

## Seven Pot Wonders: *Pastichio* and *Moussaka*

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When people figure out that I'm of Greek heritage, they almost inevitably ask, "Do you make that pastry, the one with the nuts and honey and . . . ?"

"You mean, *baklava*?" I reply.

Smiling from ear to ear, they ask the second inevitable question: "How about that eggplant dish, or is noodles? I can't remember. Anyway, it has this wonderful cream sauce and all these layers, kind of like lasagna."

"You mean *pastichio* or *moussaka*?" I reply.

"Probably, but what's the difference?"

I then explain that *pastichio* consists of alternate layers of noodles and meat; and *moussaka*, of alternate layers of eggplant and meat. Sometimes potatoes are added, and vegetarian versions omit the meat. But all versions of *pastichio* and *moussaka* are topped and bound together by a frothy béchamel sauce.

My listeners' mouths are now watering. "Do you know how to make *pastichio* and *moussaka*?"

Of course I do! I spent at fifteen years of my youth chopping onions, beating eggs, stirring pots of cream sauce, and scrubbing burnt *pastichio* and *moussaka* pots. (Back then, there were no such things as non-stick cooking ware or electric vegetable choppers.)

Nevertheless, making traditional Greek dishes with my female relatives constitute some of the fondest memories of my youth. In my their kitchens I learned that making Greek dishes required not just a recipe, but expert knowledge of temperature and texture, an exquisite sense of timing, and at least six or seven pots.

On the surface, making *pastichio* seems relatively simple; i.e., all you have to do is put some noodles, meat, tomato sauce, and spices in a pan; dump a cheese sauce over everything; and then bake the concoction. Right?

Wrong! *Pastichio* requires lots of synchronization and attention to detail. Messing up any of the many steps involved can lead to one of three *pastichio* disasters: (a) a dry *pastichio*

that can barely be chewed; (b) a mushy *pastichio*, where you can't tell one ingredient from the other; or (c) a greasy *pastichio*, where all the butter in the cream sauce has dripped into the noodles section, resulting in a hard crust of dried milk over a greasy pile of noodles.

Consider, also, all the pots involved. In Pot #1, you boil noodles. In Pot #2, you mix the noodles with butter and cheese. In Pot #3, you braise the meat with onion, spices, and tomato paste. In Pot or Bowl #4, you beat egg whites until they stand erect. (Mix-masters and blenders hadn't been invented yet. So you had to use a hand-held eggbeater and keep turning the handle around and around as fast as possible.)

Then in a separate pot, Pot or Bowl #5, you whip egg yolks until they're frothy, after which you add the yolks to the stiff egg whites in Pot #4. But this needs to be done very slowly, lest the egg whites go flat, which ruins the cream sauce. Also, if you waited too long before folding the yolks into the egg whites in Pot #4, the egg whites would lose their stiffness, which also ruins the cream sauce.

In Pot #6, you carefully sift the required amount of flour or cornstarch, which is then carefully added to the milk, butter, and select spices being heated up in Pot #7, the cream sauce pot. The last step is to alternate layers of noodles with layers of the meat mixture (and/or potatoes) in a long pan, cover the mixture with the cream sauce, and bake it for just the right amount of time. For special effects, you can sprinkle Parmesan cheese and breadcrumbs on top.

Okay, one could argue, aside from all the pots and bowls involved, what's so hard about making *pastichio*? After all, even college kids who never boiled an egg in their life can boil some noodles and make pasta?

But *pastichio* noodles aren't like other kinds of noodles. *Pastichio* noodles have to be removed from the boiling water before they are fully cooked; otherwise, they will fall apart later when they're baked with the other ingredients.

On the other hand, if you don't pre-boil *pastichio* noodles long enough, when they're baked with the other ingredients, they can come out as stiff and hard as rocks. Sometimes our *pastichio* noodles were so tough that my brothers used them as mini-swords and played soldiers with them.

Also, you couldn't be lazy about beating the egg whites. They couldn't just be well mixed: they had to be transformed into white peaks that looked like the clouds over Mount

Olympus. So no matter how much my wrist ached, I had to keep on beating the egg whites, or the *pastichio* might come out looking like spaghetti and meat mixed with scrambled eggs.

Pot #5, the cream sauce pot, posed the hardest challenge. The flour, butter, and cheese had to be combined and then cooked together until they turned into a cream sauce. If the heat wasn't high enough, these ingredients wouldn't coagulate. But if the heat was too high and the mixture ever actually boiled, the pot would surely burn.

For many years, I was the official bubble watcher. Bubbles meant the sauce had reached the boiling point; and if the sauce ever started boiling, it would burn. So I had to stand over the cream sauce pot, and at the first hint of any bubbles, let everyone know.

Sometimes I had to go to the bathroom. So I'd put the flame on low and run off. But nine times out of ten, by the time I returned, the sauce was bubbling, which meant that the bottom part of the sauce was burnt.

Hence, I was given strict orders to stand over the pot and keep stirring no matter what. That way, the heat would be evenly distributed. In addition, I'd be getting rid of the clumps of flour that would inevitably form, no matter how well the flour had been sifted.

After all, there was nothing more embarrassing then to have a guest hit a *pastichio* flour ball. The flour ball would explode in their mouths; they'd cough flour all over the table; and others would immediately start spitting out their *pastichio*. Needless to say, my mother felt like hiding in a closet.

The cream sauce was essential. It was the glue which held together the noodles, meat, and other ingredients. However, making good cream sauce meant more than not burning the pot. It also required knowing at what temperature to add the eggs to the milk and flour. If the milk and flour mixture was too hot, the eggs would cook in it. Then, there would be no sauce, just cooked eggs swimming around in milk and flour goo. But if the flour and milk mixture was too cool, the eggs and other ingredients would not merge, and there would be no sauce.

It was tricky business. I can't tell you how many burnt cream sauce pots I had to wash or how many times I had to beat dozens of eggs over again because the first batch of eggs had been put into the milk and flour pot too soon or too late.

You'd think that if you succeeded in getting all these ingredients together, that your trials were over. Not so. You had to bake the *pastichio* just the right amount of time.

If you baked it too long, it would turn out dry. If you didn't bake it long enough, the ingredients wouldn't coagulate. Although there were numerous *pastichio* recipes, only experience could tell you (a) how soft and noodles had to be, (b) how cool the milk and flour mixture had to be before adding the eggs, or (c) how much flour, cheese, or butter you had to add to compensate for having made some slight mistake in measuring some other ingredient. Also, *pastichio* noodles came in different sizes, which had implications for the rest of the ingredients and the cooking time.

*Moussaka* was also a multi-pot and many hour affair. First the eggplants had to "cry." This meant cutting the eggplants into one-inch slices and rubbing them with salt. That way, the bitter juices they usually contained would rise to the surface. This was especially important when the eggplants were senior citizens.

There were four kinds of eggplants: babies, teenagers, adults, and senior citizens. Baby and teenage eggplants tended not to have bitter juices. But (at the time) since eggplants were sold by the pound, most eggplant farmers preferred to let their eggplants grow to full size

Hence, older eggplants were usually the most available kind. But then you had to sort out senior citizens. Why? Because they were so dry inside that no matter how much oil or butter you added, the eggplant in your *moussaka* would come out hard and tough.

Eggplants also came in two sexes: male and female, depending on the nature of their curvature at one end. Some people claimed that female eggplants were sweeter and otherwise tastier than the males. But I don't think there is any scientific evidence to that effect.

After the eggplant slices finished "crying," you had to wash off the salt and the "tears," and then either bake or fry them. If you fried them, you had to dip them in a flour and egg mixture first in order to make a crust around the eggplant slices. That way, they wouldn't turn into slush when combined with layers of meat (or potatoes).

The layers of eggplant and other ingredients were bound together with a cheese and egg cream sauce similar to the carefully nurtured sauce used in *pastichio*. As with *pastichio*, baking

the entire *moussaka* combo required careful attention. If you baked it too long, the eggplant slices could turn into mush, and your dish would look like eggplant stew rather than *moussaka*.

By the time I was in high school, my mother tired of making *pastichio* and *moussaka*; and I had too much homework to be beating egg whites into white clouds and scrubbing burnt cream sauce pots. So we switched from the Greek dishes of *pastichio* and *moussaka* to Italian lasagna.

Lasagna required many hours and pots. But at least there was no unpredictable, fragile cream sauce to worry about; and if our lasagna didn't turn out right, we could always blame it on our not being Italian.