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Lamb Stuffed Grape Leaves with Lemon Sauce

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Lamb Stuffed Grape Leaves

On our honeymoon, on the sun bleached Greek Island of Lesbos, I was served the most delicious stuffed grape leaves sitting in a puddle of lemon sauce. So romantic, si? Actually Lesbos is a pretty tatty island, it has that penal colony feel to it, with lots of square concrete buildings with ragged curtains in place of windows. But we did have this amazing lunch there, and if my memory serves me, there was an outrageous talking parrot that entertained us. Flavor memories stick with me, the other stuff, not so much.

Fast forward to today, where we have some very nice grape leaves growing in the orto and on our roof. Just looking at the grape leaves made me hungry for some stuffed grape leaves. Is that weird? Should looking at a beautiful grape vine make you want to run to the local Hallal lamb butcher and beg for chopped lamb?

We decided on an experiment with the leaves, so we gathered some moscato grape leaves from the roof, where it looks like we are going to have a bumper crop of grapes. I see a bird battle in my near future?the damn birds picked us clean last year?just as they got ripe. And some ?American? grapes from our orto, that?s what they?re called, I don?t know why.

When we piled up the two stacks of leaves, the moscato leaves were much too tough and leathery, while the Americani were soft and supple. No dilemma there, the moscato leaves could be decoration and the Americani were going into the pot.

Stuffed Grape Leaves Alla Lesbos

24-30 fresh, young grape leaves, or a jar of brined ones

500 g freshly ground lamb

200g cooked barley (I was out of rice, so decided to try the barley and like it much better, more toothsome)

1 egg

1 fennel frond if you have it

2 cracked, whole cloves of garlic

1 cup chicken stock

salt, pepper, sprinkle of cinnamon, nutmeg, allspice

Combine the ground meat, cooked barley, an egg and the spices. Squish it all around with your hands, much better than trying to do it with a spoon.

Clean the grape leaves and clip the stems. If you are using brined grape leaves, wash the leaves.

Put about a tablespoon of the meat mixture into the center, underside of the leaf. Now make a neat roll of it. Mine come out square, they still taste good.

Lay the finished rolls in a saucepan. Add the cracked garlic and lay the fennel frond on top of the rolls. Add the chicken stock and gently poach the rolls in a covered pan for about 15-20 minutes. The whole house will smell delicious. Resist the urge to eat the rolls right out of the pan. OK, try one, you know, just to be sure they are edible.

Lemon Bechamel Sauce

50g of flour, or about ¼ cup

50 g of butter, about 4T

1 ½ cups of milk

1 lemon, zested and juiced

Your basic béchamel: put the milk in a saucepan and warm it until you start to see tiny bubbles around the edge. Meanwhile, melt the butter and add the flour, whisking the whole time. Slowly incorporate the milk. When the milk is fully incorporated, add the lemon zest and juice and about ½ cup of the cooking liquid from the grape leaves.

Arrange the stuffed grape leaves in a small oven proof casserole, add the lemon sauce and place in the oven at 325F/165C until everything is bot and bubbly, about 20 minutes. Time enough to make a salad, set the table, pick a wine, and change into an appropriate outfit for a recipe from Lesbos. I?ll leave that to your imagination.

Serve piping hot with some lemon wedges and any remaining sauce. A crusty piece of bread might be good to have around. Or some Greek music playing in the background?..

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