

Mock SU BEUREG, Spinach & Cheese Pie // SPANAKHOV BANRADZAGH

18 oz extra-thick (#10) country style phyllo dough

18-to-22 oz fresh spinach leaves

1 cup finely diced onion

3 tablespoons plus one tablespoon safflower oil

salt, to taste

1/2-to-1 teaspoon red Aleppo pepper

1/3 teaspoon black pepper

1/4-to-1/2 teaspoon garlic powder

6-to-8 oz California Feta cheese; or any white curd cheese

2 oz/4 tablespoons butter, melted

1/2-to-3/4 cups canola oil (more oil keeps dough sheets separated)

2 large or extra-large eggs; slightly whisked

a pinch of baking powder

1 cup milk

3/4-to-1 cup sparkling mineral water (S. Pellegrino, Perrier, VOSS)

additional oil; to grease pan

1 egg yolk whisked with one tablespoon sparkling water; for egg wash

Prepare filling. Bring water to a gentle boil, add salt and blanch spinach until almost wilted. Drain and dry on paper towels. Sauté onions in three tablespoons oil until translucent. Add spinach and remaining one tablespoon oil and stir-cook 5-to-7 minutes. Turn off heat, add salt and spices then set aside. Once cool, mix in cheese.

* you can make this without spinach; simply use about 3-to-4 cups of cheese. You can combine a variety of white cheeses with any curd cheese, or use Feta cheese with a little bit of yellow semi-firm melting cheese added to it, like Pecorino-Romano or Kashkaval cheese. Simply add a large bunch of parsley and omit spices and salt.

Prepare liquid. Combine butter, oil, eggs, baking powder, milk and mineral water. You can substitute sparkling mineral water with seltzer or soda/carbonated water.

Assemble pastry. Grease bottom and sides of a 12"x3"-round pan if your pan is less than 2"-deep I suggest placing it on a baking sheet to prevent oil drippings.

Cut three layers of phyllo dough the size of your pan and set aside until ready to use. Tear remaining sheets into medium-sized pieces. Place one of the three circles at the bottom of the pan and generously wet with some of the liquid mix. Continue layering half of the torn sheets, slightly overlapping and going up the sides of the pan and dousing in between the layers with more liquid as you go along.

Once half the sheets are used, evenly spread the spinach-cheese mixture and gently press to pack. Fold in overhanging edges over filling. Continue layering remaining phyllo dough in the same manner. Finish off with the two pre-cut circles of dough. Cut pastry into squares all the way to the bottom and pour all remaining liquid mix where the cuts are made. Cover and refrigerate 2-to-3 hours.

Bake pastry. Preheat a conventional oven to 385F-to-400F. Brush pastry with prepared egg wash, wait 5 minutes, then brush once more. Bake 25-to-30 minutes on the middle-lower rack. Move rack to the middle and bake for another 15-to-25 minutes until puffy and nicely golden brown all over.

Once you remove the pastry from the oven it will be puffy and steaming hot. Using a toothpick, poke holes where the cuts are made to allow steam to escape; it will gradually deflate. Rest 10-to-15 minutes, cut into square and serve it is equally good served slightly warm or at room temperature.