

HERBED RICE-STUFFED BELL PEPPERS & SUN-DRIED EGGPLANTS

for filling:

12 medium assorted onions and shallots, sliced 1/8" thick
1 cup olive oil, plus an additional 1/4 cup
1/2-to-2/3 cup pine nuts
1/2-to-3/4 cup currants
1 tablespoon allspice
2 tablespoons cinnamon
1 1/4 teaspoons black pepper
4 teaspoons salt
1/4-to-1/2 cup granulated white sugar, plus an additional 1 tablespoon
2 teaspoons tomato paste
1 1/2 cups short-grain rice, washed, soaked 25 minutes in cold water, drained
2 jumbo Beefsteak tomatoes, peeled, deseeded, finely chopped
1 1/2 cups boiling hot water, plus about an additional 2 cups
1-to-2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice, plus an additional 2 tablespoons
1 1/2 bunches flat-leaf parsley, chiffonade
2-to-3 bunches fresh dill, snipped
1 bunch fresh mint, chiffonade

for stuffed bell peppers:

18-20 standing bell peppers, deveined & deseeded, tops reserved
sliced onions and tomato

for stuffed eggplants:

sun-dried eggplants, soaked in several changes of water until almost softened

for stuffed mussels:

30 large fresh black mussels, shells scrubbed clean, beards pulled and barnacles cut off

Prepare rice filling: Sauté onions and shallots in a large stainless steel or cast-iron skillet without oil until translucent and all liquid is gone; for about 12 minutes. Add a little oil at a time and sauté on medium/medium-high heat until onions start to brown - you will need to use one cup of oil for this step. Add a tablespoon of sugar and sauté onions, scraping the bottom occasionally, until caramelized to a very dark golden brown. Be careful not to scorch the onions; the entire process should take about 45-to-60 minutes.

Add pine nuts and currants and stir-fry 1-2 minutes until golden and plump. Remove from heat. Add allspice, cinnamon, black pepper, salt, sugar and tomato paste. Mix in rice and tomatoes. Add 1 1/2 cups hot water, bring to a boil and simmer on medium-low heat for 12-15 minutes until all liquid is gone. Turn off heat, cover with a dish towel and let rest 15-20 minutes.

Once the rice mixture is cool to touch mix in 1-to-2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice. Toss in parsley, dill and mint. Adjust seasoning. Keep uncovered until ready to use.

To prepare stuffed bell peppers and eggplants: Cover the bottom of a heavy pan with sliced onions and tomatoes. Spoon stuffing loosely into peppers, up to half-an-inch from the top, put the caps back on and place upright in prepared pan.

Cover with 2-to-3 cups hot water, 1/4 cup oil and 2 tablespoons lemon juice. Add a sprinkle of salt and sugar. Bring to a gentle boil for 5 minutes. Reduce to medium-low and simmer, covered, 25-35 minutes until rice is cooked and peppers are tender. Turn off heat and rest in pan for 10 minutes. Drain liquids without disturbing peppers, cover and set aside to cool. Once completely cooled refrigerate overnight. Serve cold.

To prepare stuffed mussels: Keep mussels in cold water and make sure you discard the ones with open shells. Using a sharp paring knife open shell and fill with about half a tablespoon of rice stuffing then close and pack tightly into a pot you can tie them up individually with strings if you want to.

Add half a cup of water into the pot, cover with a sheet of dampened parchment paper and a heavy plate on top to weigh it down. Bring to a boil, covered, then reduce heat to the lowest setting and steam mussels for 15-to-20 minutes. Uncover, drain liquid (reserve) and rearrange mussels in pan top to bottom/bottom to top. Pour liquid back in and cook for another 10 minutes. Turn off heat. Leave to cool in pan then brush shells with olive oil for shine. Once completely cooled refrigerate overnight. Serve cold.