

Eggplant with Lamb, Tomato, and Pine Nuts

Sheik al Mehsheh, a meal “fit for a king,” is one of the most delectable ways to prepare eggplant. Traditionally, small eggplant are halved and stuffed with the lamb filling, then baked in tomato sauce. My mother’s version is this layered style, which gives the eggplant a deeply caramelized flavor. She always made eggplant as the ultimate homecoming dish for any of her five children coming home from college, and then from our various cities across the country. Nothing could make us more overjoyed than walking into the house to the scent of sheik al mehsheh, except for a mother’s warm embrace.

Makes 8 servings

- 2 large, firm eggplants
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt, divided
- 1 medium-size yellow onion, finely diced
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 pound / 450 g ground lamb or beef (80 percent lean)
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- Several grinds of black pepper
- 1 (28-ounce / 795 g) can tomato sauce
- ½ cup / 75 g Butter Toasted Pine Nuts (page 33)
- 1½ cups / 360 mL warm water
- 12 ounces / 340 g fresh mozzarella cheese
- 1 recipe Lebanese Vermicelli Rice (page 147)



Preheat the broiler and line a baking sheet with foil or parchment. Trim the stem from each eggplant, and without peeling them, cut the eggplants in ½-inch / 1.5 cm slices. Brush both sides of the eggplant slices with 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, and sprinkle them with 1 teaspoon of the salt. Arrange the slices on the prepared baking sheet and broil them in batches until they are deep mahogany brown (they’ll be slightly charred in some spots), turning them once to brown both sides, 10 to 15 minutes total.

Adjust the oven to 375°F / 190°C with a rack positioned in the center.

In a medium sauté pan, heat 1 tablespoon of the remaining olive oil over medium heat. Add the chopped onion and sauté it until it is translucent, but not browned, stirring occasionally. Stir in the garlic and cook just until it is fragrant, about a minute. Add the ground lamb or beef, breaking up the meat into very small pieces with the side of a metal spoon, stirring frequently. Season the mixture with a teaspoon of the salt, the cinnamon, and the pepper. Sauté until the meat is just cooked through, continuing to break up the meat into small pieces as it cooks.

Coat a 13 x 9 x 2-inch / 33 x 23 x 5 cm baking or similar sized gratin dish with a tablespoon of olive oil. Spread about ½ cup / 120 mL of tomato sauce in the bottom of the dish. Lay several eggplant slices in a single layer over the sauce, covering as much surface area of the bottom of the dish as possible. Spoon half of the meat evenly over the eggplant and pour half of the remaining tomato sauce evenly over the meat. Sprinkle with one-third of the pine nuts. Now layer again with eggplant, meat, pine nuts, and tomato sauce. Finish with a layer of eggplant and cover that with more tomato sauce, sprinkling the top with pine nuts.

Pour the warm water around the perimeter of the eggplant. This is an important step, or your sauce will be too thick; it may seem watery at first when you do this but the sauce will thicken as it bakes.

Cover the pan tightly with foil and bake it for 90 minutes. Remove the foil and top the eggplant evenly with fresh mozzarella cheese (rub the soft cheese between your fingers to break it up into small pieces). Bake for about 15 minutes longer, uncovered, until the cheese is bubbling and golden. Serve the eggplant warm, over rice.