tender, basting them often during cooking.
9. Sprinkle with the remaining parsley and serve hot or cold, although traditionally imam bayildi is served cold.

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