



**Cook**

# Albanian

**in America**

Recipes with love from

**The Robot Book  
Club**

# **Cook Albanian in America**

*Traditional Recipes and Family Flavors for the American Kitchen*

The Robot Book Club

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# Preface

This book, and The Robot Book Club, is an experiment large scale AI generation. Every page, from layout to images to copy, was generated with zero human review.

The authoring and publishing teams were implemented in the Kaya scripting language. They were given only the input: Albanian Home Cooking.

This is the only page authored by a human: Hello there!

— Ted Benson

# Prologue

Tuesday night in an Ohio suburb, the kitchen windows steam up, a box of supermarket phyllo thaws on the counter, the hiss of a pressure cooker sets a steady rhythm, and the rich, earthy scent of slow-cooked lamb, tangy yogurt, and roasted bell peppers fills the room. For the sons and daughters of the Albanian diaspora, watching that yogurt and those bell peppers bubble and reduce in the pan forms a direct, visceral line to a homeland often visited through the fading hues of family photographs or brief, intense summer holidays. It is the taste of a weeknight *gjellë*, the crisp, golden layers of a Sunday morning *byrek*, that whispers a forgotten language, a heritage stubbornly, joyously preserved.

This is for the cooks navigating fluorescent-lit supermarket aisles, trying to remember the specific way their grandmother crimped the *byrek*, balancing the pull of tradition with the demands of a modern weeknight. It's about honest, deeply felt Albanian cooking, the kind that happens when neighbors gather, when cousins descend, when the profound urge to simply *make* something truly, authentically Albanian is undeniable. No apologies, no compromises on flavor—just smart, practical adaptations.

Here, the ancient techniques are respected, yes, but the methods are built for real life. For accessible ingredients, for kitchens without stone hearths, for busy hands yearning to connect. From the humble, soulful stews that warm a winter night, built to satisfy, to the celebratory baked dishes that demand a crowd, this book demonstrates *Mikpritja* in action—pulling up extra chairs, dragging a folding table into the living room, and setting out plates for guests who haven't even called yet. It is a practical manual that truly comes alive in the moment the

heavy platters are passed hand to hand and the table is finally cleared. Set the table, slide over a poured glass of raki, and feed whoever walks through the door.





# Mëngjesi: The Weekend Breakfast Ritual

*The slow, comforting morning foods that define an Albanian weekend, adapted for realistic home cooking.*

Sunday at 8 a.m., the kitchen wakes to the crackle of wet dough hitting hot oil, the sharp funk of feta, and the dark sludge of proper coffee simmering in a copper xhezve. This is mëngjesi, a three-hour marathon of stretching dough and emptying coffee pots. Whether you're committing to the time it takes to stretch byrek dough until it's translucent, or cheating time with a stack of commercial phyllo to satisfy a weeknight craving, the soul of these recipes remains intact. Hot oil blisters the petulla dough, the coffee settles in the cups, and the outside world can wait, leaving a trail of shattered, buttery phyllo shards on the plate.





# Fërgesë Verore e Mëngjesit

*fuhr-GEH-suh veh-ROH-reh eh muhn-JEH-sit*

This is a masterpiece of Albanian resourcefulness, turning humble summer produce into a deeply comforting skillet meal. Without access to true gjizë—the tangy, crumbly whey cheese of the homeland—a blend of drained ricotta and sharp feta bridges the gap perfectly for the diaspora kitchen. The only secret that matters here is patience. You cook those tomatoes down until the water completely evaporates and the olive oil separates, pooling in a glistening, orange-red layer on the surface. That’s how the grandmothers do it. Serve it straight from the iron with thick bread to mop up the wreckage.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 cup</b>	whole-milk ricotta cheese	<b>4 large</b>	ripe summer tomatoes <i>halved horizontally</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	salt
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper
<b>4 med</b>	Cubanelle or mild Italian frying peppers <i>cored, seeded, and chopped into 1-inch pieces</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried oregano
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	red chili flakes
<b>3 med</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>4 large</b>	eggs
		<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh parsley or mint <i>roughly chopped</i>
		<b>1 large</b>	crusty bread <i>sliced and toasted, for serving</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Drain the ricotta.**

Place the ricotta in a fine mesh sieve over a bowl for at least 30 minutes to remove excess moisture, mimicking the dry texture of traditional Albanian gjizë.

- **Grate the tomatoes.**

Instead of tedious boiling and peeling, rub the cut side of the halved tomatoes against the large holes of a box grater over a bowl; the flesh will puree, and the skins can be discarded.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Blister the peppers in hot olive oil.**

Place a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat, add the olive oil, and fry the chopped peppers for 5 to 7 minutes until the edges blister and take on a sweet, smoky char.

**1. Build the aromatics.**

Lower the heat to medium, add the diced onion, and sauté until soft and translucent. Stir in the minced garlic and cook for just 60 seconds until fragrant, taking care not to let it brown.

**2. Simmer and reduce the tomatoes until the oil surfaces.**

Pour the grated tomatoes into the skillet along with the salt, pepper, oregano, and chili flakes. Let the sauce simmer uncovered for 10 to 15 minutes until the water entirely evaporates and the olive oil separates to pool on the surface—what Albanians call *vaji të dalë në sipërfaqe*.

**3. Fold in the cheese.**

Reduce the heat to medium-low and gently stir in the drained ricotta and crumbled feta. The cheese will melt into the acidic tomato base, transforming the sauce into a rich, creamy, orange-hued stew. Let it bubble for 2 to 3 minutes.

**4. Poach the eggs directly in the sauce.**

Use the back of a spoon to create four small wells in the thick *Fërgesë* and crack an egg into each. Sprinkle a tiny pinch of salt over each yolk, cover the skillet tightly, and cook for 3 to 5 minutes until the whites are just set.

**5. Garnish and serve immediately.**

Remove the skillet from the heat, scatter with fresh parsley or mint, and bring the hot pan directly to the table alongside thick slices of crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Scramble the eggs for a faster meal.**

For a quicker, highly traditional rural adaptation, beat the four eggs in a bowl and fold them directly into the simmering sauce for 1 to 2 minutes until you have a creamy, marbled scramble.

● **Use canned tomatoes during the winter.**

In the dead of winter when fresh tomatoes are pale and flavorless, a 14.5-ounce can of high-quality crushed tomatoes is a perfectly acceptable and preferred substitute.



# Kimë me Vezë

*kee-mah meh veh-zuh*

If you grew up in an Albanian household, the smell of onions cooking down in olive oil on a Saturday morning is practically hardwired into your DNA. This isn't a complex culinary parlor trick; it's a testament to the ingenuity of the Albanian grandmother. A cheap cut of meat is stretched to feed a crowd, carried by a mountain of onions melted down into a sweet, rich, savory jam. Forget the unnecessary spices or the urge to turn this into a Middle Eastern shakshuka—this is pure Balkan comfort, meant to be eaten straight from the skillet with a torn hunk of crusty bread to mop up the runny yolks.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 med</b>	yellow onions <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>3 tbsp</b>	water	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper
<b>1 lb</b>	80/20 ground beef	<b>1/2 cup</b>	hot water
<b>2 med</b>	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>	<b>4 large</b>	eggs
<b>1 tbsp</b>	double-concentrated tomato paste	<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Sweat the onions; do not fry them.**

The true grandma secret to this dish is starting the onions with a splash of water and a lid. The steam breaks the onions down rapidly without burning them, entirely skipping the bitter browning process in favor of a sweet, translucent melt.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the onions and 3 tablespoons of water in a large skillet over medium heat and cover with a lid.**

Let them steam and sweat for 5 to 7 minutes. This breaks down their cellular structure rapidly without browning or burning them.

- 2. Remove the lid, allow the water to evaporate, and pour in the olive oil.**

Sauté the onions, stirring frequently, until they are highly translucent, deeply softened, and turning a light golden color. Do not rush this step; it takes about 8 to 10 minutes and forms the fundamental flavor base of the dish.

- 1. Push the onions to the perimeter of the skillet, increase the heat to medium-high, and add the ground beef to the center.**

Break the meat apart with a spoon and let it brown deeply. Once it is no longer releasing liquid, mix it thoroughly with the onions, stir in the minced garlic, and cook for one more minute until fragrant.

- 2. Stir in the tomato paste, sweet paprika, salt, and black pepper.**

Cook for 2 minutes to toast the spices and deepen the color of the tomato paste.

- 3. Pour in the half cup of hot water, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pan.**

Reduce the heat to low and simmer gently for 5 minutes. The mixture should be thick, rich, and cohesive, but retain enough moisture to steam the eggs.

- 4. Use the back of a spoon to make four indentations in the meat mixture and carefully crack an egg into each well.**

Sprinkle a tiny pinch of salt and pepper over each egg yolk.

- 5. Place the lid back on the skillet and leave it on low heat for 4 to 6 minutes.**

Keep a close eye on it—you want the egg whites to be completely opaque and set, but the yolks to remain soft and runny.

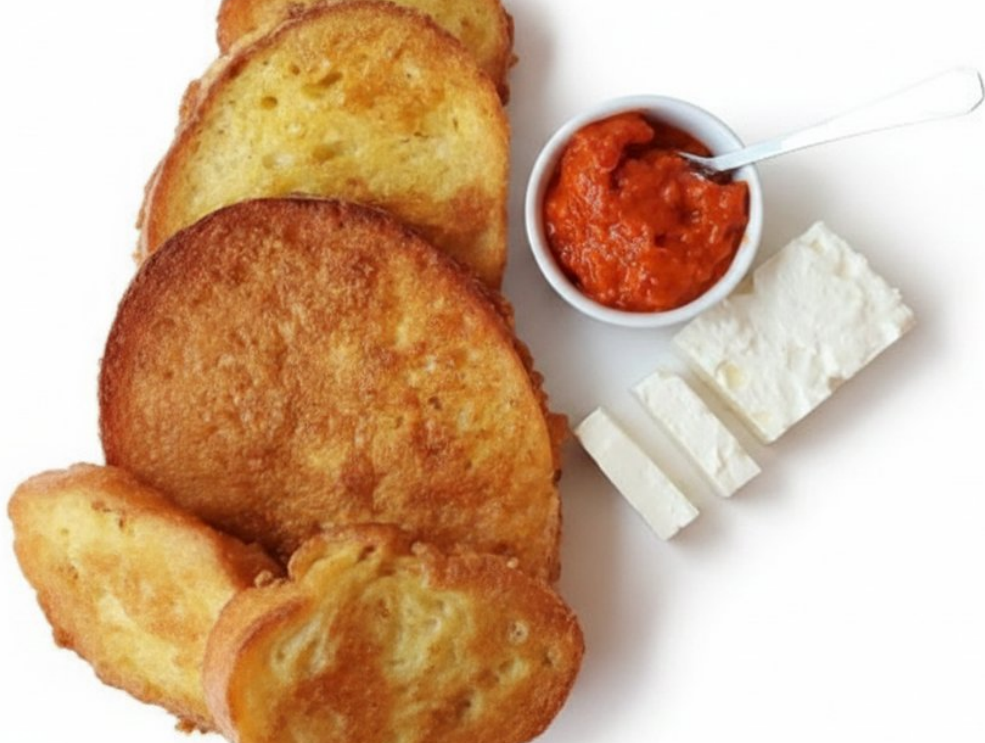
- 6. Remove from the heat, garnish generously with fresh parsley, and serve immediately.**

Bring the entire skillet to the table to be eaten with crusty artisan bread.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **A note on tomato paste versus fresh tomatoes.**

If you are cooking this in the peak of summer, you can swap the tomato paste for two ripe, sun-warmed tomatoes grated on a box grater (discarding the skins). In the winter, do not bother with mealy supermarket tomatoes; high-quality paste perfectly mimics the concentrated flavor of the summer harvest.



# Bukë me Vezë

*boo-kuh meh vehz*

For first-generation Albanians, this aroma is the ultimate anchor to the homeland. Bukë me Vezë is no cloyingly sweet American French toast; it is a deeply savory, zero-waste ritual born of necessity. Stale bread gets a quick dip in eggs and a splash of milk, then hits hot olive oil until golden and structured. It is a grandmother's pragmatic alchemy—feeding the family fast with nothing but pantry staples. Served with sharp feta, thick summer tomatoes, and raw scallions, it tastes exactly like home.

## INGREDIENTS

**1 med** crusty Italian or French bread  
*sliced and left to go stale*      **4 large** eggs

<b>1/4 cup</b>	whole milk	<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter
<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	feta cheese <i>cut into thick chunks, for serving</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	Pecorino Romano or Feta cheese <i>finely grated or crumbled</i>	<b>2 large</b>	tomatoes <i>thickly sliced, for serving</i>
		<b>4 med</b>	scallions <i>trimmed, for serving</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Stale the bread.**

If your loaf is fresh, slice it and leave it out on the counter overnight to dry out the crumb.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the batter aggressively.**

In a wide, shallow bowl, beat the eggs, milk, salt, pepper, and the grated Pecorino or crumbled feta with a fork until frothy and completely homogenous.

- 2. Heat the frying fat.**

Place a heavy skillet over medium heat and add the olive oil and butter, letting it get hot enough that a drop of egg sizzles instantly to keep the bread from absorbing excess grease.

- 3. Execute the quick dip.**

Working in batches, dip the stale bread slices into the egg mixture for just two to three seconds per side without letting them soak.

- 4. Fry to a golden crust.**

Lay the coated bread into the hot skillet, frying for two to three minutes on the first side until deeply golden and savory, then flip and cook for another two minutes.

**1. Serve hot.**

Transfer the fried bread to a platter and eat it immediately alongside chunks of sharp feta, thick slices of tomato, and raw scallions.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

- **The bread must be stale.**

Fresh bread will disintegrate and turn into mush. If your bread is fresh, slice it and leave it exposed to the air for at least twelve hours before frying.

- **Embrace the savory profile.**

Do not add vanilla or sugar. This dish leans entirely on the sharp bite of the cheese and the slightly peppery finish of the olive oil.



# Pispili i Shpejtë në Tigan

*pees-PEE-lee ee shpayt nuh tee-GAHN*

If you grew up in an Albanian household, you know the smell of pispili—toasted cornmeal, sizzling olive oil, and sharp feta pulling you out of bed. Traditionally an hour-long oven affair, grandmas have a trick for when the family is hungry now: the skillet. You must squeeze every drop of water from your greens, and hydrate the cornmeal with hot water so it doesn't turn out gritty. Most importantly, do not skip the fresh dill and mint. That cooling herbal note against warm, salty feta is the true, unapologetic taste of the Balkans.

## INGREDIENTS

**1 lb**

fresh spinach  
*washed*

**1 bunch**

scallions  
*thinly sliced*

**1 tbsp** extra-virgin olive oil  
**1 pinch** salt  
**1 pinch** black pepper  
**1 1/2 cup** yellow cornmeal  
**1 tsp** salt  
**1 tsp** baking powder  
**1 cup** hot water  
**1/2 cup** plain whole-milk yogurt

**2 large** eggs  
**3 tbsp** extra-virgin olive oil  
**1 1/2 cup** sheep's milk feta cheese  
*crumbled by hand*  
**1/4 cup** fresh dill  
*finely chopped*  
**1/4 cup** fresh mint  
*finely chopped*  
**2 tbsp** extra-virgin olive oil  
*divided*

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. **Wilt the greens.**

Heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Cook the scallions until soft, then add the spinach in handfuls, tossing until just wilted. Remove from the heat and let cool.

### 2. **Squeeze out all the moisture.**

Transfer the cooled greens to a clean kitchen towel and ruthlessly wring out every drop of water. This keeps the pie from turning to mush. Chop the dry ball of greens roughly and set aside.

### 3. **Hydrate the cornmeal.**

In a large bowl, whisk the cornmeal, 1 teaspoon of salt, and the baking powder. Pour in the hot water and stir well. Let it sit for 5 minutes so the grain softens and doesn't taste gritty.

### 4. **Build the batter.**

Once the cornmeal has rested, whisk in the yogurt, eggs, and 3 tablespoons of olive oil. You want a thick batter somewhere between pancake batter and wet sand.

**1. Fold in the matrix.**

Add your dry, chopped greens, crumbled feta, dill, and mint to the batter. Gently fold everything together until evenly distributed.

**2. Fry the crust.**

Wipe out your skillet and heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil over medium heat. Pour the batter into the center, spreading it evenly into a flat disk. Let it sizzle uncovered for 2 minutes to establish a crust.

**3. Cover and cook.**

Turn the heat down to medium-low. Cover the skillet with a tight-fitting lid and cook for 8 to 10 minutes. The trapped steam will cook the center while the bottom gets a gorgeous, golden-brown crust.

**4. Flip the pispili.**

Remove the lid. Once the top looks set, run a spatula around the edges. Place a large plate upside down over the skillet, hold firmly, and invert so the pispili falls onto the plate, crispy side up.

**5. Crisp the second side.**

Add the final tablespoon of olive oil to the skillet. Slide the pispili back in and cook uncovered for 5 to 7 minutes. Slide onto a board, let it cool slightly, and serve.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Squeeze the greens ruthlessly.**

Moisture is the absolute enemy of a good pispili. Taking the time to physically wring out the spinach prevents the cornmeal from steam-boiling in its own juices.

● **Don't skip the herbs.**

Dill and mint aren't garnishes here; they're structural. That cooling herbal note against the warm, salty feta is the quintessential flavor signature of the dish.

● **Use the right cornmeal.**

Stick to fine or medium yellow cornmeal. Never use sweetened cornbread mixes, as this dish is strictly savory.



# Tigan me Suxhuk dhe Vezë

*tee-GAHN meh soo-JOOK dheh VE-zuh*

If you grew up in an Albanian household, the smell of sizzling suxhuk on a weekend morning is permanently encoded into your DNA. This dry, heavily garlicked beef sausage is the undisputed king of the Balkan breakfast spread. The grandmother's secret lies entirely in the violently red, spiced fat it releases when cooked slowly. You fry the suxhuk in butter, coax out that glorious oil, and crack your eggs directly into it. It's called a weekend ritual, but taking exactly ten minutes from fridge to pan, it's secretly your ultimate busy weeknight savior.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 tbsp</b>	European-style unsalted butter	<b>2 oz</b>	Albanian white cheese or sheep's milk feta in brine <i>crumbled</i>
<b>4 oz</b>	beef suxhuk or Turkish sucuk <i>casings removed and sliced into 1/4-inch rounds</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
<b>4 large</b>	eggs	<b>4 slice</b>	crusty sourdough or ciabatta <i>thickly sliced</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Prep the sausage.**

Peel the casing off the suxhuk before slicing, as it can be tough and chewy when pan-fried.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the gold.**

Place a medium heavy-bottomed skillet—ideally cast iron—over medium-low heat and add the butter.

- 2. Coax out the spices.**

As soon as the butter melts and foams, lay the suxhuk slices flat in the pan and sear them slowly for about two minutes per side. You want the sausage to crisp slightly while leaching its bright red, paprika-laced fat into the butter; do not rush this with high heat.

- 3. Fry the eggs in the red oil.**

Once the suxhuk is swimming in that violently red fat, gently crack the eggs directly into the pan, spacing them out over the meat.

- 4. Baste and set.**

Let the eggs fry undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes until the whites are just set but the yolks remain luxurious and runny. If you prefer a firmer yolk, cover the skillet for the final 60 seconds to steam the tops.

**1. Finish with cheese and pepper.**

Remove the skillet from the heat, generously scatter the crumbled cheese over the hot eggs and sausage so it just begins to soften, and finish with a crack of black pepper.

**2. Serve it straight from the pan.**

Bring the skillet directly to the table with the thick slices of crusty bread, which act as your edible spoon for dragging through the yolk, cheese, and spicy fat.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Sourcing the suxhuk.**

You can easily find vacuum-sealed Turkish sucuk at any local Mediterranean, Middle Eastern, or halal market. If you are truly in a pinch at a standard American supermarket, a high-quality, hard Spanish chorizo or thick-cut halal beef pepperoni will mimic the fat-rendering technique.

● **Skip the salt.**

The suxhuk and the brined cheese are both highly seasoned; you will almost certainly not need any additional salt to finish this dish.



# Përshesh me Qumësht

*purrr-SHESH meh CHOO-musht*

Before cereal boxes invaded pantry shelves, there was përshesh. Up in the Albanian mountains, wasting bread was a grave taboo. The solution was brilliant, zero-waste peasant food: tear dense, stale loaves into a bowl and drown them in steaming, high-fat dairy. Today, it's the diaspora's ultimate fallback meal. It takes three minutes, requires no technique, and delivers pure, unapologetic comfort. The secret is the interplay of hot, rich milk and the salty punch of good sheep's milk feta over ragged, chewy bread.

## INGREDIENTS

**2 cup** stale crusty bread  
*torn by hand into irregular chunks*

**1 1/2 cup** whole milk

**1 pinch** kosher salt

**1 tsp** cultured butter

**2 tbsp** brined sheep's milk feta  
*roughly crumbled*

## INSTRUCTIONS

**1. Tear the bread into a bowl.**

Use your hands, never a knife. The ragged edges absorb the milk unevenly, giving you a mix of soft, soaked edges and firm, chewy centers. Drop the chunks into a deep, heat-proof bowl.

**2. Simmer the milk.**

In a small saucepan, bring the whole milk to a gentle simmer over medium heat until it's steaming hot and just on the verge of bubbling. Don't let it boil over.

**3. Drown the bread.**

Pour the steaming milk directly over the bread. Use a spoon to gently press the chunks down so every piece is submerged. Let it sit undisturbed for exactly 60 seconds—any longer and you risk mush.

**4. Garnish and serve.**

While the bowl is still steaming, drop the butter on top to melt, and hit it with the crumbled feta. The heat softens the cheese just enough to release its sharp, salty aroma. Eat immediately.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Bread Selection.**

Never use soft American sandwich bread; it will turn into gummy paste. You need a dense, rustic loaf like sourdough, pane di casa, or an unsweetened cornbread, and it needs to be two or three days old.

- **The Sweet Version.**

If you want the version every Albanian kid ate before bed, skip the feta and salt. Instead, stir a tablespoon of sugar or honey into the hot milk before pouring it over the bread.



# Tost i Fshatit me Kaçkavall

*tohst ee fshah-teet meh kash-kah-vahl*

If you ask any Albanian what tastes like home, past the complex stews and the labor-intensive byreks, they will inevitably sigh and mention bukë e thekur me kaçkavall. It is the ultimate expression of their culinary philosophy: when your ingredients are perfect, you don't need to do much to them. In the villages, thick slabs of rustic bread were topped with salty, yellow sheep's cheese and thrown into the residual heat of a wood-fired oven. The cheese bubbles, browns in spots, and becomes dangerously molten, while the thick crust of the bread shatters satisfyingly when you bite into it. If you can't find real Balkan Kaçkavall at a local market, this specific supermarket blend of sharp

provolone and mozzarella hits the exact same nostalgic, sharp notes. No fake Hollywood versions here—just pure, grandma-approved comfort.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 large</b>	artisan sourdough boule or rustic Italian loaf <i>cut into 3/4-inch slices</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	low-moisture mozzarella cheese <i>shredded</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted European-style butter <i>softened to room temp</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	Pecorino Romano cheese <i>grated</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	sharp provolone cheese <i>shredded</i>	<b>1 pinch</b>	dried oregano
		<b>1 pinch</b>	crushed red pepper flakes

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Position an oven rack about 4 inches below your broiler element and preheat the broiler on high.**  
Arrange the bread slices on a heavy-duty baking sheet.
- 2. Spread the softened butter in a thin, even layer across the entire surface of each slice, going completely edge-to-edge.**  
This isn't just for flavor; it seals the crumb and acts as a lipid barrier so the exposed crust doesn't immediately incinerate under the intense heat.
- 3. Toss the provolone, mozzarella, and pecorino together, then distribute the cheese evenly over the buttered bread.**  
Pile the cheese slightly higher in the center than on the edges, as it will melt outward. Make sure there are no bare patches of bread exposed in the middle. Grating your own cheese instead of using pre-sliced allows it to interlock into a cohesive, bubbly blanket.

**1. Throw the baking sheet under the broiler and do not walk away.**

This will take anywhere from 2 to 5 minutes depending on your oven. You're looking for the cheese to bubble vigorously and develop distinct golden-brown, toasted spots across the surface, while the edges of the bread turn a deep, dark, shattered-glass crispy brown. Don't settle for a flat, sad puddle of melted dairy.

**2. Pull from the oven, hit it lightly with a pinch of oregano or red pepper flakes, and serve immediately.**

Eat it while the cheese is still dangerously molten and stretching. For the real Albanian breakfast experience, serve it alongside fresh salted tomatoes, Kalamata olives, and a steaming cup of hot black tea.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing real kaçkavall.**

If you have access to a Mediterranean, Turkish, or European market, look for authentic sheep's milk Kaçkavall (often sold under brands like Sutas or Kashkaval Vitosha). If you score some, skip the provolone-mozzarella blend and simply use 1 1/2 cups of shredded Kaçkavall.



# Gjellë & Jani: The Weeknight Simmer

*Hearty, vegetable-forward stews that honor the old world but save your Tuesday night.*

Tuesday at 6:30 PM, the Dutch oven hisses as you build gjellë and jani—the absolute workhorses of the working kitchen. Born of saving seeds in matchboxes and working rocky soil, they simmer steadily on a standard gas burner. They are the smell of survival: pots bubbling low, breaking down humble beans, bruised tomatoes, and tough cuts until the meat yields to the back of a spoon.

Whether it's an overnight soak for an heirloom fasule or a rapid-fire fërgesë thrown together after a brutal shift, the objective remains the same. You use what you have to build deep flavor out of nothing, turning a jar of roasted peppers and a can of supermarket white beans into restorative comfort that makes a Tuesday night in Ohio smell like a Sunday in Tirana. Pop the can, ignite the burner, and salvage the evening.





# Jani me Fasule

*yah-nee meh fah-SOO-leh*

Walk into any Albanian home on a Monday and you'll get hit with the deep, indisputable aroma of Jani me Fasule. This is peasant food at its absolute finest—the kind of resourceful, stick-to-your-ribs cooking that kept generations alive and eventually became royalty. The authentic secret is uncompromising: a hard 'first boil' to strip the beans of impurities, and a rich flavor base built on whole boiled vegetables mashed directly into screaming-hot, caramelized tomato paste. No flour, no fake shortcuts. We're using a pressure cooker here to condense an all-day Sunday project into a weeknight reality, but the soul of the stew stays exactly where it belongs.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	dried Cannellini beans <i>soaked overnight in cold water with 1/4 tsp baking soda</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil
<b>6 cup</b>	water <i>hot</i>	<b>3 clove</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>peeled and halved</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	double-concentrated tomato paste
<b>1 large</b>	carrot <i>peeled and halved</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 small</b>	red bell pepper <i>halved and seeded</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	crushed red pepper flakes
<b>2</b>	dried bay leaves	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried mint
<b>1/4 lb</b>	smoked slab bacon <i>left whole</i>	<b>to taste</b>	salt
		<b>to taste</b>	black pepper
		<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Soak the beans.**

The night before cooking, submerge the dried beans in plenty of cold water and stir in a quarter teaspoon of baking soda. This is a grandmother's trick that drastically cuts down cooking time and yields a creamier center.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Purge the beans to remove impurities.**

Bring the soaked beans to a rapid boil in a large pot of fresh water for five minutes. Dump that murky, foam-covered water down the drain and rinse the beans off.

- 2. Fire up the pressure cooker.**

Throw the rinsed beans, six cups of hot water, halved onion, carrot, bell pepper, bay leaves, and the slab bacon into an electric pressure cooker. Cook on high pressure for thirty minutes, then let the pressure release naturally for ten minutes.

**1. Extract and mash the vegetables.**

Fish out the boiled onion, carrot, and pepper halves and mash them into a rustic puree with a fork in a small bowl. Pull the bacon out, chop or shred it, and toss it back into the pot.

**2. Build the fërgesë in a separate skillet.**

Heat the olive oil over medium heat and fry the minced garlic and tomato paste for two minutes to kill the tinny, raw acidity. Stir in the paprika, red pepper flakes, and your vegetable puree, cooking until it forms a thick, deeply fragrant, brick-red paste.

**3. Marry the flavors and simmer.**

Scrape that rich paste into the pressure cooker with the beans. Turn the machine to its sauté function, stir in the dried mint, salt, and black pepper, and let it bubble uncovered for ten to fifteen minutes until the broth transforms into a glossy gravy.

**4. Finish and serve.**

Stir in the fresh parsley. Ladle the stew blazing hot into wide bowls alongside crusty rustic bread, wedges of raw white onion, and a side of pickled vegetables.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The pantry emergency canned bean shortcut.**

If you forgot to soak your beans, bypass the first boil and pressure cook phases. Finely dice the aromatics, sauté them in a heavy Dutch oven until soft, build your fërgesë right in the pot, and add three 15-oz cans of Cannellini beans. Rinse two of the cans, but dump the third can in with its starchy liquid to thicken the broth. Simmer for fifteen minutes.

● **Swapping the meat.**

If you can't find smoked slab bacon, a smoked turkey leg or a high-quality smoked kielbasa perfectly replicates the smoky, cured pastërma traditionally used in the Balkans.



# Jani me Fasule

*yah-nee meh fah-SOO-leh*

Walk into any Albanian home on a Monday and you'll get hit with the deep, indisputable aroma of Jani me Fasule. This is peasant food at its absolute finest—the kind of resourceful, stick-to-your-ribs cooking that kept generations alive and eventually became royalty. The authentic secret is uncompromising: a hard 'first boil' to strip the beans of impurities, and a rich flavor base built on whole boiled vegetables mashed directly into screaming-hot, caramelized tomato paste. No flour, no fake shortcuts. We're using a pressure cooker here to condense an all-day Sunday project into a weeknight reality, but the soul of the stew stays exactly where it belongs.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	dried Cannellini beans <i>soaked overnight in cold water with 1/4 tsp baking soda</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil
<b>6 cup</b>	water <i>hot</i>	<b>3 clove</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>peeled and halved</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	double-concentrated tomato paste
<b>1 large</b>	carrot <i>peeled and halved</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 small</b>	red bell pepper <i>halved and seeded</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	crushed red pepper flakes
<b>2</b>	dried bay leaves	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried mint
<b>1/4 lb</b>	smoked slab bacon <i>left whole</i>	<b>to taste</b>	salt
		<b>to taste</b>	black pepper
		<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Soak the beans.**

The night before cooking, submerge the dried beans in plenty of cold water and stir in a quarter teaspoon of baking soda. This is a grandmother's trick that drastically cuts down cooking time and yields a creamier center.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Purge the beans to remove impurities.**

Bring the soaked beans to a rapid boil in a large pot of fresh water for five minutes. Dump that murky, foam-covered water down the drain and rinse the beans off.

- 2. Fire up the pressure cooker.**

Throw the rinsed beans, six cups of hot water, halved onion, carrot, bell pepper, bay leaves, and the slab bacon into an electric pressure cooker. Cook on high pressure for thirty minutes, then let the pressure release naturally for ten minutes.

**1. Extract and mash the vegetables.**

Fish out the boiled onion, carrot, and pepper halves and mash them into a rustic puree with a fork in a small bowl. Pull the bacon out, chop or shred it, and toss it back into the pot.

**2. Build the fërgesë in a separate skillet.**

Heat the olive oil over medium heat and fry the minced garlic and tomato paste for two minutes to kill the tinny, raw acidity. Stir in the paprika, red pepper flakes, and your vegetable puree, cooking until it forms a thick, deeply fragrant, brick-red paste.

**3. Marry the flavors and simmer.**

Scrape that rich paste into the pressure cooker with the beans. Turn the machine to its sauté function, stir in the dried mint, salt, and black pepper, and let it bubble uncovered for ten to fifteen minutes until the broth transforms into a glossy gravy.

**4. Finish and serve.**

Stir in the fresh parsley. Ladle the stew blazing hot into wide bowls alongside crusty rustic bread, wedges of raw white onion, and a side of pickled vegetables.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The pantry emergency canned bean shortcut.**

If you forgot to soak your beans, bypass the first boil and pressure cook phases. Finely dice the aromatics, sauté them in a heavy Dutch oven until soft, build your fërgesë right in the pot, and add three 15-oz cans of Cannellini beans. Rinse two of the cans, but dump the third can in with its starchy liquid to thicken the broth. Simmer for fifteen minutes.

● **Swapping the meat.**

If you can't find smoked slab bacon, a smoked turkey leg or a high-quality smoked kielbasa perfectly replicates the smoky, cured pastërma traditionally used in the Balkans.



# Gjellë me Arra

*gyell-uh meh ahr-rah*

The old-school way demands boiling a tough village bird for hours, but a Tuesday night in the American Midwest requires a smarter pivot. We're swapping the whole chicken for seared thighs and a rich bone broth, focusing our attention where it actually belongs: the gull. You must toast the flour in good butter until it smells like roasted hazelnuts, and obliterate the walnuts so finely they literally melt into the sauce. Forget the watered-down, egg-yolk-thickened fakes you see online. This is the real, deeply savory, garlic-heavy gravy as it's eaten in Elbasan, practically begging to be mopped up with a ridiculous amount of bread.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	bone-in, skin-on chicken thighs	<b>4 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>1 tbsp</b>	olive oil	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	shelled walnuts
<b>3 cup</b>	low-sodium chicken bone broth	<b>5 med</b>	garlic
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>clove</b>	<i>peeled</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper	<b>1 tbsp</b>	white wine vinegar
<b>4 tbsp</b>	unsalted European-style butter	<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter
		<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika

## PREPARATION

- **Process the walnuts and garlic.**

Place the shelled walnuts and peeled garlic cloves in a food processor and pulse until they resemble fine, wet sand. Do not leave them in large chunks; the traditional secret to this velvety texture is breaking the nuts down so completely that they release their oils into the gravy.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the chicken.**

Heat the olive oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat, season the chicken thighs with salt and pepper, and sear skin-side down until deeply golden and crispy, about 6 to 8 minutes. Flip and cook for another 2 minutes, then pour the 3 cups of broth directly into the skillet to deglaze the browned bits.

**1. Simmer the chicken.**

Bring the broth to a boil, reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer for 20 minutes until the chicken is cooked through. Remove the chicken to a plate and measure out 2 1/2 cups of the hot, infused broth from the skillet, adding a splash of water if you're short.

**2. Build the roux.**

In a separate heavy pot, melt the 4 tablespoons of European butter over medium-low heat, sprinkle in the flour, and whisk continuously for 3 to 5 minutes. Do not rush this; you want the flour to toast until it turns a pale hazelnut color and smells distinctly nutty.

**3. Create the gravy.**

Slowly pour the reserved hot broth into the toasted flour, whisking vigorously and constantly to prevent lumps. Keep whisking as the mixture bubbles and thickens into a smooth cream, which should take about 3 minutes.

**4. Fold in the walnuts.**

Reduce the heat to low, fold the finely ground walnut and garlic mixture into the gravy, and stir in the white wine vinegar. Let it simmer gently for 1 to 2 minutes to mellow the raw garlic, but do not let it boil vigorously or the walnut oils will separate.

**5. Finish the dish.**

Nestle the chicken thighs back into the gravy, then melt the remaining tablespoon of butter in a small pan, stir in the sweet paprika for 10 seconds, and drizzle the red aromatic butter over the skillet right before serving.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Make it Dibran style.**

For a traditional northern Albanian variation, swap the wheat flour for an equal amount of yellow cornmeal. This gives the gravy a deeply rustic, slightly gritty texture and a roasted corn flavor.



# Tasqebap i Shpejtë

*tas-che-bap ee shpayt*

If you grew up in an Albanian household, this is the smell of a Tuesday night. Historically a clay-pot wedding feast, Tasqebap was pragmatically streamlined by grandmothers into a weeknight masterpiece. The secret lies in violently melting the onions with splashes of hot water until they surrender into a velvety gravy, and hitting the unctuous beef fat with a sharp splash of vinegar right at the end. It's working-class genius in a bowl—no substitutions, no shortcuts on technique, just the pure, comforting taste of home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	beef chuck roast <i>aggressively trimmed of hard fat and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	crushed canned tomatoes
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil	<b>1 cup</b>	beef broth <i>heated</i>
<b>2 large</b>	yellow onions <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1 large</b>	bay leaf
<b>3 med cloves</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried oregano
<b>1 tbsp</b>	tomato paste	<b>1 tbsp</b>	apple cider vinegar
<b>1/2 cup</b>	dry white wine	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
		<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Cut the beef into very small cubes.**

Trimming the chuck roast aggressively and breaking it down into 1/2-inch chunks is non-negotiable. This maximizes the surface area for browning and guarantees the tough collagen tenderizes in a 45-minute window rather than a three-hour marathon braise.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the beef until a deep, dark crust forms.**

Place a Dutch oven over medium-high heat and add the olive oil. Pat the beef cubes completely dry, season with salt and pepper, and add them in a single layer. Let them sear undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes until dark brown, then flip and brown the remaining sides.

**1. Melt the onions using repetitive micro-deglazing.**

Reduce the heat to medium and add the chopped onions. As they fry, pour in a tablespoon of hot water, scrape the browned bits from the bottom, and let the water evaporate. Repeat this splash-and-scrape process two more times over 10 minutes until the onions completely disintegrate into a sweet, jammy paste.

**2. Build the savory roux and umami base.**

Stir in the garlic for 30 seconds. Sprinkle the flour evenly over the meat and onions, stirring constantly for 2 minutes to cook out the raw wheat flavor. Push the mixture aside, drop the tomato paste into the center, and toast it for a minute until it turns a rusty brick red before stirring it into the beef with the paprika.

**3. Deglaze with wine and simmer.**

Pour in the wine, scraping the bottom of the pot for 2 minutes until the sharp smell of alcohol dissipates. Add the crushed tomatoes, bay leaf, and just enough hot beef broth to barely cover the meat. Bring to a gentle boil, cover tightly, reduce heat to the lowest setting, and simmer for 40 minutes.

**4. Finish with herbs and a crucial hit of acidity.**

Remove the lid for the final 5 minutes so the sauce reduces to a thick, glossy gravy that coats the back of a spoon. Remove from the heat and discard the bay leaf. Crush the dried oregano between your palms directly into the stew, then stir in the vinegar to balance out the rich beef fat. Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Do not rush the onion breakdown.**

Forcing the onions to physically dissolve with tiny splashes of hot water is the ancestral secret here. If you skip this, you get a chunky, rustic stew instead of the smooth, luxurious gravy that defines a true Tasqebap.

- **Serve with an absorbent starch.**

This dish demands a mountain of buttery, short-grain rice pilaf, crispy fried polenta, or an aggressive amount of crusty bread to sop up the sauce. A side of pickled vegetables (turshi) is highly recommended for an acidic bite between rich mouthfuls.



# Gjëllë me Mashurka në Tigan

*jyeh-luh meh mah-shoor-kah nuh tee-gahn*

If you ask an Albanian-American what home smells like, they will tell you about onions, olive oil, and tomatoes slowly simmering in a heavy pot. Gjëllë is the undisputed king of the weeknight—deeply comforting and entirely unpretentious. The magic isn't in a rare spice; it is in the sequencing. You give the beef a head start so it yields completely by the time the green beans soften, and if you need to add water, make sure it is hot so you don't shock the vegetables. Grab a loaf of crusty bread; you will want to swipe the plate clean.

## INGREDIENTS

**3 tbsp** extra virgin olive oil

**1 large** yellow onion  
*finely diced*

<b>1 lb</b>	beef chuck roast <i>cut into 1-inch cubes</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried oregano
<b>3 cloves</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 tbs</b>	tomato paste	<b>3 cup</b>	hot water <i>divided</i>
<b>2 med</b>	ripe tomatoes <i>grated on a box grater, skins discarded</i>	<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	fresh green beans <i>ends trimmed and cut in half</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>2 med</b>	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Build the aromatic base.

Heat the olive oil in a deep skillet or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the onion and sauté until deeply translucent and soft, about 5 to 7 minutes.

### 2. Sear the beef.

Increase the heat to medium-high and add the cubed beef. Sear until lightly browned on all sides, about 5 to 8 minutes, then stir in the garlic until fragrant.

### 3. Create the tomato broth.

Push the meat aside, drop the tomato paste into the center to toast for a minute, then stir it into the beef. Pour in the grated fresh tomatoes, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom, and season with salt, pepper, oregano, and paprika.

### 4. Simmer the meat first.

Pour in just enough hot water to barely cover the meat—about 1 1/2 to 2 cups. Bring to a gentle boil, reduce the heat to low, cover, and simmer for 30 to 40 minutes until the beef yields easily to a fork.

### 5. Introduce the vegetables.

Add the green beans and potatoes, tossing them gently in the broth. If the pan looks dry, add another 1/2 to 1 cup of hot water.

## 1. **Finish the stew.**

Cover and simmer for another 30 minutes until the potatoes are fork-tender and the green beans are soft but still hold their shape. Remove from the heat, adjust the seasoning, and stir in the fresh parsley just before serving.

### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Temperature matters.**

Never introduce cold water to the pot once the stew is simmering. It shocks the vegetables and arrests the cooking process, ruining the velvety texture of the broth.

- **Let the potatoes thicken the broth.**

Skip the flour or cornstarch slurries. The natural starches from the potatoes will break down into the tomato and olive oil base, thickening the stew perfectly on its own.



# Gjellë me Presh dhe Mish i Grirë

*jyeh-lluh meh presh theh meesh ee greer*

If there is a single dish that captures the smell of an Albanian home on a bitter January Tuesday, it is this one. Gjellë me Presh is a masterclass in making humble ingredients taste like royalty, transforming cheap ground beef and sweet winter leeks into a rich, deeply comforting stovetop stew. The secret lies not in fancy technique, but in grandmotherly wisdom: preserving the architecture of the leek rounds, coaxing out the savory depths of tomato paste toasted in beef fat, and finishing the pot with a handful of rice and a hit of red wine vinegar to cut the richness. It is fast, accessible, entirely doable on a weeknight, and tastes exactly like the motherland.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>3 large</b>	leeks <i>white and light green parts only, root ends removed</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil <i>divided</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper
<b>1 lb</b>	80/20 ground beef	<b>2</b>	dried bay leaves
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	short-grain white rice
<b>2 tbsp</b>	tomato paste	<b>2 cup</b>	beef broth <i>hot</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>1 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar
		<b>1 pinch</b>	sugar

## PREPARATION

- **Prep the leeks in advance.**

You can wash and slice the leeks the night before and store them in an airtight container in the fridge to cut your active weeknight prep down to under fifteen minutes.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Clean and slice the leeks.**

Cut the leeks into 1-inch thick rounds and soak them in a bowl of cold water to release hidden dirt. Carefully lift them out with your hands to keep the rings nested together, then pat them dry on a kitchen towel.

- 2. Fry the leeks gently to set their shape.**

Heat 2 tablespoons of the oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the leek rounds and fry them gently for 5 to 7 minutes until just softened but not browned, then carefully remove them to a plate with a slotted spoon so they retain their shape.

**1. Brown the ground beef and aromatics.**

Add the remaining tablespoon of oil to the pot, toss in the diced onion, and sauté for 3 to 4 minutes until translucent. Add the beef, breaking it up, and cook until all the water has evaporated and the meat is sizzling hard in its own fat.

**2. Toast the tomato paste and spices.**

Stir the tomato paste, sweet paprika, salt, and pepper into the beef fat. Let it cook for about 2 minutes until it turns a deep, rusty red, which eliminates the raw canned flavor.

**3. Build the stew and bring to a simmer.**

Gently nestle the reserved leeks back into the meat mixture, pour in the hot broth, and toss in the bay leaves and rice. Bring the liquid to a gentle boil, then immediately drop the heat to low.

**4. Cover and simmer until the oil separates.**

Cover the pot with a tight-fitting lid and let it simmer undisturbed for 35 to 40 minutes. You will know it is done the authentic way when the leeks are meltingly tender, the rice has thickened the broth, and a rich layer of colorful, infused oil floats to the top.

**5. Finish with the grandmother's secret splash.**

Turn off the heat and stir in the red wine vinegar and the pinch of sugar to balance the buttery sweetness of the leeks. Taste for salt and serve hot in shallow bowls with plenty of crusty bread to mop up the juices.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Use sweet, never smoked, paprika.**

Smoked paprika introduces a campfire flavor that is completely alien to traditional Albanian stovetop stews; stick strictly to sweet red paprika.

● **Weigh down the leeks if necessary.**

If you want to cook it exactly like an Albanian grandmother, place a smaller heat-proof plate or lid directly on top of the leeks inside the pot to weigh them down and keep them submerged before covering the pot with its main lid.

- **The vegetarian swap.**

Meat used to be a luxury. For a deeply satisfying and traditional meatless weeknight meal, omit the beef, sauté the onions and leeks, add the tomato paste, and increase the rice to 1/4 cup.



# Turli Perimesh në Tigan

*toor-lee peh-ree-mesh nuh tee-gahn*

This is the ultimate late-summer Balkan workhorse. While diaspora kids might remember their mothers hovering over a simmering pot for hours, hitting it hot and relatively fast in a skillet is the weeknight secret to coaxing out those same deep, slow-cooked flavors. The trick here is respect for the process: don't crowd the pan, don't rush the sequencing, and whatever you do, degorge your eggplant and grate your fresh tomatoes. Those are the grandmother-approved maneuvers that make this taste like home, leaving you with a rich, olive oil-slicked sauce that demands a hunk of crusty bread.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 med</b>	Globe eggplant <i>cut into 1-inch batons</i>	<b>1 med</b>	zucchini <i>cut into thick half-moons</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>3 large</b>	vine tomatoes <i>halved horizontally</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	tomato paste
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>chopped</i>	<b>1 med</b>	dried bay leaf
<b>4 med cloves</b>	garlic <i>roughly sliced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 large</b>	Yukon Gold potato <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch cubes</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>2 med</b>	Cubanelle peppers <i>roughly chopped</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Draw the bitter juices out of the eggplant.**

Place the eggplant batons in a colander in the sink. Toss with the kosher salt and let them sit for 15 minutes. Rinse them quickly under cold water and pat them completely dry with a paper towel.

- **Grate the tomatoes for a fresh puree.**

Place a box grater over a bowl and grate the cut side of the tomato halves against the large holes. The rich pulp will fall into the bowl, leaving the skin flat in your hand to discard. This is the grandmother trick for a perfectly smooth sauce without the hassle of blanching.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sweat the onions in a generous pour of olive oil.**

Heat the olive oil in a large, deep skillet or cast-iron pan over medium-high heat. Add the chopped onions and sauté for 3 to 4 minutes until they just begin to soften and turn translucent.

**1. Layer in the vegetables sequentially based on their density.**

Add the potatoes first, giving them a 4-minute head start. Toss in the peppers for 2 minutes, then finally add the dried eggplant and zucchini. Sauté everything together for another 4 to 5 minutes until the vegetables take on a slight glisten.

**2. Stir in the aromatics to build the base flavor.**

Add the sliced garlic, paprika, and tomato paste to the skillet, stirring constantly for 1 minute until fragrant.

**3. Add the grated tomatoes and bring the stew to a simmer.**

Pour the fresh tomato puree and its juices into the pan. Add the bay leaf and season generously with salt and black pepper. Bring to a gentle boil, then immediately drop the heat to low.

**4. Let the stew reduce undisturbed until the oil separates.**

Cover the skillet, leaving the lid slightly ajar, and simmer gently for 20 to 25 minutes. Don't stir aggressively or you'll mash the vegetables; just shake the pan occasionally. It's done when the water evaporates, the potatoes are fork-tender, and a rich, orange-red oil forms at the edges.

**5. Garnish with fresh parsley and serve.**

Remove from the heat, discard the bay leaf, and stir in the fresh parsley. Serve warm or at room temperature with crusty bread and a hunk of feta or a dollop of plain yogurt.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

● **Make it a meat dish.**

If your grandmother always made this with meat, simply dice half a pound of beef stew meat into small cubes and brown it in the oil for 5 minutes before adding the onions. Add an extra splash of water during the simmer to ensure the meat becomes tender.

● **Adjusting for out-of-season tomatoes.**

If your fresh tomatoes aren't particularly juicy, add about a half cup of warm water when you pour in the puree to bring the liquid halfway up the vegetables.



# Fërgesë e Tiranës me Mish Viçi

*fuhr-GEH-seh eh tee-RAH-nuhs meh meesh VEE-chee*

If you want to know what a kitchen in Tirana smells like at six in the evening, this is it. Fërgesë is the ultimate Albanian comfort food—a bubbling, savory collision of tender meat, jammy tomatoes, and tangy baked cheese that demands to be mopped up with an irresponsible amount of crusty bread. You likely won't find traditional salted gjizë curd in an American supermarket, but a heavily drained whole-milk ricotta cut with sharp feta pulls off the exact same magic. Cut the meat small so it cooks fast, rely on a pinch of cornmeal for that rustic village texture, and let the oven do the rest.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	veal cutlets or sirloin beef <i>cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1/2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried oregano
<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>to taste</b>	salt
<b>3 cloves</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>to taste</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	crushed canned tomatoes	<b>1 cup</b>	whole-milk ricotta cheese <i>drained in a fine-mesh sieve for 30 minutes</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	yellow cornmeal	<b>1/3 cup</b>	feta cheese <i>finely crumbled</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Drain the ricotta.**

Place the whole-milk ricotta in a fine-mesh strainer over a bowl to let the water drain out for at least 30 minutes before starting the recipe.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat your oven and baking vessel.**

Preheat the oven to 375°F and place a ceramic baking dish or cast-iron skillet inside to get hot, mimicking the traditional clay tavë dheu.

- 2. Sauté the aromatics.**

In a large skillet over medium-high heat, melt the olive oil and butter, then sweat the diced onion until softened and golden, about 5 minutes.

- 3. Sear the meat.**

Add the cubed veal or beef. Cook until deeply browned on the edges, about 5 to 7 minutes, then toss in the minced garlic for one more minute.

**1. Build the stew.**

Pour in the crushed tomatoes, oregano, paprika, salt, and pepper, scraping up any browned bits from the pan. Lower the heat to medium-low, cover, and simmer for 15 minutes.

**2. Thicken the sauce.**

Remove the lid, sprinkle the cornmeal and flour directly over the simmering stew, and stir continuously for two minutes until glossy and thick.

**3. Fold in the cheese.**

Turn off the heat. Gently fold the drained ricotta and crumbled feta into the skillet until combined into a creamy, pale-orange stew.

**4. Bake until molten.**

Carefully transfer the mixture to your preheated baking dish and bake uncovered for 15 to 20 minutes, until the edges are vigorously bubbling and a golden crust forms on top.

**5. Serve immediately.**

Let it rest for 5 minutes so it doesn't take the roof of your mouth off, then serve straight from the dish with a stack of crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The cheese hack.**

Mixing drained whole-milk ricotta with feta perfectly mimics the tangy, granular profile of Albanian gjizë curd. Just make sure you drain the ricotta well or the stew will separate and become watery.

● **Why cornmeal?**

Using a dash of finely ground cornmeal instead of entirely relying on wheat flour is the grandmother's secret here. It gives the sauce the authentic rustic, slightly gritty texture found in village cooking.





# Tavë: The Sunday Centerpiece

*Revered baked casseroles meant for gathering the extended family, expertly translated for the modern kitchen.*

The vessel is heavy. Originally forged in a village hearth and served in a scorched clay pot, a proper tavë anchors the Sunday dining table with honest, uncompromising food: lamb blanketed in bubbling yogurt custard, the sharp, feral tang of liver and cottage cheese, the slow, sweet collapse of winter leeks. An enameled cast-iron pan replaces the clay pot to replicate that steady, even heat,

driving the slow breakdown of fat and connective tissue until the custard blisters black at the edges—but when that heavy pan hits the table, it is still the kind of cooking that makes everyone shut up, sit down, and pass the bread.





# Tavë Kosi

*tah-vuh koh-see*

If you search the internet for Tavë Kosi, you will find a lot of fake, Hollywood-style Mediterranean nonsense loaded with garlic and oregano. Ignore it. Authentic Albanian cooking is a masterpiece of restraint, and this—the undisputed national dish—relies entirely on the alchemy of a few pure ingredients: the rich savoriness of lamb, the acidic tang of whole-milk yogurt, and the binding magic of eggs and butter. Traditionally a multi-hour Sunday affair involving bone-in cuts, we've streamlined this for a Wednesday night by using diced lamb shoulder. The secret to keeping the yogurt from turning into a watery, curdled mess in the oven? A simple roux made from the lamb's juices. It guarantees a magnificent, golden soufflé every single time.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	boneless lamb shoulder <i>cut into 1-inch cubes</i>	<b>3/4 cup</b>	water
<b>6 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>divided</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	long-grain white rice
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	salt	<b>3 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	<b>4 large</b>	eggs <i>beaten</i>
		<b>3 1/2 cup</b>	full-fat Greek yogurt

## PREPARATION

- **Trim the lamb shoulder with intent.**

Remove excess hard fat from the lamb shoulder so the dish isn't greasy, but be sure to leave enough soft fat behind—that fat is crucial for flavoring the broth.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Brown the lamb aggressively in butter.**

Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C). In a wide, oven-safe skillet or Dutch oven, melt 2 tablespoons of the butter over medium-high heat. Season the lamb generously with salt and pepper, add it to the pan, and sear until beautifully browned on all sides, about 6 to 8 minutes.

- 2. Simmer to create the essential meat broth.**

Pour in the water, scraping the bottom of the pan to release the browned bits. Bring to a rapid simmer, cover tightly, drop the heat to low, and steam for 15 minutes to tenderize the lamb and yield the savory liquid you will need later.

- 3. Move the lamb to a baking dish and scatter the rice.**

Using a slotted spoon, transfer the lamb pieces to an 8x11-inch earthenware or glass baking dish, leaving all the cooking liquid in the pot. Sprinkle the rice evenly around the lamb to act as a sponge for residual moisture.

**1. Build the stabilizing roux using the reserved lamb juices.**

Pour the lamb liquid from the skillet into a measuring cup. Wipe the skillet clean, return it to medium-low heat, and melt 3 tablespoons of butter. Whisk in the flour and cook for 2 minutes until it smells nutty and turns pale gold. Slowly pour in the reserved lamb liquid, whisking vigorously until it thickens into a gravy, then remove from the heat and let it cool for a few minutes.

**2. Whisk the yogurt and eggs, then temper with the warm gravy.**

In a large bowl, whisk the beaten eggs, Greek yogurt, salt, and a few cracks of black pepper until perfectly smooth. Slowly stream the slightly cooled lamb gravy into the yogurt mixture while whisking constantly; this is the grandmother's secret that binds the fat and prevents the yogurt from breaking in the oven.

**3. Assemble and bake until puffed and golden.**

Pour the yogurt mixture evenly over the lamb and rice. Cut the remaining 1 tablespoon of butter into tiny pieces and dot them across the top. Bake for 35 to 45 minutes until the yogurt puffs up dramatically like a golden-brown soufflé. Let it rest for 10 minutes before serving.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Never use low-fat yogurt.**

The dairy fat is absolutely required for the custard texture to stabilize properly under high heat.

● **Resist the urge to add garlic or oregano.**

Tavë Kosi is an exercise in restraint. The pure, delicate flavors of baked dairy and roasted lamb are completely masked by heavy Mediterranean herbs.



# Tavë Peshku Shkodrane

*tahv pehsh-koo shkoh-drah-neh*

In the ancient bazaar of northern Albania, local cooks engineered a brilliant alchemy: balancing the heavy, fatty meat of river fish with a sharp, sweet-and-sour reduction of red grape vinegar and wild plum paste. If you want a kitchen to smell exactly like a Sunday afternoon in Shkodra, this is the blueprint. The defining secret—the one a grandmother would insist upon before you even touch the oven—is sealing the fish in hot oil, then immediately repurposing that exact fish-infused fat to slowly caramelize the onions. It builds the legendary sauce, the *iç*, with the very soul of the fish.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 lb</b>	firm white fish steaks like red snapper or striped bass <i>patted entirely dry</i>	<b>14 oz</b>	crushed tomatoes
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1/3 cup</b>	red wine vinegar
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper	<b>1/3 cup</b>	dried pitted prunes <i>roughly chopped</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1 tsp</b>	granulated sugar
<b>1/3 cup</b>	olive oil	<b>3 large</b>	dried bay leaves
<b>2 large</b>	yellow onion <i>halved and sliced thin into crescents</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	water
<b>8 clove</b>	garlic <i>peeled and halved</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350°F.**
- 2. Sear the fish to seal the meat.**

Season the dry fish generously with salt and pepper, then dust lightly with flour. Heat the oil in a large oven-safe skillet over medium-high heat and fry the fish for 1 to 2 minutes per side until just golden, transferring it to a plate while leaving the infused oil in the pan.
- 3. Caramelize the onions in the fish-infused oil.**

Reduce the heat to medium. Add the sliced onions to the reserved oil and cook, stirring frequently, until they soften completely and take on a rich, reddish-golden hue, about 8 to 10 minutes.
- 4. Build the sweet and sour iç.**

Stir in the halved garlic cloves for a minute until fragrant, then pour in the crushed tomatoes, red wine vinegar, chopped prunes, sugar, and bay leaves. Season with a heavy pinch of salt and black pepper.

**1. Simmer the sauce into a thick glaze.**

Let the mixture gently bubble for 10 minutes, allowing the prunes to melt and the vinegar to reduce into a thick, slightly gelatinous mass. Stir in the water if the skillet begins to look too dry.

**2. Marry the fish and sauce in the oven.**

Nestle the seared fish pieces deep into the skillet, spooning the thick onion and tomato mixture over the top. Bake uncovered for 25 to 30 minutes, until the liquid has mostly evaporated and the oils separate slightly at the edges.

**3. Garnish and serve.**

Remove from the oven, discard the bay leaves, shower the hot casserole with fresh parsley, and serve immediately with thick, crusty bread to mop up the rich oils.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Respect the prune substitution.**

In Shkodra, this dish relies on pistil, an artisanal wild plum leather. Chopped dried prunes are not a cheap shortcut; they are the exact botanical cousin needed to recreate the sticky tartness that balances the sharp vinegar.

● **Choose the right fish.**

Traditional recipes call for giant Lake Shkodër carp, but American river carp can taste muddy. Thick cuts of Red Snapper, Striped Bass, or Halibut offer the meaty texture required to hold up to the heavy sauce without falling apart.



# Pastıçe

*pah-STEE-cheh*

If there is one aroma that teleports a first-generation Albanian-American straight back to childhood, it is the smell of salty cheese and pasta turning golden brown in a hot oven. Born from periods of deep scarcity, Pastıçe is the ultimate expression of resourcefulness—stripping away the heavy meat sauces of neighboring countries and making magic out of milk, eggs, and a tangy abundance of feta. It sidesteps the Hollywood glow-up; there's no cheddar, no artisanal breadcrumbs. Just a clever grandmother's trick of a quick micro-roux that guarantees a velvety custard wrapping every noodle. It's a spectacular Sunday centerpiece that is wonderfully, miraculously fast enough to pull off on a Tuesday night.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	bucatini	<b>10 oz</b>	block feta in brine <i>crumbled into chunky pieces</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>divided, plus extra for greasing</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	Parmigiano-Reggiano <i>freshly grated</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>2 1/2 cup</b>	whole milk	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>4 large</b>	eggs	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	ground nutmeg <i>freshly grated</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven and generously grease your baking dish.**  
Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C) and generously butter a 9x13-inch baking dish.
- 2. Boil the pasta until it is decidedly undercooked.**  
Bring a large pot of heavily salted water to a boil, drop in the bucatini, and cook for exactly 5 minutes less than the package instructions so it remains firm in the center. Drain well and transfer directly to your prepared baking dish.
- 3. Toast the butter and flour to build a quick micro-roux.**  
In a small saucepan over medium heat, melt 1 tablespoon of the butter. Whisk in the flour for 1 to 2 minutes until faintly nutty, then slowly pour in the cold milk while whisking vigorously to avoid lumps. Let it warm and slightly thicken for about 2 minutes, then remove from the heat.
- 4. Whisk the warm milk into the eggs to create the custard.**  
In a large bowl, whisk the eggs thoroughly. Gradually stream in the warm milk mixture, whisking constantly so the eggs don't scramble, and stir in the salt, black pepper, and nutmeg.

**1. Crumble the feta directly into the baking dish.**

Using your hands, tear the block feta into chunky pieces directly over the warm pasta, ensuring distinct pockets of saltiness survive the bake, and toss gently to distribute.

**2. Drench the pasta in the custard and prepare for the oven.**

Pour the egg and milk custard evenly over the pasta, using a fork to gently shift the noodles so the liquid coats every strand down to the bottom. Sprinkle the grated Parmigiano-Reggiano across the top and dot the surface with the remaining 1 tablespoon of butter, cut into tiny pieces.

**3. Bake until golden brown, then let it rest.**

Bake uncovered on the middle rack for 35 to 45 minutes until the custard is fully set and the top noodles are deeply golden and crispy. Let the dish rest for at least 10 to 15 minutes before serving so the custard firms up, allowing you to slice it into neat wedges.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Leftovers are a prized possession.**

Store covered in the fridge. For a truly authentic experience, eat a cold slice straight from the fridge the next morning, or pan-fry a slice in a little butter for a crispy, decadent lunch.

● **Don't skimp on the cheese quality.**

Avoid dry, pre-crumbed American feta in plastic tubs. You need high-quality block feta stored in brine, ideally Bulgarian or Greek sheep's milk, to achieve the proper melting texture and salty punch.



# Tavë me Bamje

*tah-vuh meh bahm-yeh*

Okra is wildly misunderstood in the States, mostly because we lack the generational knowledge of an Albanian grandmother. If you grew up eating this deeply comforting Sunday centerpiece, you know the vegetable should be savory, tart, and entirely devoid of slime. The secret is applied culinary physics: a careful conical trim, an acid soak, and a dry-heat pre-cook. We use accessible beef chuck, heavily browned, and a generous dose of olive oil to anchor the dish. With a modern freezer hack, this long-held weekend tradition is easily pulled off on a busy Thursday night.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	fresh small okra pods <i>rinsed</i>	<b>3 med</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	white vinegar	<b>1 clove</b>	
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	tomato paste
<b>5 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil <i>divided</i>	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	crushed canned tomatoes
<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	beef chuck roast <i>cut into 1.5-inch cubes and trimmed of hard fat</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>2 large</b>	yellow onions <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
<b>1 med</b>	sweet green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	low-sodium beef broth
		<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Trim the okra stems at an angle.**

Using a paring knife, pare away the tough stem end to create a cone shape. Do not cut straight across or puncture the hollow inside; exposing the seeds guarantees a slimy stew.

- **Soak the okra in an acid bath.**

Submerge the trimmed pods in a large bowl of cold water with the white vinegar and salt. Let sit for 20 to 30 minutes to tighten the pores and remove the fuzzy exterior, then drain, rinse well, and pat completely dry with paper towels.

- **Pre-bake the okra to lock in the texture.**

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Toss the dried okra with 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, spread in a single layer on a baking sheet, and roast for 20 minutes until slightly blistered.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. **Brown the beef thoroughly.**

Heat 1 tablespoon of olive oil in a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Sear the beef in batches until deeply crusted on all sides, then remove to a plate.

### 2. **Sweat the aromatics.**

Lower the heat to medium and add the remaining 2 tablespoons of olive oil to the pot. Sauté the onions and green pepper, scraping up the browned beef bits, until completely soft and reduced in volume, about 10 minutes. Stir in the garlic and cook for one more minute.

### 3. **Build the braising liquid.**

Stir in the tomato paste and let it darken for two minutes. Add the crushed tomatoes, paprika, black pepper, and the browned beef along with any rested juices. Pour in just enough broth to barely cover the meat, bring to a gentle simmer, cover, and cook on the stovetop until fork-tender, about 45 minutes.

### 4. **Marry the okra and stew.**

Carefully fold the pre-baked okra into the tender beef stew without stirring vigorously, maintaining the shape of the pods. If your Dutch oven is not oven-safe, transfer the mixture to a clay tavë or casserole dish.

### 5. **Bake to caramelize.**

Bake uncovered in the 375°F oven for 20 to 30 minutes until the liquid reduces, the oils rise to the surface, and the top takes on a rich finish. Let rest for 10 minutes, garnish with fresh parsley, and serve.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **The busy weeknight frozen okra hack.**

Skip the fresh okra, the trimming, and the acid soak entirely by purchasing frozen whole baby okra. Toss it directly with olive oil while still frozen and roast for 25 minutes while you build the beef stew base on the stove.

- **Use a clay pot if you have one.**

Baking the final stew in a traditional unglazed clay tavë or Spanish cazuela slightly thickens the sauce and provides an earthy undertone that modern baking dishes cannot replicate.



## Tavë me Patate dhe Pulë

If there is an aroma that means home to an Albanian-American, it is the smell of a tavë pulling duty in the oven. Traditionally built around a tough, intensely flavorful village bird and roasted for hours, this chicken and potato bake is the everyday hero of the matriarchal kitchen. To get that same soul-warming, schmaltz-soaked perfection on a Tuesday night in Ohio, you rely on the grandmother's secret. A quick yogurt marinade tenderizes modern supermarket poultry, and parboiling the potatoes guarantees a shatteringly crisp crust. It is practical, it is pure, and it tastes exactly like the homeland.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 lb</b>	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper
<b>2 tbsp</b>	plain whole milk yogurt	<b>8 clove</b>	garlic <i>2 finely minced, 6 left whole and unpeeled</i>
<b>5 tbsp</b>	olive oil <i>divided</i>	<b>2 1/2 lb</b>	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>cut into 2-inch wedges</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>cut into small cubes</i>
<b>2 tsp</b>	dried Mediterranean oregano <i>divided</i>	<b>1 sprig</b>	fresh rosemary
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1/2 cup</b>	low-sodium chicken broth

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 400°F and bring a large pot of heavily salted water to a rolling boil.**
- 2. In a large bowl, massage the yogurt, 2 tablespoons of the olive oil, paprika, 1 teaspoon of the oregano, the minced garlic, salt, and pepper deeply into the chicken thighs.**

The lactic acid in the yogurt works quickly to tenderize standard supermarket poultry, giving it the rich, tender profile of a free-range village bird.

- 3. Drop the potatoes into the boiling water for exactly 5 minutes, then drain well and return them to the empty pot.**  
You do not want to cook them through, just soften the exterior; shake the dry pot vigorously for a few seconds to rough up the edges into a starchy paste that will fry into a brilliant crust.
- 4. Transfer the hot, roughed-up potatoes to a large roasting pan and toss with the remaining 3 tablespoons of olive oil, remaining 1 teaspoon of oregano, whole garlic cloves, and rosemary sprig.**

- 1. Nestle the marinated chicken thighs skin-side up among the potatoes, then carefully pour the chicken broth into the bottom corner of the pan.**

Do not pour the broth over the chicken itself, as you want the skin to roast aggressively. Scatter the cubed butter evenly over everything.

- 2. Bake uncovered for 40 to 45 minutes, until the chicken skin is deeply browned and the potatoes are golden and blistered.**

The liquid steams the potatoes initially, while the rendering chicken fat and butter melt down to fry them.

- 3. Let the tavë rest for 5 minutes, then serve directly from the baking dish.**

The unpeeled garlic cloves will be sweet and jammy—squeeze them out of their skins and smash them directly onto the potatoes.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Source authentic Mediterranean oregano if at all possible.**

Standard supermarket oregano in America is often Mexican, which carries citrus and licorice notes. Mediterranean or Greek oregano provides the sharp, piney aroma that is non-negotiable for this dish.



# Tavë me Spinaq dhe Kos

*tahv meh spee-nahch theh kohs*

If you ask an Albanian about their national dish, they'll point to Tavë Kosi—slow-roasted lamb submerged in a golden yogurt custard. But for a weeknight, the grandmothers of the homeland swap the heavy meat for humble spinach, keeping that same quiche-like, tangy crust. It's practical, brilliant, and tastes exactly like the kitchen you grew up in. The secret isn't a rare spice; it's sheer technique. Cook the spinach until the pan is bone dry, and don't skip the flour in the yogurt—it's what protects the dairy from curdling under high heat.

## INGREDIENTS

**2 lb**

fresh spinach

*washed and roughly chopped*

**3 tbsp**

extra virgin olive oil

<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>4 large</b>	eggs	<b>4 oz</b>	feta cheese in brine <i>crumbled</i>
<b>2 cup</b>	plain whole milk yogurt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>softened</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh dill or mint <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt		

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350°F and grease the baking dish.**  
Thoroughly coat the bottom and sides of a 9x13-inch baking dish with the softened butter to ensure the casserole develops a rich, caramelized edge.
- 2. Sweat the onion.**  
Heat the olive oil in a large, wide skillet over medium heat, adding the diced onion and cooking until soft and translucent, about 5 to 7 minutes.
- 3. Wilt the spinach and drive off the water.**  
Add the spinach a few handfuls at a time, cooking until the volume dramatically reduces, and keep cooking until every drop of water evaporates from the bottom of the pan—any leftover moisture will ruin the custard.
- 4. Whisk the yogurt custard.**  
In a large bowl, vigorously whisk the eggs with the salt and pepper, then thoroughly whisk in the yogurt and flour until the mixture is perfectly smooth and lump-free.
- 5. Combine the base.**  
Stir the cooked, slightly cooled spinach mixture, the fresh herbs, and half of the crumbled feta directly into the yogurt custard, ensuring the greens are suspended in the liquid.

**1. Bake the tavë.**

Pour the mixture into your buttered dish, scatter the remaining feta over the top, and bake for 35 to 40 minutes until the center is set and the surface achieves a beautiful, golden-brown crust.

**2. Rest and serve.**

Let the dish rest for 10 minutes out of the oven to allow the custard to tighten up, guaranteeing clean, deeply savory slices.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

- **Use standard whole milk yogurt, not Greek.**

American Greek yogurt is strained and too thick to form the proper custard matrix required for this dish; standard pourable yogurt perfectly mimics Albanian kos.

- **Always buy block feta in brine.**

Pre-crumbled feta is coated in anti-caking agents that will disrupt the texture of the bake.



# Zgara: The Backyard Besa

*Bridging the American backyard BBQ with the smoky, herb-scented traditions of the Balkans.*

He slaps the minced beef onto a hot Weber grate, watching the smoke rise the moment the fat hisses against the charcoal. It's the smell of garlic, mint, and fat hitting white-hot Kingsford coals, alongside hand-rolled qofte and skinless qevapi sizzling under a heavy haze of smoke. This kind of savory satisfaction doesn't need a bun to make sense.

You need skewers of lemon-oregano mish të pjekur, a village salad sharp enough to cut the richness, and cold sallatë me kos to drag the charred meat through. The host pours another round of raki, sealing the backyard promise that nobody leaves hungry, and nobody leaves sober. Keep the coals hot, pass the yogurt dip, and eat them right off the fire.





# Qofte Zgare

*CHOF-teh ZGAR-eh*

In Albania, the zgara is more than a grill; it's the burning heart of the neighborhood. When the scent of roasting meat and blooming oregano hits the air, everyone knows it's time to eat. These qofte deliver the exact taste of those long summer nights to an American backyard. The magic relies on an absolute grandmother's trick: grating the onion to trap its juices and adding a pinch of baking soda to keep the meat incredibly bouncy and tender over high heat.

## INGREDIENTS

**1 1/2 lb** 80/20 ground beef

**1/2 cup** panko breadcrumbs

**1 med** yellow onion  
*peeled*

**3 tbsp** whole milk

<b>1 large</b>	egg	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>4 clove</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	baking soda
<b>1/2 cup</b>	flat-leaf parsley <i>leaves only, finely chopped</i>	<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>2 tsp</b>	dried mint	<b>1 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	dried oregano	<b>2 tbsp</b>	olive oil <i>for shaping and grilling</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Preheat the grill.**

Prepare an outdoor gas or charcoal grill for medium-high heat, ensuring the grates are clean and well-oiled to prevent sticking.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Hydrate the binder.**

Combine the panko and milk in a small bowl, letting it sit for five minutes until it forms a soft paste.

- 2. Grate the onion.**

Set a box grater inside a large mixing bowl and grate the onion on the large holes, ensuring you capture all the flesh and the extruded onion juice.

- 3. Build the flavor matrix.**

Add the hydrated panko paste, egg, garlic, parsley, mint, oregano, paprika, baking soda, salt, and pepper to the bowl with the grated onion, stirring until it forms a highly seasoned wet paste.

- 4. Incorporate the meat.**

Add the ground beef and use clean hands to gently fold it into the wet seasoning, stopping the exact moment the ingredients are evenly distributed.

**1. Rest the meat.**

Cover the bowl tightly and refrigerate for at least one hour, giving the baking soda time to tenderize the proteins and the dried herbs time to bloom.

**2. Shape the qofte.**

Lightly coat your hands with a few drops of olive oil and roll the rested mixture into golf-ball sized rounds or slightly flattened ovals.

**3. Grill the meatballs.**

Cook on a well-oiled grill over medium-high heat for eight to ten minutes, turning frequently until a deeply browned crust forms and the interior is fully cooked.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Do not skip the baking soda.**

It raises the pH of the meat, preventing the proteins from bonding too tightly and guaranteeing a springy, tender bite over the intense heat of the grill.

● **Respect the mint.**

Dried mint is the soul of this dish, providing a deep, earthy warmth that fresh mint simply cannot replicate.

● **Handle with care.**

Over-kneading the meat activates the proteins and turns the qofte into dense pucks, so treat the mixture delicately.

● **Indoor alternative.**

If weather prevents grilling, fry the qofte in batches in a cast-iron skillet with two tablespoons of olive oil over medium-high heat until a deeply browned crust forms.



# Qebapa të Shtëpisë

*chveh-BAH-pah tuh shtuh-PEES*

If one scent defines an Albanian childhood, it's the hypnotic, garlicky smoke of qebapa sizzling over charcoal. For years, the diaspora has chased the elusive bounce of the homeland's street food, often ruining it with eggs or breadcrumbs. The real secret of the old-school qebapcore is pure chemistry: baking soda to tenderize the proteins, and sparkling water to aerate them. Mix it Sunday night, let the fridge do the heavy lifting, and you've got a legendary, authentic meal in the time it takes to heat a skillet.

## INGREDIENTS

**2 lb** 80/20 ground beef  
*cold*

**1 small** yellow onion  
*grated into a mush on a box grater*

<b>2 cloves</b>	garlic <i>finely minced or pressed</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	baking soda	<b>4 large</b>	thick pita breads
<b>1/4 cup</b>	sparkling water or club soda <i>cold</i>	<b>1 large</b>	white onion <i>finely diced</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	Vegeta seasoning	<b>1 cup</b>	ajvar
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 cup</b>	sour cream or plain full-fat Greek yogurt
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika		

## PREPARATION

- **Activate the chemical binders.**

In a small bowl, combine the baking soda, sweet paprika, black pepper, salt, and Vegeta. Pour the cold sparkling water over the spices so it fizzes and bubbles up, then stir in the grated onion and minced garlic.

- **Knead the meat vigorously.**

Place the cold ground beef into a large mixing bowl and pour the foaming spice liquid over it. Using your hands, vigorously knead and squeeze the mixture for 3 to 5 minutes until it transforms from crumbly ground beef into a cohesive, slightly sticky paste.

- **Let it rest overnight.**

Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and place it in the refrigerator for at least 12 hours, preferably 24. This non-negotiable resting period allows the baking soda to tenderize the meat proteins and the flavors to permeate the fat.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Shape the qebapa.

When you are ready for dinner, remove the meat from the fridge. Wet your hands slightly with cold water to prevent sticking, and roll 1 1/2 to 2 tablespoon portions of the meat between your palms into tight cylinders roughly 3 inches long.

**1. Sear the meat.**

Preheat a large cast-iron skillet, heavy griddle, or outdoor grill over medium-high heat and brush lightly with neutral oil. Grill the qebapa in batches for 6 to 8 minutes, turning them frequently with tongs so they develop a dark, caramelized crust on all sides while remaining juicy inside.

**2. Warm the bread in the pan drippings.**

Transfer the cooked qebapa to a plate. Place your pita bread directly into the hot skillet, wiping up the seasoned, rendered beef fat left behind, and warm for 30 seconds per side until softened.

**3. Serve immediately.**

Pass the hot qebapa with the fat-soaked bread, a massive pile of raw diced onions, a generous smear of ajvar, and a cool dollop of sour cream or yogurt.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Do not substitute lean ground beef.**

The 80/20 fat ratio is completely essential here. Lean beef will dry out and ruin the rich texture that replicates authentic Balkan meats.

● **Vegeta substitutions.**

If you cannot find Vegeta in the international aisle of your supermarket, substitute with an extra 1 teaspoon of kosher salt mixed with a crushed bouillon cube or a pinch of MSG.



# Mish Qingji të Pjekur

If there is one smell that defines an Albanian summer, it is the intoxicating smoke of lamb fat rendering over white-hot charcoal. You don't need four hours to slow-roast a whole leg to understand the fierce hospitality of the homeland; you just need a few good chops, high heat, and the right herbs. No complex Middle Eastern spice rubs, no harissa, no yogurt—just good olive oil, fresh lemon, crushed garlic, and dried Greek oregano acting as a stand-in for wild mountain rigon. It is elemental, aggressively simple, and perfectly doable on a Tuesday night in the suburbs.

## INGREDIENTS

**8 large**

bone-in lamb rib chops  
*fat cap left intact*

**3 tbsp**

extra-virgin olive oil

**1 large** lemon  
*juiced, plus extra wedges for serving*

**4 med** garlic cloves  
*smashed and roughly chopped*

**1 tbsp** dried Greek oregano

**1 sprig** fresh rosemary  
*leaves stripped and finely chopped*

**1 1/2 tsp** coarse kosher salt

**1 tsp** black pepper  
*freshly ground*

## PREPARATION

- **Whisk together the marinade ingredients in a wide, shallow dish.**

Combine the olive oil, lemon juice, smashed garlic, oregano, rosemary, salt, and pepper.

- **Aggressively massage the marinade into the meat.**

Don't just toss the chops; rub the mixture deep into the flesh. Leave them on the counter for exactly 30 minutes to take the chill off the meat while the salt and lemon perform their tenderizing magic.

- **Fire up your grill for high heat.**

If using charcoal, you want a bed of glowing, screaming-hot coals. For a gas grill, crank it to medium-high and preheat for 15 minutes. Indoors, place your heaviest cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until it begins to smoke.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the chops directly over the intense heat.**

Do not wipe the marinade off the chops; you want those little bits of garlic and herb clinging to the meat. Place them over the coals and leave them completely alone for 3 to 4 minutes until a dark, caramelized crust forms.

- 2. Flip the chops and cook to medium-rare.**

Cook for another 3 to 4 minutes on the second side. If the dripping fat causes massive flame flare-ups, shift the chops slightly to indirect heat so they don't turn to ash.

**1. Rest the meat before serving.**

Transfer the chops to a platter, tent loosely with foil, and let them rest for 5 to 10 minutes to allow the juices to redistribute. Serve immediately with a squeeze of fresh lemon.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Do not substitute standard pizza oregano.**

Seek out dried Greek oregano, which is the closest botanical match to the wild rigon Albanian sheep graze on in the homeland. Avoid Mexican oregano entirely, as its citrus and licorice notes will ruin the flavor profile.

● **Never cook cold meat.**

The 30-minute countertop rest is essential. Hitting a screaming-hot grill with fridge-cold lamb guarantees tough, grey bands of meat rather than a perfectly seared crust and tender interior.



# Bërxolla me Hudhër

*burr-DZOH-luh meh HOO-thur*

If you grew up in an Albanian household, this smell is an instant trigger: the sharp, earthy scent of wild oregano hitting hot oil, followed by the sweet, savory sizzle of crushed garlic and pork fat. In Albania, the *zgara*, or grill, is king. But grandmothers have long known the secret to replicating that fire-kissed flavor indoors using a heavy skillet. There is no fussy, chef-driven marinade here. It is all about mechanics and heat. A quick pounding of the meat ensures a fast, even sear, while a butter-basted finish and a final hit of fresh lemon deliver the deep, unapologetic taste of the homeland, completely achievable after a long Tuesday at work.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4</b>	bone-in center-cut pork chops	<b>1 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil <i>divided</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter
<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried Greek oregano <i>crumbled</i>	<b>4 large</b>	garlic <i>peeled and gently smashed</i>
<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1/2 large</b>	lemon <i>juiced</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Smash the garlic and halve the lemon before you begin.**

Once the pork hits the hot cast iron, things move incredibly fast. You do not want to be scrambling for ingredients while your meat overcooks.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Lay the chops on a sturdy board, cover with plastic, and pound the meat to an even 1/2-inch thickness.**

Use a meat mallet or a heavy skillet. This isn't just aggression; it breaks down tough muscle fibers and guarantees a tender, lightning-fast sear.

- 2. Drizzle the chops with half the olive oil and season aggressively with the salt, pepper, and oregano.**

Press the seasoning firmly into the meat, then leave them on the counter for 15 to 30 minutes to take the chill off and draw the flavors deep inside.

- 3. Heat a large cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat with the remaining olive oil and drop in the chops.**

Wait until the oil shimmers and just begins to smoke. Let the meat sear entirely undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes until a dark, golden-brown crust forms.

**1. Flip the chops, drop the heat to medium, and toss the butter and smashed garlic into the pan.**

As the butter foams, it gently fries the garlic without scorching it. Tilt the pan slightly and continuously baste the melted garlic-butter over the meat for another 3 to 4 minutes.

**2. Squeeze the lemon juice directly into the roaring hot skillet to deglaze.**

It will sizzle violently, lifting the savory fond from the bottom and emulsifying with the pork fat and butter. Transfer the chops to a platter, pour the pan sauce over the top, and serve immediately.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Swap for veal if you prefer or require a halal option.**

While pork is the everyday workhorse, bone-in veal chops are an equally authentic alternative that benefit immensely from the exact same pounding technique.

- **Do not attempt this in a flimsy non-stick pan.**

A heavy cast-iron skillet is absolutely essential to hold the intense, even heat required to build a proper zgara-style crust indoors.

- **Sourcing matters for the rigon.**

Albanian wild oregano has a sharp, floral punch. Standard dried Greek oregano is the exact botanical equivalent; avoid Mexican or standard Italian varieties here.



# Kofshë Pule Zgare

*kof-shuh poo-leh zgah-reh*

If there is a sound that defines the diaspora summer, it is the intense sizzle of marinated dark meat hitting a hot zgarë. Forget the sanitized, Hollywood versions of Mediterranean cooking that lean entirely on fresh herbs and expensive oils. The real secret of an Albanian grandmother lies in the dairy aisle and a specific yellow jar. A deep bath of yogurt tenderizes the meat, while a heavy spoonful of Vegeta delivers an umami payload that transforms simple poultry into savory perfection. It is practical, fiercely authentic, and tastes exactly like home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 lb</b>	boneless skinless chicken thighs <i>trimmed of excess fat</i>	<b>1 med</b>	lemon <i>zested and juiced</i>
<b>1/2 cup</b>	plain whole milk yogurt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	Vegeta seasoning
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>4 clove</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried oregano <i>crushed between your palms</i>
		<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Make the yogurt marinade.

In a large bowl or zip-top bag, whisk together the yogurt, olive oil, garlic, lemon zest, lemon juice, Vegeta, paprika, oregano, and black pepper until it forms a smooth, thick dressing.

### 2. Bathe the chicken.

Add the chicken thighs and massage the yogurt mixture into every crevice of the meat. Cover and refrigerate for at least two hours. Leaving it overnight will yield the absolute best results for your Tuesday night dinner.

### 3. Fire up the grill.

Preheat your outdoor grill to medium-high heat and lightly oil the grates. You want it hot enough to sear, but not so hot that the yogurt burns before the chicken cooks through. If cooking indoors, preheat your broiler to high and set an oven rack six inches from the heat source.

### 4. Grill to charred perfection.

Leave the marinade clinging to the meat and place the thighs on the grill. Cook undisturbed for 6 to 8 minutes until a deep golden-brown crust forms with a few dark, charred spots from the milk solids. Flip and cook for another 5 to 7 minutes until the internal temperature reaches 165°F.

**1. Rest the meat.**

Transfer the grilled chicken to a platter and let it rest for five minutes. This allows the juices to settle back into the meat before you carve or serve.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The Umami Secret.**

If you cannot find Vegeta in the international aisle of your local supermarket, substitute one crumbled chicken bouillon cube mixed with a half teaspoon of salt.

● **Bone-In Adaptation.**

Authentic Albanian grill houses heavily favor bone-in, skin-on thighs for maximum crispy texture. If you have the time on a weekend, swap in bone-in thighs and simply double your grilling time.



# Kallamar Zgare

*kah-lah-MAHR ZGAH-reh*

When their parents first settled in Ohio, the backyard grill wasn't just for hot dogs—it was a portal back to the Ionian Sea. The secret to recreating those humid nights in Vlorë isn't a complex restaurant trick; it's what any Albanian grandmother will tell you over the coals. Buy the frozen squid, dry it aggressively, blister it on a dangerously hot grill for no more than three minutes, and never add the lemon until it's off the fire. It is fast, unapologetic, and perfectly tender.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	squid tubes and tentacles <i>thawed if frozen</i>	<b>1 small clove</b>	garlic <i>gently smashed</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sea salt

<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried Greek oregano <i>crushed between palms</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	premium extra virgin olive oil	<b>1 small clove</b>	garlic <i>minced into a fine paste</i>
<b>1 large</b>	lemon <i>zested and juiced</i>	<b>1 pinch</b>	flaky sea salt
<b>2 tbsp</b>	flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>		

## PREPARATION

- **Dry the squid aggressively.**

Moisture is the enemy of the grill. Lay the thawed squid on paper towels and pat them completely dry inside and out so they sear rather than steam.

- **Fire up the grill.**

Preheat an outdoor charcoal grill or an indoor cast-iron grill pan until it is blisteringly hot.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Toss the squid for the grill.**

In a medium bowl, combine the dried squid, one tablespoon of olive oil, the smashed garlic clove, sea salt, and black pepper. Do not add any lemon juice at this stage.

- 2. Flash grill the tubes.**

Place the tubes on the screaming hot grill, pressing them flat with tongs if they curl. Let them blister for exactly two minutes until you see dark char marks, then flip and cook for one to two minutes more until opaque.

- 3. Char the tentacles.**

Toss the tentacles onto the grill during the final two minutes. They cook incredibly fast and are done the second they curl up with crispy edges. Move all the squid to a cutting board immediately.

**1. Slice and dress while hot.**

Slice the tubes horizontally into thick, one-inch rings. Transfer them immediately to a serving bowl along with the tentacles, the premium olive oil, lemon juice, lemon zest, parsley, oregano, and minced garlic. Toss well.

**2. Serve immediately.**

Bring the bowl straight to the table with crusty bread to soak up the glorious emulsification of hot olive oil, garlic, and bright citrus pooling at the bottom.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The frozen shortcut is deeply authentic.**

Do not stress about finding fresh coastal catch. Freezing mechanically breaks down the dense muscle fibers of the squid, acting as a perfect tenderizer for the home cook.

● **Save the acid for the end.**

Marinating raw squid in lemon juice chemically denatures the proteins, resulting in a rubbery chew once it hits high heat. The lemon goes on at the very end to flavor, not to cook.



# Sallatë Fshati

*sah-LAH-tuh fshah-tee*

If your parents grew up in the Balkans, you already know this salad. It is a masterclass in doing almost nothing to perfect summer produce—no lettuce, no croutons, no balsamic glazes. The secret isn't an obscure ingredient; it is a hard rule of physics. Never salt or dress the vegetables before they hit the table. Build it dry, then douse it in oil and vinegar right as you sit down. This keeps the tomatoes crisp while coaxing out just enough liquid to pool with the olive oil. Tearing off a piece of crusty bread to mop up that bottom-of-the-bowl broth is the best part of the meal.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 med</b>	ripe tomatoes <i>cut into large wedges</i>	<b>6 oz</b>	feta cheese in brine <i>kept as a solid block or broken into large chunks</i>
<b>1 large</b>	English or Persian cucumber <i>unpeeled or partially peeled in stripes, cut into thick half-moons</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	extra-virgin olive oil
<b>1 med</b>	green bell pepper <i>halved, seeded, and sliced into thin strips</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar
<b>1/2 small</b>	red or white onion <i>sliced into very thin half-moons</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried oregano
<b>1/2 cup</b>	Kalamata or black olives <i>left whole or pitted</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt
		<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
		<b>1 loaf</b>	crusty bread <i>torn into pieces for serving</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Wash and dry all produce thoroughly.**

Because this salad relies entirely on raw vegetables, excess water from washing will dilute the dressing.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the tomatoes, cucumber, green pepper, and onion in a large, wide serving bowl.**

Toss them lightly so the colors are evenly distributed, taking care not to over-mix and break down the tomatoes.

- 2. Top the vegetable mixture evenly with the olives and feta.**

Either break the feta into large, rustic crumbles over the bowl, or lay the entire slab directly in the center of the salad.

- 3. Sprinkle the dried oregano generously over the cheese and vegetables.**

- 4. Hold the salad at room temperature until the exact moment of serving.**

Do not refrigerate, as cold dulls the flavor of the tomatoes, and absolutely do not add any salt or dressing yet.

**1. Dress the salad at the table immediately before eating.**

Drizzle the olive oil and red wine vinegar over everything, then season with salt and pepper. Toss gently and serve with plenty of crusty bread to mop up the juices at the bottom of the bowl.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

- **Source the right cheese.**

Pre-crumbled feta from a plastic tub is coated in anti-caking agents, leaving it dry and dusty. You want the creamy, salty bite of a solid block soaked in brine.



## Tarator / Sallatë me Kos

*tah-rah-TOR / sah-LAH-tuh meh KOHS*

When an Albanian backyard grill is loaded with heavy, smoky meats, the palate demands a sharp, cooling contrast. Enter Tarator, a yogurt and cucumber dish often confused by outsiders with Greek tzatziki, but functionally entirely its own beast. Made with traditional kos—a tart, whole-milk yogurt—it is thinner, incredibly hydrating, and unapologetically acidic. The secret to making it taste exactly like a grandmother's kitchen in Tirana lies entirely in the technique: pulverizing the garlic into a wet paste with coarse salt and forcefully wringing the water from the grated cucumber so you, not the vegetable, control the final texture.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 med</b>	English cucumbers <i>peeled and grated on the large holes of a box grater</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	ice-cold water
<b>4 med</b>	cloves garlic <i>peeled</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil <i>divided</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	fresh lemon juice <i>optional</i>
<b>2 cup</b>	whole-milk plain Greek yogurt	<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
		<b>1 pinch</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Extract the cucumber water.

Take a handful of the grated cucumber and give it a firm squeeze over the sink to release the excess water before placing the dry shreds into a large mixing bowl. If you skip this, the vegetable will slowly bleed into the yogurt, turning a beautiful side dish into a soupy mess.

### 2. Mash the garlic into a wet paste.

Place the peeled garlic cloves on a cutting board, sprinkle the kosher salt directly over them, and use the flat side of a chef's knife to repeatedly scrape and mash them against the board until they form a smooth paste, then add it to the cucumber.

### 3. Thin the yogurt to the proper consistency.

In a separate bowl, vigorously whisk the Greek yogurt with the ice-cold water until it reaches a luxurious, velvety consistency that is pourable but still coats the back of a spoon. If your store-bought yogurt lacks a sharp, homeland tang, whisk in the optional lemon juice.

**1. Emulsify the mixture and let it rest.**

Pour the thinned yogurt over the cucumber and garlic, add two tablespoons of the olive oil, the fresh dill, and the black pepper, stirring gently until fully combined. Cover and refrigerate for at least fifteen minutes so the raw garlic allicin can mellow and bloom into the dairy fat.

**2. Finish with good olive oil right before serving.**

Ladle the mixture into individual small bowls and drizzle with the remaining tablespoon of olive oil before carrying them out to the grill.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Regional variations dictate the herb.**

Southern Albania (Tosk) traditionally relies exclusively on fresh dill, while Northern Albania and Kosovo (Gheg) favor heavier pastoral profiles. If you want to channel the north, swap the dill for one teaspoon of dried mint.

● **Ingredient sourcing is half the battle.**

Standard American plain yogurt is too sweet and thin, while standard Greek yogurt is too thick. A full-fat Mediterranean brand like Karoun is ideal, but manually thinning whole-milk Greek yogurt with ice water works perfectly. Never use low-fat dairy here.



# Perime Zgare

*peh-REE-meh ZGAH-reh*

When Americans grill vegetables, they typically drown them in oil and vinegar before they ever see the fire, resulting in a burnt, soggy afterthought. In Albania, the *zgara* is a sacred space of hospitality, and the vegetables are treated with the exact same reverence as the meat. The grandmother's secret here is purely thermal: grill the produce almost dry until blistering and deeply charred, then plunge them screaming hot into a bath of extra-virgin olive oil, balsamic, and raw crushed garlic. The broken-down plant cells act like hot sponges, instantly blooming the garlic and drinking in the tangy marinade. It is a smoky, rich, restorative staple of a Tirana summer night, completely manageable on a Tuesday in Ohio.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 med</b>	globe eggplant <i>sliced into 1/2-inch thick rounds</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	balsamic vinegar
<b>2 med</b>	zucchini <i>sliced on a long bias into 1/2-inch thick planks</i>	<b>2 large cloves</b>	garlic <i>crushed and finely minced</i>
<b>1 large</b>	red bell pepper <i>cored and quartered</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt <i>plus extra for sweating the eggplant if time permits</i>
<b>1 large</b>	green bell pepper <i>cored and quartered</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
<b>1 large</b>	red onion <i>sliced into 1/2-inch thick rounds with rings kept intact</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried oregano
<b>1/4 cup</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral oil <i>for brushing the grill grates</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Sweat the eggplant if time permits.**

Lay the eggplant slices on a baking sheet, sprinkle generously with extra kosher salt, and let them sweat out their bitter water for 30 minutes before patting them completely dry with a paper towel.

- **Build the grandmother's marinade.**

In a large mixing bowl wide enough to hold all the cooked vegetables, whisk together the extra-virgin olive oil, balsamic vinegar, minced garlic, kosher salt, black pepper, and oregano.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Fire up the zgara.**

Preheat your outdoor grill or an indoor cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat until the grates are fiercely hot, then lightly wipe them with a paper towel dipped in neutral oil.

**1. Grill the vegetables completely dry.**

Place the sliced vegetables on the hot grill in batches to avoid overcrowding, letting them cook undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes per side until they develop deep, dark char marks and a tender, collapsed interior.

**2. Plunge the vegetables directly into the hot bath.**

As soon as the vegetables are tender and blistered, use tongs to transfer them immediately from the screaming hot grill grates directly into the large bowl with the waiting marinade.

**3. Toss and rest.**

Gently toss the vegetables so the ambient heat slightly cooks the raw garlic and the porous flesh drinks up the oil and vinegar, then let the bowl sit at room temperature for at least 10 minutes before serving.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Standard American eggplants can be bitter.**

American globe eggplants are often older and more bitter than the smaller, sweeter varieties found in Albanian markets, making the sweating step highly recommended if you aren't rushing to get dinner on the table.

● **The stovetop grill pan works flawlessly.**

If you are cooking in an apartment without an outdoor grill, a cast-iron grill pan works perfectly—just ensure you let it heat up for a full 5 minutes before adding the vegetables so they char rather than steam.



# Kaçkavall Zgare

*kach-kah-VAHL zgah-reh*

Walk past any *zgara* in Albania, and the first thing that hits you isn't the roasting lamb—it's the intoxicating aroma of sheep's milk cheese bubbling against hot iron. Growing up in the States, our backyard barbecues were a mashup of Midwestern suburbia and Balkan tradition, and this was the ultimate offering of hospitality. The secret here is doing almost nothing at all: screaming hot cast iron, a thick slab of good cheese, and the self-control not to flip it too early. It tells your guests to sit down, tear off a piece of bread, and belong.

## INGREDIENTS

**1 lb**

Kaçkavall cheese  
*cut into 3/4-inch thick slabs*

**1 tbsp**

extra-virgin olive oil

**1 tsp** dried Mediterranean oregano    **1 large** crusty bread loaf  
*torn into pieces for dipping*

## PREPARATION

- **Take the chill off the cheese.**

Remove the cheese from the refrigerator about 15 minutes before cooking so it comes slightly to room temperature, which helps it melt evenly on the inside before the outside burns.

- **Mind your knife work.**

Cut the cheese into 3/4-inch slabs; if you cut it too thin, it will melt into a grease puddle before a proper crust can form.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Fire up your cast-iron skillet.**

Place a medium cast-iron skillet directly onto the grates of your backyard grill over medium-high heat, or onto your kitchen stove, until a drop of water dances and evaporates instantly.

- 2. Sear the cheese undisturbed.**

Add the olive oil to the pan, let it shimmer, and carefully lay the cheese slabs into the skillet so they spit and sizzle violently for 2 to 3 minutes.

- 3. Flip the cheese to finish the melt.**

Slide a thin metal spatula under the cheese, flipping confidently once a rigid, caramelized crust has formed, and cook for another 1 to 2 minutes until the edges bubble and collapse slightly.

- 4. Garnish and serve immediately in the hot pan.**

Remove the skillet from the heat, drizzle with a little more raw olive oil, and forcefully crush the dried oregano between your fingers as you sprinkle it over the molten cheese.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Source a thick slab of substitute cheese if authentic Kaçkavall is unavailable.**  
Grab a block of Halloumi from the supermarket, or ask the deli counter for a single, un-sliced 1-inch thick slab of young Pecorino or sharp Provolone.
- **Use the right oregano.**  
Ensure your label says Mediterranean or Greek oregano; American supermarket oregano is often Mexican, which has a completely different, citrusy flavor profile.
- **Never put the cheese directly on the grill grates.**  
Traditional Kaçkavall will melt right through the bars and cause flare-ups. The cast-iron pan catches the flavorful butterfats, mixing them with the oil and oregano to create a rich dipping sauce.





# Mikpritja: The Art of the Unexpected Guest

*Embracing the profound Albanian code of hospitality with quick pantry assemblies, iconic sweets, and the ritual of raki.*

At the first unexpected knock, you pull a block of supermarket feta from the fridge, scatter olives into a bowl, and rush to the entryway before anyone sees an empty table. Mikpritja means you always keep a chilled bottle of raki by the

door. It's the frantic, beautiful ballet of pulling a feast out of thin air, offering up the best seat in the house, and pouring a sharp, clear glass of raki before anyone has even taken their coat off.

You don't ask if they're hungry. You just feed them. A salty, sharp meze board thrown together in the time it takes to exchange pleasantries buys you a minute. Then comes the heavy artillery: weeping sponges of caramel-slicked trilece, dense wedges of walnut baklava, and syrupy nests of shredded kadaif drenched in clove syrup. Keep a jar of walnuts in the pantry, and pour the drinks before they even sit down.





# Pjatanca e Rasteve

*pyah-TAHN-tsah eh RAH-steh-veh*

In Albania, an unexpected guest isn't a burden; they're a blessing from God. The immediate response isn't panic, but the Pjatanca e Rasteve—a sprawling platter of cured meats, tangy pickles, and fresh vegetables pulled straight from the pantry. But the real magic, the grandmother's secret that elevates this from a cold-cut plate to an unforgettable act of hospitality, is the searing hot, bubbling skillet of djathë i pjekur (baked feta) dropped right in the center. It takes three minutes to prep, fills your kitchen with the scent of the old country, and buys you time to sit, pour some raki, and actually talk to the people at your table.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>7 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta in brine <i>patted completely dry</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	kashkaval or sharp provolone <i>sliced into triangles</i>
<b>1 small</b>	red onion <i>sliced into very thin half-moons</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	pickled vegetables <i>drained</i>
<b>1 med</b>	ripe tomato <i>sliced into thin rounds</i>	<b>1 large</b>	cucumber <i>thickly sliced</i>
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra-virgin olive oil	<b>1 large</b>	tomato <i>thickly sliced</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	red pepper flakes	<b>2 large</b>	eggs <i>hard-boiled, peeled, and halved</i>
<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	Kalamata or green olives
<b>1 tsp</b>	dried Mediterranean oregano	<b>1 large</b>	loaf crusty bread or pita <i>warmed and sliced</i>
<b>4 oz</b>	sujuk or spicy dry salami <i>sliced into rounds</i>		

## PREPARATION

- **Boil the eggs.**

Cook the eggs for 10 minutes, transfer immediately to an ice bath, then peel and halve them.

- **Prep the cold cuts.**

Slice the meats, cheeses, and fresh vegetables ahead of time so they are ready to assemble at a moment's notice.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven.**

Crank your oven to 400°F.

**1. Build the protective base.**

In a small cast-iron skillet or heavy ceramic baking dish, drizzle one tablespoon of olive oil. Layer the sliced red onions and tomato rounds evenly across the bottom. This creates a sweet, jammy compote that stops the cheese from scorching against the hot pan.

**2. Prepare the feta.**

Place the dry block of feta directly on top of the tomato and onion bed. Drizzle the remaining two tablespoons of olive oil generously over the top—the cheese needs this fat to stay soft under the intense heat. Hit it with the red pepper flakes and a crack of black pepper.

**3. Bake until bubbling.**

Roast in the oven for 15 to 20 minutes. You want the edges of the cheese to soften and bubble, and the tomatoes below to break down. If you want a golden-brown crust, switch on the broiler for the final two minutes, but watch it closely.

**4. Assemble the cold platter.**

While the cheese bakes, grab a large wooden board. Arrange the sujuk, kashkaval, cucumbers, fresh tomatoes, pickles, olives, and halved eggs around the edges. Leave a large, empty space right in the middle.

**5. Bloom the oregano.**

Here is the grandmother's secret: do not bake the oregano. High heat incinerates the delicate herb, turning it bitter. Instead, the second you pull the bubbling feta from the oven, sprinkle the dried oregano evenly over the searing hot oil so it blooms instantly.

**6. Serve immediately.**

Place the hot skillet in the center of your platter and serve right away with warm crusty bread to dredge through the melted cheese and spiced oil.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing the right feta is non-negotiable.**

Do not buy pre-crumbled feta. It is coated in anti-caking agents and will never soften correctly. Buy whole blocks submerged in brine, ideally made from sheep's milk.

- **Embrace the pantry substitutions.**

If you can't find traditional sujuk or kashkaval, a high-quality spicy Italian sopressata or Spanish chorizo alongside sharp provolone or pecorino perfectly captures the necessary fat and bite.



# Petulla me Kos të Shpejta

*peh-TOO-lah meh KOHS tuh SHPEY-tah*

In Albania, a sudden knock at the door triggers an ancient, beautiful reflex: the immediate offering of comfort. There is no time for yeast to rise when an unexpected guest arrives. These quick fritters rely on a violent, brilliant reaction between acidic whole-milk yogurt and baking soda to puff up in minutes. The real genius, however, is the grandmother's secret: a single spoonful of raki or vinegar in the batter. It vaporizes instantly in the hot oil, building an invisible barrier that guarantees a cotton-soft interior without a trace of grease.

## INGREDIENTS

**2 cup**

all-purpose flour

**1 tsp**

baking soda

<b>1/2 tsp</b>	fine sea salt	<b>1 cup</b>	feta cheese <i>crumbled, for serving</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	plain whole-milk yogurt	<b>1/4 cup</b>	honey <i>for serving</i>
<b>1 large</b>	egg	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fruit jam <i>for serving</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	raki or apple cider vinegar		
<b>1 qt</b>	neutral oil <i>for frying</i>		

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the wet ingredients into a smooth base.**  
In a large mixing bowl, vigorously whisk together the egg, yogurt, and the raki or apple cider vinegar until completely uniform.
- 2. Incorporate the dry ingredients gently.**  
Quickly stir the flour, baking soda, and salt into the wet mixture just until the flour disappears, leaving a thick, shaggy batter.
- 3. Let the batter rest undisturbed for 15 minutes.**  
Do not skip this. The pause gives the baking soda time to react with the lactic acid in the yogurt, swelling the batter so it fries up soft and pillowy.
- 4. Bring the frying oil to temperature.**  
Pour an inch and a half of neutral oil into a heavy skillet or Dutch oven and heat to 350°F over medium-high heat.
- 5. Scoop the sticky batter into the hot oil.**  
Keep a small cup of water nearby to dip your spoon into before scooping golf-ball-sized dollops, sliding them carefully into the oil.
- 6. Fry until puffed and deeply golden brown.**  
Fry four or five at a time for two to three minutes per side, then use a slotted spoon to transfer the fritters to a paper towel-lined plate.
- 7. Serve immediately while still hot.**  
Pile them onto a communal platter alongside bowls of crumbled feta, honey, and jam so everyone can build their own perfect bite.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **The grandmother's secret is pure thermodynamics.**

Adding raki or vinegar introduces a liquid that vaporizes instantly when it hits hot oil, creating outward steam pressure that seals the crust and prevents the dough from absorbing grease.

- **Mind your yogurt consistency.**

Traditional Albanian kos has higher whey content and acidity. Standard plain whole-milk yogurt mimics this perfectly. If thick Greek yogurt is all you have, thin it with a splash of milk until it resembles a loose pancake batter.



# Hasude / Reshedi e Karamelizuar

*hah-SOO-deh / reh-sheh-DEE eh kah-rah-meh-lee-ZOO-ahr*

In Albanian culture, the guest is sacred, and an empty pantry is no excuse for a lack of hospitality. This dish is a triumph of grandmotherly alchemy, transforming mere water, sugar, cornstarch, and butter into a shimmering, amber-colored pudding in fifteen minutes. For a kid growing up in the American suburbs, the scent of browning butter, toasted walnuts, and caramelizing sugar is the unmistakable signal that a quiet weeknight has suddenly become an impromptu celebration.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	cornstarch	<b>1/2 cup</b>	unsalted butter
<b>1 1/4 cup</b>	white granulated sugar <i>divided in half</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	walnuts <i>lightly toasted and roughly chopped</i>
<b>2 1/2 cup</b>	water <i>room temperature</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	ground cinnamon

## PREPARATION

- **Toast the walnuts before beginning the recipe.**

Warm the walnuts in a dry skillet over medium heat for five minutes until fragrant before roughly chopping them.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the cornstarch, half the sugar, and the water in a bowl until completely smooth.**

Set this slurry aside, giving it one final stir right before using since the starch will naturally settle at the bottom.

- 2. Melt the butter in a heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat and stir in the remaining sugar.**

Keep stirring continuously with a wooden spoon until the sugar completely melts and takes on a deep, rich amber color.

- 3. Pour the cool cornstarch slurry directly into the hot caramel.**

Do not panic when it sputters aggressively and the caramel seizes into hard chunks. Keep the heat on medium and continue to stir; the hardened sugar will melt right back down as the liquid heats up.

- 4. Continue stirring vigorously without interruption as the mixture rapidly thickens.**

Within minutes, the cloudy liquid will transform into a glossy, translucent, and highly cohesive jelly.

1. **Cook until the pudding physically pulls away from the sides of the pot and your spoon.**

This visual cue ensures the starch is fully cooked. Remove the pot from the heat and fold in the chopped walnuts.

2. **Spoon the warm mixture immediately onto a platter in rustic, freeform dumplings.**

Dust lightly with ground cinnamon and serve immediately alongside a strong cup of Turkish coffee.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Stick to white granulated sugar for this recipe.**

You need the visual cue of the white sugar turning amber to gauge the perfect caramelization level without burning it.

- **Try the weekend upgrade if you have extra time.**

Press the hot mixture into a baking dish, brush the top with a beaten egg yolk mixed with a little milk or yogurt, and bake at 400°F for 15 minutes to develop a beautiful, slightly crispy caramelized crust.



# Sheqerpare me Karafil

*sheh-cher-PAH-reh meh kah-rah-FEEL*

In an Albanian household, a ringing doorbell is never an inconvenience—it's an event demanding Mikpritja, the sacred code of hospitality. That means feeding an unexpected guest something sweet within ten minutes of their arrival. These clove-scented, syrup-soaked shortbreads are the quintessential answer. The grandmother's secret here isn't a rare ingredient; it's an unforgiving alchemy of temperature. Submerging piping hot, butter-rich cookies into ice-cold syrup forces the pastry to drink up the liquid completely without turning to mush. They melt in the mouth exactly as they would in the motherland.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 cup</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1</b>	large egg
<b>2 1/2 cup</b>	water	<b>2</b>	large egg yolks
<b>1 thick slice</b>	fresh lemon	<b>1 tsp</b>	vanilla extract
<b>5</b>	whole cloves	<b>1 tsp</b>	baking powder
<b>1 cup</b>	unsalted butter <i>melted and cooled slightly</i>	<b>3 1/4 cup</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>1/2 cup</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1 pinch</b>	kosher salt
		<b>20</b>	raw almonds

## PREPARATION

- **Make the syrup ahead of time.**

To make this doable on a busy weeknight, boil the syrup the night before or the minute you walk into the kitchen so it has plenty of time to cool in the fridge.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Boil the syrup.**

In a medium saucepan, combine the 2 cups of sugar, water, lemon slice, and cloves. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring just until the sugar dissolves. Simmer for exactly 8 to 10 minutes.

- 2. Chill the syrup completely.**

Remove the saucepan from the heat, transfer the liquid to a heat-proof pitcher, and place it in the refrigerator. It must be entirely cold before it hits the hot cookies.

- 3. Whisk the wet ingredients.**

Preheat your oven to 350°F and line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a large bowl, vigorously whisk the melted butter and 1/2 cup of sugar for a minute. Add the whole egg, egg yolks, and vanilla extract, whisking until the mixture is smooth, glossy, and slightly pale.

**1. Form the dough.**

Sprinkle the baking powder and salt over the wet mixture. Gradually add the flour, 1 cup at a time, switching to a wooden spoon and eventually your hands. Mix just until it forms a soft, homogenous ball that feels like play-dough. Do not over-knead.

**2. Shape the cookies.**

Pinch off pieces of dough and roll them into 1.5-inch balls. Place them on the baking sheet about 2 inches apart. Flatten each ball slightly with your thumb and press a raw almond firmly into the center.

**3. Bake the cookies.**

Bake for 20 to 25 minutes, or until pale golden brown and slightly darker around the bottom edges.

**4. Shock the cookies with cold syrup.**

The moment you pull the hot cookies from the oven, pour the ice-cold syrup evenly over them right on the tray. You should hear a satisfying sizzle. Discard the cloves and lemon slice.

**5. Let the cookies rest.**

Do not eat them yet. Let the cookies sit at room temperature for at least 2 hours, or ideally overnight, to fully absorb the syrup before serving with strong coffee.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Respect the thermal shock.**

The single most prevalent point of failure in diaspora attempts at Balkan desserts is mushy dough. If both the syrup and cookies are hot, the dessert disintegrates into porridge. If both are cold, the cookies remain dry inside.

● **Patience is an ingredient.**

True authenticity requires letting the cookies rest overnight. This allows the clove-scented sugar water to fully penetrate the core and equalize.



# Trileçe Moderne me Karamel të Shpejtë

*tree-LEH-cheh*

In Albania, the unexpected guest isn't an inconvenience—it's a blessing. The sacred code of hospitality, *Mikpritja*, demands you offer your absolute best, without hesitation. When traditional layered sweets take days, modern grandmothers pivot to *Trileçe*. While the rest of the world knows *tres leches* smothered in whipped cream, the Balkans claimed it, modernized it, and draped it in a glossy blanket of thick caramel. This version relies on a brilliant local hack for a foolproof cornstarch caramel that won't seize. By assembling the fat-free sponge

in individual glasses, the cake cools and absorbs the rich milks in a fraction of the time. It is the exact, intoxicating taste of a Tirana café, ready before the coffee is even done brewing.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 large</b>	eggs <i>room temperature</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	sweetened condensed milk
<b>1/2 cup</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1 cup</b>	granulated sugar
<b>1 tsp</b>	vanilla extract	<b>3/4 cup</b>	water <i>hot</i>
<b>3/4 cup</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1/4 cup</b>	water <i>cold</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	baking powder	<b>1 tbsp</b>	cornstarch
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	whole milk	<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter
<b>1 cup</b>	heavy whipping cream	<b>1 pinch</b>	salt

## PREPARATION

- **Bring the eggs to room temperature.**

Cold eggs will not whip to the necessary volume to support a fat-free sponge. Submerge them in a bowl of warm water for 5 minutes if you're in a rush.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350°F and prepare a half-sheet pan.**

Line a large, rimmed half-sheet pan with parchment paper to ensure a thin, quick-baking cake.

- 2. Whip the eggs, vanilla, and sugar into a pale, thick foam.**

In a stand mixer or with a hand mixer, beat the room-temperature eggs, vanilla, and 1/2 cup of sugar on high speed for 8 to 10 minutes until the mixture triples in volume. Do not rush this; mechanical aeration is the only thing keeping this fat-free sponge light.

**1. Sift and fold in the dry ingredients.**

Sift the flour and baking powder together, then gently fold them into the egg foam using a spatula in three additions with a sweeping under-and-over motion to avoid deflating the eggs.

**2. Bake the sponge cake until lightly golden.**

Spread the batter evenly across the prepared sheet pan and bake for 10 to 12 minutes until it springs back to the touch, then let it cool for 5 minutes.

**3. Whisk the three milks together.**

While the cake bakes, vigorously whisk the whole milk, heavy cream, and sweetened condensed milk until completely uniform.

**4. Assemble the sponge in individual serving glasses.**

Using a round cookie cutter or the rim of your glass, punch out circles from the thin sponge cake and drop one or two layers into elegant serving glasses.

**5. Soak the cake with the milk mixture.**

Poke the sponge rounds a few times with a fork and generously pour the milk mixture over them; the warm cake will absorb the rich liquid like a vacuum in minutes while you chill them in the refrigerator.

**6. Melt the remaining sugar for the quick caramel.**

Place 1 cup of granulated sugar in a wide, dry saucepan over medium heat, leaving it undisturbed until the edges melt and turn amber, then gently swirl until it becomes a deep golden syrup.

**7. Carefully whisk in the hot water.**

Remove the pan from the heat and carefully pour in the 3/4 cup of hot water. It will bubble violently, but return it to low heat and stir until any hardened sugar pieces dissolve completely.

**8. Thicken the caramel with a cornstarch slurry.**

Whisk the cornstarch with the 1/4 cup of cold water in a small bowl, then pour this slurry into the simmering caramel, stirring constantly for 1 to 2 minutes until it thickens to the consistency of warm honey.

**1. Stir in the butter and salt, then crown the desserts.**

Remove from the heat, stir in the butter and salt for gloss and richness, let cool for 5 minutes, and then pour a thin layer of the warm caramel over the soaked sponge in each glass.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Use hot water for the caramel.**

Adding cold water to melted sugar will instantly seize it into a hard glass block. Always use hot water to prevent aggressive crystallization.

● **Do not skip the heavy cream.**

Many internet recipes substitute evaporated milk for the soak, but maintaining the heavy cream is what gives the authentic Albanian flavor profile.

● **The cornstarch hack is beautifully authentic.**

This isn't an American bastardization. High-fat Albanian dairy creams behave differently under high heat, and this quick cornstarch slurry technique is exactly how modern grandmothers ensure a perfect, glossy glaze without the risk of splitting standard butter-cream caramels.



# Kadaif i Shpejtë në Tigan

*kah-dah-EEF ee shpayt nuh tee-GAHN*

In Albania, a knock at the door means the guest has arrived, and a simple cup of coffee won't cut it—you have to offer sweets. But when you don't have three hours to layer and bake a traditional massive pan of kadaif, you turn to the skillet. This brilliant, unapologetic diaspora hack captures the exact, intoxicating aroma of toasted butter, sweet walnuts, and lemon syrup of the holidays, bypassing the oven entirely to come together in twenty minutes. It's deeply comforting, undeniably authentic, and built for real life.

## INGREDIENTS

**1 1/2 cup** granulated sugar

**1 1/4 cup** water

**1 thick slice** lemon  
*peel intact*

**1 tsp** vanilla extract

**8 oz** Kataifi dough  
*thawed completely in the fridge*

**6 tbsp** unsalted butter  
*melted and clarified*

**1 cup** walnuts  
*roughly crushed or chopped*

**1 tbsp** granulated sugar

**1/2 tsp** ground cinnamon

## PREPARATION

- **Thaw the dough overnight.**

Frozen kataifi dough must be thawed slowly in the refrigerator; if you try to unroll it while cold or frozen, the delicate strands will shatter.

- **Tease the dough apart.**

Gently pull the kataifi strands apart with your fingers, fluffing them strand by strand so they aren't in one massive clump.

- **Clarify the butter.**

American butter has high water content. Melt it slowly in the microwave, skim the white foam off the top, and pour only the clear, golden fat into your bowl so the milk solids don't burn in the skillet.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Brew the sherbet first.**

Combine 1 1/2 cups sugar, water, and the lemon slice in a small saucepan over medium-high heat. Boil just until the sugar dissolves, then drop the heat to a simmer and leave it alone for 8 minutes. Remove from heat, stir in the vanilla, and let it cool to room temperature.

- 2. Prep the filling.**

In a small bowl, toss the crushed walnuts with 1 tablespoon of sugar and the cinnamon.

**1. Dress the dough.**

Pour 4 tablespoons of your clarified melted butter over the fluffed kataifi dough. Use your hands to gently massage the butter into the strands so they are evenly coated.

**2. Build the skillet pie.**

Brush a 9-inch non-stick skillet with 1 tablespoon of butter and set over medium-low heat. Scatter exactly half the buttered dough evenly across the bottom and press it down firmly with a spatula to form a compact layer. Scatter the walnut mixture over this base, leaving a slight border, then top with the remaining dough and press down firmly again.

**3. Crisp to a golden brown.**

Cook for 7 to 9 minutes, resisting the urge to crank up the heat. You want the heat to penetrate without burning the bottom. Lift an edge to check; it should be a deep, toasted golden brown.

**4. Execute the flip.**

Slide the pie out of the skillet onto a large plate. Add your final 1 tablespoon of butter to the empty skillet. Place another plate over the top of the kadaif, invert it, and slide it back into the skillet raw-side down. Cook for another 5 to 7 minutes until equally golden.

**5. Sizzle and soak.**

Turn off the heat. Remove the lemon slice from your cooled syrup, then immediately pour the room-temperature syrup evenly over the hot kadaif right in the skillet. It should sizzle violently. Let it sit in the pan for 10 minutes to absorb before cutting into wedges.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The golden rule of sherbet.**

Cold syrup on hot pastry, or hot syrup on cold pastry. If both are hot, you get gummy mush. If both are cold, the pastry stays bone dry.

- **The ten minute hack.**

If even twenty minutes is too long, chop up the dough, throw it directly into a hot buttered skillet with sugar and walnuts, and stir-fry until caramelized. Spoon the crunchy hash hot over vanilla ice cream.



# Baklava e Vogël e Shpejtë

*bahk-lah-vah eh voh-guhl eh shpayt*

Albanian hospitality demands your absolute best the moment an unexpected guest crosses the threshold. Forget the heavy honey and rosewater of diaspora bakeries—authentic Albanian baklava is an exercise in pure, rustic elegance: shattered layers of buttery pastry, the earthy crunch of toasted walnuts, and a bright lemon syrup. This weeknight adaptation honors the ancient code of Mikpritja, using high-quality store-bought phyllo and strict traditional techniques to produce a tray that smells, sounds, and tastes exactly like a holiday in Tirana.

## INGREDIENTS

**4 1/2 cup** granulated white sugar

**3 1/2 cup** water

**1 med** lemon  
*cut into 2 thick slices*

**16 oz** frozen phyllo dough  
*thawed*

**1 1/4 cup** European-style unsalted  
butter

**3 1/2 cup** raw walnuts  
*coarsely ground*

**1/4 tsp** ground cinnamon

## PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough.**

Leave the box in the fridge overnight, then let it sit on the counter for 1 hour before using so the delicate sheets don't crack.

- **Grind the walnuts.**

Pulse the raw walnuts in a food processor until they look like coarse gravel. Do not over-process them into dust; you need the earthy crunch.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Boil the sherbeti.**

In a medium saucepan, combine the sugar, water, and lemon slices over medium-high heat. Once it reaches a rolling boil, simmer gently for exactly 15 minutes, then remove the lemon and let it cool completely to room temperature.

- 2. Clarify the butter.**

Melt the butter in a small saucepan over low heat and skim off the white foam that rises to the top to prevent burnt milk solids from ruining your pastry.

- 3. Build the base layers.**

Brush a 9x13-inch pan with butter, lay down two sheets of phyllo, and lightly dab melted butter over the surface without pressing down so air stays trapped between the sheets. Repeat until half the dough is used.

- 4. Add the walnut center.**

Toss the ground walnuts with the cinnamon, then spread them in one even, thick layer across the pastry.

**1. Finish layering the pastry.**

Continue the pattern of two sheets of phyllo and a dab of butter until the dough is gone, brushing the final top sheet generously.

**2. Cut the baklava into diamonds.**

Using a very sharp, thin knife, slice straight down through the layers before baking, holding the top sheets gently so they don't tear.

**3. Bake the baklava in two stages.**

Bake at 350°F for 35 minutes until golden brown, then lower the heat to 300°F and bake for another 40 to 45 minutes to completely dry out and crisp the interior layers.

**4. Shock the pastry with cold syrup.**

Remove the screaming hot baklava from the oven and immediately pour the completely cooled syrup evenly over the pan to create a loud, vigorous sizzle.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The Golden Rule of Thermodynamics.**

Never pour hot syrup on hot baklava, or you will end up with walnut oatmeal. The syrup must be completely cold, and the pastry screaming hot from the oven.

● **No honey allowed.**

Honey alters the flavor profile and makes the dessert overly heavy and floral. Stick to pure white sugar and lemon for the authentic homeland taste.