



Cook

Balkan

in America

Recipes with love from
**The Robot Book
Club**

Cook Balkan in America

Authentic Recipes and Hearty Traditions for the Modern Kitchen

The Robot Book Club

Copyright © 2026 Edward Benson

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

Published by The Robot Book Club

Table of Contents

Jutarnja Kafa i Doručak: Morning Rituals & Breakfasts

Jela na Kašiku: The Weeknight Spoon

Pita i Burek: Phyllo Mastery

Nedeljni Ručak: The Sacred Sunday Supper

Roštilj & Meza: Porch Gatherings and Grilled Meats

Zimnica: The Balkan Pantry & Modern Shortcuts

Slatkiši: Celebration Sweets

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: Balkan Home Cooking.

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

— Ted Benson

Prologue

This food isn't a museum exhibit of peasant stews; it is the reality of a diaspora brushing commercial phyllo dough with sparkling mineral water to fake a weekend bakery ritual in forty-five minutes. This is for those who grew up smelling a different kind of Sunday, whose weeknights hummed with the low simmer of *jela na kašiku*, even if the streetlights outside illuminated a perfectly ordinary Ohio suburb. Survival means adaptation.

This is for the children of the diaspora, those who remember their grandmother stretching dough paper-thin across the kitchen table. They've seen the videos, read the blogs, even tried a few recipes—only to find themselves missing the sharp, unmistakable tang of fermented cabbage. They crave the specific texture of *kajmak* that store-bought won't replicate, the impossible flakiness of *burek* without a *sač*, the slow, layered patience of *sarma* that no quick-fix truly honors.

The truth is, recreating the food of the old country thousands of miles away in a modern American kitchen isn't about compromise. It's about translating those unwritten rules—knowing the exact temperature to bloom the yeast, or the precise way to whip standard cream cheese into village dairy—into something tangible and repeatable. It's about making the everyday miracle of Balkan cooking accessible.

Here, you won't find exotic ingredients that require a pilgrimage to a specialty market or obscure tools gathering dust in the garage. Instead, you'll find the soul of Balkan cuisine, refined and adapted for your stovetop, your



Jutarnja Kafa i Doručak: Morning Rituals & Breakfasts

Comforting morning rituals centered around strong coffee, savory pastries, and rich dairy.

Six a.m. at the kitchen counter, the gas burner clicks, setting off the hiss of a dented džezva, the bitter, sludgy perfection of unfiltered coffee, and the quiet understanding that the day cannot officially commence until you've sat down to properly drink it. Hands wrapped around warm ceramic, you wait for the dark

grounds to settle. Whether you have exactly five minutes before the morning commute to scramble eggs with blistered peppers, or a slow Sunday where the oil crackles for the uštípke, demanding the golden, oily crunch of grandma's fried uštípki dragged through fresh cheese, breakfast is heavy on the dairy. Keep the heat low, watch the foam rise, and do not stir.





Jaja na Kajmaku

Jaja на кајмаку

yah-yah nah kye-mah-koo

If you ask anyone from the Balkans to name the defining taste of a childhood morning, they won't tell you about pancakes. They'll close their eyes and tell you about this. It is unapologetic, deeply rustic food—a brilliant marriage of hot dairy and egg. The magic lies entirely in the kajmak, a tangy, salted clotted cream that melts into an intensely savory, bubbling sauce. You fry the eggs gently in that liquid gold, coaxing the whites to set while keeping the yolks perfectly molten, ready to bleed into the butterfat at the touch of a torn heel of crusty bread.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp	kajmak	1/8 tsp	sea salt
1/2 tsp	unsalted butter	2 large	crusty bread <i>cut into thick slices</i>
2 large	eggs <i>pasture-raised preferred</i>		

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Warm the skillet over medium-low heat.

Place a small non-stick or well-seasoned cast iron skillet on the burner. Heat control is everything here; if the pan is too hot, the milk solids will instantly burn and turn bitter.

2. Melt the kajmak and butter slowly until foamy.

Add the dairy and let it melt without rushing. It will separate slightly into clear butterfat and toasted milk solids, releasing a rich, nutty aroma.

3. Crack the eggs directly into the bubbling fat.

Do not break the yolks—this is the cardinal rule of the dish. Let them slip directly into the center of the pan.

4. Fry gently until the whites are fully opaque and set.

Sprinkle a tiny pinch of salt over the yolks. Let them cook undisturbed for 3 to 5 minutes so the bottoms set luxuriously while the yolks remain completely liquid.

5. Slide onto a warm plate and serve immediately.

Get every drop of that melted dairy out of the pan. Serve immediately with a stack of crusty bread to mop up the juices, and ideally a cold glass of plain kefir to cut the richness.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The 5-Minute Pantry Kajmak Hack.**

Authentic raw-milk kajmak is almost impossible to find in an American supermarket. To reverse-engineer it: pulse 4 oz softened cream cheese, 4 oz softened unsalted butter, 4 oz rinsed sheep's milk feta, and 2 tbsp full-fat sour cream in a food processor until just cohesive. Keep it in the fridge; it melts and tastes remarkably like the real thing.



Prženice

Прженице

pr-zhe-nee-tse

If there is a universal smell that defines a weekend morning in a Balkan household, it is the aroma of stale bread sizzling in hot fat. Born from a grandmother's absolute refusal to waste a single crumb, this isn't the syrupy, cinnamon-dusted French toast of American diners. It is deeply savory, aggressively golden, and relies on an unwritten secret: a spoonful of sour cream in the egg wash that denatures the residual gluten, leaving a crisp exterior yielding to a rich, pudding-like center. Serve it with feta, ajvar, and a total lack of pretense.

INGREDIENTS

1 loaf	unsliced bakery bread <i>sliced 3/4-inch thick and left out to stale for 2 days</i>	1 tbsp	sour cream
4 large	large eggs <i>room temperature</i>	1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1/2 cup	whole milk <i>room temperature</i>	2 tbsp	neutral oil
		2 tbsp	unsalted butter
		1 med	garlic clove <i>halved</i>

PREPARATION

- **Ensure your bread is genuinely stale before you begin.**

Fresh bread is the enemy of *prženice* and will turn into a soggy, oil-logged sponge.

If you forgot to leave it out, dry the slices in a 250°F oven for 10 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the eggs, milk, sour cream, and salt until completely homogenous.**
You do not want distinct streaks of egg white cooking onto the exterior of your bread.
- 2. Heat the oil and butter in a large skillet over medium heat until the butter foams and subsides.**
The oil raises the smoke point, preventing the milk solids in the butter from burning while delivering an essential deep golden crust.
- 3. Dip a slice of stale bread into the egg wash for just three seconds per side.**
Do not let it linger and drown, or the crumb will collapse. Re-whisk the egg mixture quickly with a fork right before dipping every single slice.
- 4. Immediately transfer the soaked bread to the hot skillet.**
You must hear a distinct sizzle upon contact. If it does not sizzle, your pan is too cold and the bread will absorb heavy grease.

- 1. Fry for two to three minutes per side without pressing down, until deeply golden brown.**

Transfer the cooked bread to a paper towel-lined plate to drain. Wipe out the pan and replenish the fat if the butter solids begin to scorch before cooking the remaining slices.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Rub the hot crust with a raw garlic clove.**

For an authentic northern flourish, aggressively rub the cut side of a halved raw garlic clove over the bread the exact moment it leaves the pan.

- **Do not skip the dairy pairing.**

Serve these alongside a glass of pourable plain kefir or yogurt to cut the richness, flanked by feta cheese and roasted red pepper ajvar.



Gibanica Gužvara

Гибаница гужвара

ghee-bah-nee-tsay goozh-vah-rah

If you grew up in a Balkan household, the smell of gibanica baking is the smell of a weekend morning. This isn't the neat, flat, polite spinach pie you find in a Mediterranean deli. Gužvara means crumpled—it is beautifully, deliberately chaotic. Sheets of thick phyllo are crushed like wads of paper, submerged in a rich, salty custard of feta and kefir, and baked until the whole thing puffs up like a golden cloud. But the real secret is in the cooling. To keep the heavy cheese from collapsing the flaky layers, you invert the hot pan onto four coffee mugs. It defies gravity, sounds ridiculous, and is the ultimate, unwritten grandmother's trick for an uncompromisingly airy pie.

INGREDIENTS

16 oz	number 10 country style phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the fridge</i>	1 cup	whole milk kefir
5 large	eggs	1/2 cup	sour cream
10 oz	sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>	1/2 cup	neutral oil
10 oz	whole milk ricotta cheese	1 cup	highly carbonated sparkling mineral water <i>cold</i>
		1 tsp	kosher salt

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 400°F and lightly oil only the very bottom of a 9x13 inch metal baking pan.**
Leave the sides completely dry so the pie can grip the walls while baking.
- **Arrange four sturdy coffee mugs on the counter in a rectangle slightly smaller than your baking pan.**
You will need these ready the exact second the hot pie comes out of the oven.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whip the eggs vigorously until they are light and frothy.**
Crack the eggs into a large mixing bowl and beat them for at least 60 seconds. This mechanical aeration is critical for achieving the pie's signature height.
- 2. Stir together the cheese custard and the mineral water.**
Fold in the crumbled feta, ricotta, kefir, sour cream, oil, and salt, leaving some chunky texture. Just before assembling, stir in the cold sparkling mineral water; the carbonation is your true leavening agent.
- 3. Line the baking pan with flat sheets of phyllo to create a waterproof base.**
Lay two sheets of phyllo flat into the bottom of the baking pan, allowing the excess pastry to hang over the edges. Place another two sheets across the opposite direction to create a protective basket.

- 1. Loosely crumple the remaining phyllo sheets, submerge them in the custard, and pack them into the pan.**

Take a single sheet of phyllo, loosely scrunch it up like a discarded piece of paper, and submerge it entirely into the cheese liquid. Lift it out, let the excess drip off, and place it into the pan. Repeat, packing the wet, crumpled dough balls side-by-side until the pan is filled, reserving two flat sheets for the top.

- 2. Pour any remaining custard over the top and seal the pie with two flat phyllo sheets.**

Fold the dry, overhanging edges of the base sheets inward over the wet filling, then lay the final two reserved sheets flat over the top to create a smooth lid, tucking the edges down the sides. Brush the top with a little oil and a splash of sparkling water.

- 3. Bake until the pie crests above the rim and develops a deeply textured crust.**

Bake in the center of the oven for 40 to 45 minutes. The pie should puff up majestically and turn a deep golden brown.

- 4. Immediately flip the hot pan upside down and rest the corners on the coffee mugs.**

Swiftly invert the pan as soon as it leaves the oven and rest it on the prepared mugs. Let it hang suspended for 20 to 30 minutes; gravity will keep the heavy cheese from collapsing the steam pockets as the pie cools.

- 5. Turn the pan right-side up, slice into large squares, and serve.**

Once cooled to a stable state, flip the pan back over. The gibanica will be towering, incredibly airy, and perfectly structured. Serve warm or at room temperature with an extra glass of kefir.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not use a non-stick or Teflon pan for this recipe.**

The pie needs to grip the bare metal sides of an enameled or aluminum pan to stay suspended during the upside-down cooling phase.

- **Standard, ultra-thin pastry dissolves into mush under the weight of this custard.**

Seek out number 10 country-style phyllo dough for the structural integrity needed to survive the dunking process.



Starinska Popara

Старинска Попара

stah-RIN-skah POH-pah-rah

It's a peasant dish, born of poverty and a strict cultural taboo against throwing away bread. When a rustic loaf goes rock-hard, you don't toss it; you resurrect it with hot water, good butter, and a fistful of salty cheese. It might not look like much, but one bite of these savory, chewy morsels will anchor you instantly to a grandmother's kitchen in the motherland. The unwritten rule for perfection is simple: don't drown it into a soup, and for the love of God, never boil the cheese.

INGREDIENTS

350 g

rustic artisan bread

*left out in a paper bag for 2 to 3 days
until rock-hard*

1 1/2 cup

water

1/2 tsp kosher salt

3 tbsp unsalted butter

1 cup full-fat feta cheese
crumbled

2 tbsp sour cream

PREPARATION

- **Tear the stale bread into uneven, bite-sized chunks by hand.**

Avoid using a knife. Tearing creates rough, jagged edges that absorb the savory broth perfectly while leaving the centers pleasantly chewy.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring the water, salt, and butter to a rolling boil in a deep skillet over medium heat.**

Melting the fat into the water first is the ultimate secret; it instantly coats the bread when it hits the pan, creating a barrier that prevents it from turning into a soggy paste.

- 2. Drop the torn bread into the boiling liquid and immediately reduce the heat to low.**

Using a wooden spoon, gently fold the bread for one to two minutes until it drinks up the broth. The mixture should be thick and cohesive, not soupy. If it looks entirely dry, add a tablespoon of hot water.

- 3. Remove the pan entirely from the heat before adding the cheese.**

Never boil the cheese, or the proteins will seize and turn rubbery. Gently fold in the crumbled feta so it softens and melts into the crevices of the bread from the residual heat.

- 4. Serve the popara immediately, straight out of the hot pot.**

Top with a dollop of sour cream or kajmak. It pairs perfectly with a cold glass of plain kefir or drinkable yogurt to cut through the richness.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not use pre-sliced sandwich bread.**

Standard American sandwich bread will disintegrate instantly into an inedible slurry; you must use a dense, crusty artisan loaf, sourdough boule, or French baguette.

- **Mimic traditional kajmak with clotted cream.**

If you want true authenticity but cannot find imported Balkan kajmak at a local specialty market, mixing English clotted cream with a pinch of salt is the closest textural and flavor match.



Domaća Projara

Домаћа пројара

doh-MAH-chah PRO-yah-rah

Historically, pure cornmeal proja was an austere survival food. But post-war grandmothers got their hands on wheat flour, eggs, and handfuls of salty cheese, birthing projara—an incredibly moist, savory quick-bread. The secret to its lightness isn't some refined pastry technique. It's the brute-force chemical magic of highly carbonated sparkling water reacting with baking powder. Originally measured by eye in empty yogurt cups, we've translated those resilient ratios for standard American kitchens. You want authenticity? Get the pan smoking hot with pork fat before the batter hits it. Serve it straight from the oven alongside a tall glass of cold kefir.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cup	medium-grind yellow cornmeal	1 cup	club soda <i>freshly opened</i>
1 1/2 cup	unbleached all-purpose flour	2/3 cup	sunflower oil
1 tbsp	baking powder	8 oz	feta cheese <i>roughly crumbled</i>
1 tsp	kosher salt	2 oz	full-fat cottage cheese
3 large	large eggs <i>brought to room temperature</i>	1 tbsp	lard
1 cup	plain kefir	1 tbsp	sesame seeds

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven and your pan.

Set your oven to 400°F. Place a 9x13-inch metal or ceramic baking dish inside while it preheats, dropping the lard into the pan. Letting the fat get smoking hot ensures the batter flash-fries on contact, creating a deeply savory, rustic crust that you can't get from a cold pan.

2. Mix the dry and wet components.

In a large bowl, whisk together the cornmeal, all-purpose flour, baking powder, and salt. In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs until frothy, then stir in the kefir and sunflower oil. Pour in the club soda and watch it aggressively foam and bubble.

3. Combine the batter.

Dump the foaming wet mixture into your dry ingredients. Stir gently with a wooden spoon or rubber spatula just until combined. Do not overmix—a few lumps are perfectly fine and preferable.

4. Fold in the cheese.

Gently fold the crumbled feta and cottage cheese into the batter with your spatula. Step away from the whisk; you want distinct, salty pockets of cheese to survive the mixing process, not dissolve into the liquid.

1. Listen for the sizzle.

Carefully remove the screeching-hot, greased pan from the oven, swirling the melted lard to coat the bottom and sides. Pour the batter directly into the hot pan—it should sizzle the second it hits. Sprinkle the top evenly with sesame seeds.

2. Bake and serve hot.

Return the pan to the oven and bake for 25 to 30 minutes. You are looking for a deep, gorgeous golden-brown crust and a toothpick that comes out clean. Let it cool in the pan for 10 minutes before slicing into squares. Serve it warm, right away.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Seltzer Trick.**

Do not substitute the sparkling water with tap water. Carbonation is the foundational Balkan trick to aerate and lighten heavy cornmeal doughs. Make sure you crack a fresh can just before mixing.

● **The Yogurt Dilemma.**

Standard American Greek yogurt is too thick, having been strained of its whey. If Greek yogurt is all you have, thin it down with milk or water until it mimics the consistency of pourable heavy cream.

● **Storage.**

Projara is best eaten the day it is made. However, owing to the oil and cheese content, it reheats beautifully in a toaster oven the next day, completely retaining its moisture.



Brzi Pekarški Burek sa Sirom

Брзи пекарски буреk са сиром

br-zee peh-kar-skee boo-rek sah see-rom

In the Balkans, scoring a hot, greasy, perfectly blistered slice of burek wrapped in butcher paper from the local pekara is a morning religion. There is a blood-feud-level regional debate over the name—Bosnians fiercely insist true 'burek' means meat only, while everyone else happily orders 'burek sa sirom'. We aren't here to solve it, we're here to eat. This recipe bypasses the hours of hand-stretching dough on a kitchen table. By treating standard supermarket phyllo with an emulsion of oil and carbonated water, then unceremoniously crumpling it into a skillet, you replicate those exact, life-affirming bakery air pockets. It tastes exactly like the homeland.

INGREDIENTS

8 oz	full-fat cottage cheese	1/2 cup	neutral cooking oil
8 oz	sheep's milk feta <i>crumbled</i>	1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1/4 cup	full-fat sour cream	1 tbsp	neutral cooking oil <i>for greasing the pan</i>
2 large	eggs	16 oz	phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the fridge</i>
1 cup	highly carbonated plain sparkling water		

PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough safely.**

Leave the frozen phyllo in its sealed package in the refrigerator overnight so the fragile sheets don't crack when unrolling.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 400°F and mix the cheese filling.**

In a medium bowl, vigorously mash the cottage cheese, crumbled feta, sour cream, and eggs with a fork into a cohesive, chunky paste.

- 2. Whisk the hydration emulsion.**

In a measuring cup, whisk the sparkling water, half cup of oil, and salt. Oil and water naturally separate, so give this a quick, violent whisk immediately before every single application.

- 3. Build the foundation.**

Generously grease a 10-inch round cast-iron skillet or heavy cake pan with the remaining tablespoon of oil. Lay two flat sheets of phyllo into the bottom, letting the excess drape over the edges of the pan, and drizzle about 3 tablespoons of the emulsion over these base sheets.

1. Employ the crumpling technique.

Take a fresh sheet of phyllo, crumple it loosely like a piece of discarded tissue paper, and drop it into the pan. Repeat with two more sheets until the bottom is covered, then generously drench this crumpled layer with the emulsion.

2. Layer the cheese and repeat.

Drop dispersed spoonfuls of one-third of the cheese over the crumpled dough. Add another layer of three crumpled phyllo sheets, whisk and drizzle the emulsion, and add another third of the cheese. Repeat until the cheese is exhausted, making sure to reserve a quarter cup of the liquid emulsion for the very end.

3. Seal the pastry.

Fold the overhanging foundation edges inward over the messy crumpled layers. Lay your final two flat sheets of phyllo smoothly across the top, tucking the edges down the sides of the skillet like making a hotel bed.

4. Drench the crust and bake.

Pour the remaining emulsion evenly over the top. It will look like a flooded mistake, but don't panic, the dough will absorb it in the heat. Poke five or six deep holes through the top with a knife so the pastry doesn't inflate like a balloon, then bake for 35 to 40 minutes until shatteringly crisp and deep golden brown.

5. Perform the bakery flip.

Remove from the oven, loosen the edges with a knife, and place a large cutting board over the skillet. Confidently flip the whole thing over to invert the burek. If you leave it in the pan, the bottom will steam into a tragic, soggy mess. Cut into quarters and serve hot with a glass of drinkable yogurt.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not fear the fragile dough.**

If a sheet of phyllo rips while you are handling it, don't sweat it. The beauty of the crumpled architecture is that it completely hides all sins.

- **The technique is modular.**

The exact same crumpling and hydration method works perfectly if you swap the cheese for a pound of ground beef heavily browned with minced onions and black pepper.



Palenta sa Sirom i Slaninom

Палента са сиром и сланином

pah-LEN-tah sah SEE-rom ee SLAH-nee-nom

For generations across the Balkans, a pot of boiling cornmeal was the difference between starving and surviving a brutal winter. Today, it is the ultimate comfort food, deeply tied to the smells of woodsmoke and rendered pork fat. This preparation bypasses the relentless, agonizing whisking demanded by Italian polenta in favor of a brilliant village secret: the "rupa" method. By letting the boiling water cascade over a pierced mountain of stone-ground cornmeal, the overworked grandmothers of the old country turned a labor-intensive chore into a hands-off masterpiece, finished with a generous pour of sizzling smoked bacon and sharp feta.

INGREDIENTS

4 cup	Water	6 oz	Thick-Cut Double-Smoked Bacon
1 tsp	Fine Sea Salt		<i>cut into small dice</i>
1 tbsp	Cultured Butter	4 oz	Firm Feta Cheese in Brine
1 cup	Stone-Ground Yellow or White Cornmeal		<i>crumbled</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring the water, salt, and butter to a rolling boil.**
Use a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium-high heat. The touch of fat helps prevent sticking right out of the gate.
- 2. Pour the cornmeal to form a mound and pierce a hole through the center.**
Do not stir. Pour the cornmeal in a steady stream so it forms a mountain resting on the bottom. Take the handle of a long wooden spoon and poke a hole dead-center until you hit the bottom of the pot.
- 3. Leave the pot entirely alone at a gentle bubble for 30 to 40 minutes.**
Reduce the heat to medium-low. The boiling water will geyser up through the hole and cascade over the sides, cooking the grains perfectly via convection without forming a single lump.
- 4. Render the diced bacon until crispy in its own golden fat.**
Start this about 10 minutes before the cornmeal is done. Place the bacon in a cold skillet and let the fat render slowly over medium-low heat until the bits are swimming in liquid, then remove from the heat.
- 5. Remove from the heat and beat the cornmeal vigorously until smooth.**
Grip the pot firmly and use the wooden spoon to beat the mixture for 2 to 3 minutes until the lumps vanish and it transforms into a thick, glossy velvet. If it feels excessively stiff, splash in a tiny bit of hot water.

1. Spoon into bowls and crown with the feta, bacon, and sizzling fat.

Scatter the crumbled feta over the steaming palenta, then pour the hot bacon and its rendered fat right over the top to partially melt the cheese. Serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the grind.**

True flavor and texture rely entirely on medium-grind, stone-ground cornmeal. Instant varieties will turn into a sad, flavorless paste and rob the dish of its rustic soul.

● **The diaspora kajmak hack.**

If you want true Balkan luxury but don't have access to fresh, unpasteurized mountain dairy, blend equal parts softened cream cheese and butter with a splash of sour cream. Stir a generous dollop into the hot palenta during the final beating stage.

● **The Herzegovinian twist.**

For a meatless Friday or a tangier profile, skip the bacon entirely. Drench the hot palenta in a mixture of plain whole-milk yogurt heavily spiked with minced raw garlic, finishing with a generous pour of hot melted butter.



Jela na Kašiku: The Weeknight Spoon

The unglamorous, fiercely beloved backbone of the Balkan table: hearty, economical stews adapted for the modern American weeknight.

These stews are not the majestic spreads rolled out for visiting relatives on a Sunday afternoon. This is Tuesday at six p.m., the commute ringing in your ears, when you drag a heavy Dutch oven onto the stove and need the onions to

collapse into a savory paste in forty-five minutes. In working-class cooking, the best meals are eaten from a bowl, with a spoon.

Jela na kašiku. This is the unglamorous backbone of the everyday Balkan table. It is peasant food in the best sense—chuck roast, soaked beans, and carrots simmered down into a restorative broth. These recipes are the lifeblood of the modern diaspora—heavy-bottomed pots of gulaš and thick pasulj built to hit the table on a Tuesday night after a long shift. It is a taste of the old country, streamlined for the new one. Grab a paprika-stained wooden spoon and get the heat on.





Brzi Pasulj sa Suvim Mesom

Брзи пасуљ са сувим месом

br-zee pah-sooly sah soo-veem meh-som

In the Balkans, a diet without 'meals on a spoon' is considered a tragedy of both digestion and the soul. Pasulj is the undisputed king of these pots—a smoky, velvety bean stew that traditionally demands days of soaking and tending. But for the diaspora navigating an American weeknight, this quick adaptation sacrifices none of the deep, ancestral flavor. By relying on high-quality canned beans, heavily smoked meat, and mastering the sacred *zaprška*—the paprika-laced roux that binds it all together—you can resurrect the exact aromas of a Sarajevo Sunday in under an hour.

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp	neutral oil or lard	1 med	bay leaf
1 large	yellow onion <i>very finely diced</i>	4 cup	unsalted chicken or vegetable broth
2 med	carrots <i>finely diced or grated</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper
12 oz	smoked kielbasa, thick-cut double-smoked bacon, or smoked ham hock <i>sliced or diced</i>	3 tbsp	neutral oil
45 oz	canned Cannellini or Great Northern beans <i>thoroughly rinsed and drained</i>	2 tbsp	all-purpose flour
		3 small	garlic cloves <i>finely minced</i>
		1 tbsp	Hungarian sweet paprika

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Render the fat and sweat the aromatics.

Place a heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat, adding the 1 tablespoon of oil or lard, onion, carrots, and smoked meat. Sauté slowly for 8 to 10 minutes until the onions are completely translucent and melting into a paste. Do not rush this step, as the melted onion is vital to the stew's final velvety texture.

2. Simmer the beans and broth.

Add the rinsed beans, bay leaf, broth, and black pepper. Bring to a gentle boil, then immediately drop the heat to low, cover partially, and let simmer for 20 minutes to allow the beans to absorb the smoky essence of the meat.

3. Prepare the *zaprška*.

While the stew simmers, heat the remaining 3 tablespoons of neutral oil in a small skillet over medium-low heat. Whisk in the flour and toast for 1 to 2 minutes until it smells nutty and turns pale golden. Stir in the minced garlic for exactly thirty seconds, then immediately pull the skillet completely off the heat.

1. Bloom the paprika off the heat.

Stir the sweet paprika into the hot oil and flour mixture. This must be done off the burner, as exposing paprika to direct, high heat will caramelize its natural sugars and turn the entire pot bitter.

2. Temper the roux and thicken the stew.

Carefully ladle a scoop of hot broth from the main pot into the skillet, whisking rapidly as it spits and sizzles to form a smooth red paste. Scrape this entire paste back into the main pot of beans.

3. Execute the final boil.

Stir the stew thoroughly and simmer for a final 10 to 15 minutes. This cooks out the raw flour taste and allows the gelatinized starches to fully hydrate, transforming the watery broth into a rich, thick stew. Taste and season with salt if needed, then remove the bay leaf before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Rule of the Second Day.**

If you have the patience, let the pot cool and stash it in the fridge overnight. The starches will settle, the smoke will penetrate the cellular structure of the beans, and the reheated stew will be exponentially better tomorrow.

● **Serve it like a local.**

Serve hot with thick, crusty bread and quarters of raw white onion on the side. Biting into the sharp, raw onion between rich spoonfuls is the traditional way to cleanse the palate.



Kafanska Teleca Corba

kah-fahn-skah teh-leh-chah chor-bah

If you sit down at a kafana anywhere from Belgrade to Sarajevo, this is the bowl they bring you to start the meal, cure a cold, or fix a hangover. It is the ultimate spoon food—a velvety, restorative elixir packed with tiny, melt-in-your-mouth cubes of meat and root vegetables. The secret to making it taste exactly like the homeland lies in swapping watery celery stalks for earthy celeriac, dicing everything wonderfully small so every component fits on a single spoon, and finishing with a silky temper of egg yolk and sour cream.

INGREDIENTS

3 tbsp neutral oil

1 large yellow onion
very finely diced

1 lb	veal shoulder or beef chuck <i>cut into uniform 1/4-inch cubes</i>	1 tsp	whole black peppercorns
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and cut into 1/4-inch cubes</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
1 small	celery root <i>peeled and cut into 1/4-inch cubes</i>	2 tbsp	all purpose flour
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and cut into 1/4-inch cubes</i>	1/4 cup	cold water
2 med	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/4-inch cubes</i>	1 tsp	sweet paprika
6 cup	warm water	1 large	egg yolk
1 tbsp	Vegeta or dry vegetable seasoning	3 tbsp	full fat sour cream
2 med	dried bay leaves	1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
		2 tbsp	white vinegar or lemon wedges <i>for serving</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Sweat the onions and sear the finely diced meat until its liquid completely evaporates.**

In a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium heat. Sauté the onion for 5 to 7 minutes until soft, then add the meat. Keep cooking until the liquid released from the meat cooks off entirely and the cubes begin to gently fry and brown in the oil, concentrating their flavor.

2. **Simmer the meat gently until it begins to turn tender.**

Pour in about 2 cups of the warm water to barely cover the meat, add a pinch of salt, cover, and drop the heat to low. Let it simmer for 45 to 60 minutes so the tough connective tissue can break down before the vegetables are introduced.

3. **Build the soup base with the root vegetables and aromatics.**

Add the meticulously diced carrots, celery root, parsnip, and potatoes, tossing them with the meat. Pour in the remaining 4 cups of warm water along with the bay leaves, peppercorns, and Vegeta. Bring to a gentle boil, then lower the heat, cover partially, and simmer for 30 to 40 minutes until the root vegetables are tender but holding their shape.

1. Thicken the broth with a cold roux.

In a small mug, aggressively whisk the flour, sweet paprika, and cold water into a smooth, lump-free slurry. Slowly pour this into the simmering soup while stirring constantly, letting it cook for another 10 to 15 minutes until the broth transforms to a slightly heavy, silky consistency. Turn off the heat entirely.

2. Temper the dairy finish to create the signature velvet texture.

In a small bowl, whisk the egg yolk and sour cream until perfectly smooth. Wait until the soup has completely stopped bubbling, then ladle a splash of hot broth into the dairy mixture, whisking vigorously to temper it. Slowly pour the warmed mixture back into the soup in a thin stream, stirring continuously. Never let the soup boil again once the dairy is in.

3. Garnish with parsley and serve with a hit of acid.

Stir in the chopped parsley and adjust the salt to taste. Serve in deep bowls alongside crusty bread, letting guests add a splash of white vinegar or lemon juice at the table to cut the richness and bring the soup to life.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Mind the dairy if making ahead.**

If you are prepping this for the week, do not add the egg and sour cream mixture to the whole pot, as it will cause the soup to sour faster in the fridge. Keep the base cold, and whisk a little yolk and sour cream directly into individual bowls when reheating.



Gusto Dinstani Grasak sa Mesom

Густо динстани грашак са месом

goo-sto deen-stah-nee grah-shahk sah meh-som

If you grew up in a Balkan household, you know the smell of a Tuesday night: yellow onions sweating into submission, sweet paprika hitting hot oil, and the promise of a meal meant to be eaten with a deep spoon and a torn chunk of bread. This is *jela na kašiku*—a pragmatic, unpretentious stew engineered to stretch a little meat into a feast. We skip the heavy, separate-pan roux for a quick slurry, but we don't touch the two unwritten rules of the old country: the onions must cook low

and slow until they practically melt, and you must fold in fresh dill off the heat. That dill is the magic trick. It cuts the rich broth and makes the whole pot taste unmistakably like home.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp	neutral cooking oil	1 tsp	black pepper
1 large	yellow onion <i>very finely diced</i>	1 tbsp	tomato paste
1 lb	boneless skinless chicken thighs <i>cut into 1-inch cubes</i>	16 oz	frozen green peas
2 large	carrot <i>peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch rounds</i>	4 cup	low-sodium chicken broth
2 clove	garlic <i>minced</i>	2 tbsp	all-purpose flour
1 tbsp	Vegeta seasoning	1 tbsp	sweet Hungarian paprika
		1/4 cup	cold water
		3 tbsp	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>

PREPARATION

- **Chop the aromatics and portion the chicken before you begin cooking.**

This recipe moves steadily once the onions are soft. Having the carrots, garlic, and chicken cubed and ready ensures the paprika and garlic won't burn while you prep.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sweat the onions until they practically dissolve into a jam.**

Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-low heat. Add the onions and cook slowly, stirring occasionally, for 8 to 10 minutes until they are completely soft and translucent. Do not let them brown; this is the foundation of the stew's flavor.

1. Sear the chicken and build the braising base.

Turn the heat up to medium, add the cubed chicken, and sauté until it loses its raw color. Stir in the carrots, garlic, Vegeta, black pepper, and tomato paste to coat. Add a splash of water, cover the pot, turn the heat to low, and let it steam in its own juices for 15 minutes.

2. Simmer the peas in just enough broth to barely cover the ingredients.

Uncover and add the frozen peas. Pour in the broth—stop when the liquid just reaches the top of the vegetables and meat, as too much water makes a thin soup instead of a thick stew. Bring to a gentle boil, reduce the heat, and simmer uncovered for 15 to 20 minutes until the peas are tender.

3. Thicken the stew with a quick paprika slurry.

In a small mug, vigorously whisk the flour, sweet paprika, and cold water until lump-free. While stirring the stew constantly, pour in the slurry. Simmer for 5 more minutes to cook out the raw flour taste as the broth transforms into a rich, velvety consistency.

4. Finish off the heat with fresh dill.

Remove the pot from the heat completely before folding in the chopped dill to preserve its bright, volatile oils. Taste, adjust the salt if necessary, and serve immediately in wide bowls with crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Go gluten-free by blending the peas.**

Skip the flour slurry entirely. When the stew is almost done, scoop out 1 cup of the cooked peas and broth, blend it until smooth, and stir it back into the pot to naturally thicken the liquid.



Pileci Krompir Paprikas

pee-let-chee krom-peer pap-ree-kash

If there is a scent that defines a Balkan childhood, it is the smell of sweet paprika blooming in warm oil. Forget the heavy, sour cream-laden restaurant approximations; true home-style paprikash is an unfussy, one-pot marvel of bone-in chicken and tender potatoes yielding to a rich, crimson broth. The mother's secret here isn't a thick, floury roux, but the patience to melt the onions and the wisdom to mash a few cooked potatoes back into the pot at the very end. The result is a naturally velvety stew that practically begs to be mopped up with a torn heel of crusty bread.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs and drumsticks <i>patted dry</i>	2 tbsp	Hungarian sweet paprika
2 tbsp	neutral oil	1 tbsp	tomato paste
1 large	yellow onion <i>very finely diced</i>	1 1/2 lb	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1 1/2-inch chunks</i>
2 med	carrot <i>peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch rounds</i>	4 cup	low-sodium chicken broth
1 med	green bell pepper <i>cored and chopped</i>	1 large	bay leaf
3 clove	garlic <i>minced</i>	1 tbsp	Vegeta seasoning
		1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the chicken skin-side down in hot oil until deeply golden brown, about 5 to 7 minutes per side.**
Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Season the dry chicken with a little salt, sear to render the fat and build a flavorful fond, then remove the pieces to a plate and leave the rendered fat in the pot.
- 2. Slowly sweat the diced onions in the rendered chicken fat until they melt into a translucent paste.**
Lower the heat to medium. This takes about 8 to 10 minutes and forms the essential textural base of the stew. Stir in the carrots and bell pepper, cook for another 3 minutes, then add the garlic until fragrant.
- 3. Pull the pot completely off the heat to stir in the sweet paprika and tomato paste for exactly 15 seconds.**
Do not skip removing the pot from the burner; the high sugar content in paprika will scorch and turn violently bitter in seconds. Immediately quench the blooming spices with one cup of the broth to halt the frying process.

- 1. Return to the heat and add the potatoes, seared chicken, bay leaf, Vegeta, and the remaining broth.**

The liquid should just barely cover the meat and potatoes. Bring to a gentle boil, cover with the lid slightly ajar, and simmer on low for 35 to 40 minutes until the chicken falls off the bone and the potatoes are fork-tender.

- 2. Fish out four or five chunks of soft potato, mash them with a ladle of hot broth into a smooth paste, and stir back into the pot.**

Let the stew bubble for another 5 minutes. This releases the pure potato starch into the broth, naturally thickening it into a rich, velvety consistency without the need for a heavy flour roux.

- 3. Remove from the heat, stir in the fresh parsley, and let the pot rest for 10 minutes before serving.**

Jela na kašiku (meals on a spoon) always taste better when they have had a moment to settle. Serve in deep bowls with thick slices of rustic crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Protect the flavor profile by using only true sweet paprika.**

The authentic taste relies entirely on the earthy, sweet pepper notes of high-quality Hungarian sweet paprika. Do not substitute smoked Spanish pimentón, which will completely alter and overpower the dish.



Brzi Slatki Kupus sa Slaninom

Брзи слатки купус са сланином

br-zee slaht-kee koo-poos sah slah-nee-nom

Forget the gray, sulfurous mush most Americans associate with boiled cabbage. In the Balkans, fresh sweet cabbage is a thirsty vegetable that demands rich, smoky pork fat to come alive. By rendering thick-cut smoked bacon and deploying an old village trick—a late hit of acid to kill the funk and cut the fat—this humble head of brassica transforms into a deeply savory, soul-nourishing stew. It’s exactly what your grandmother threw together on a busy Tuesday, and the only real rule is to keep your damn hands off the spoon once it simmers.

INGREDIENTS

1 large	green cabbage <i>core removed, cut into rustic 2-inch chunks</i>	1 tbsp	sweet paprika
8 oz	thick-cut smoked slab bacon <i>diced into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	1 tbsp	Vegeta seasoning
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	2 tbsp	tomato paste
2 large	carrot <i>cut into thin coins</i>	1/2 tsp	freshly ground black pepper
3 large	garlic clove <i>minced</i>	2 med	dried bay leaves
		1 1/2 cup	hot water
		1 tbsp	apple cider vinegar
		1 tsp	Dijon mustard

PREPARATION

- **Source the right bacon.**

Since we're skipping traditional Balkan dried meats (*suvo meso*), ask your butcher for thick-cut smoked slab bacon or double-smoked bacon to replicate that deep, rustic flavor.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Render the smoky foundation.**

Place a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-low heat and slowly cook the bacon for 8 to 10 minutes until crispy. Remove half the bacon with a slotted spoon to save for garnish, leaving the rest and all that beautiful rendered fat in the pot.

- 2. Build the aromatics.**

Toss the onion and carrots into the hot bacon fat, sautéing for about 6 minutes until soft and translucent, then stir in the garlic for sixty seconds.

1. Bloom the spices.

Skip the heavy traditional roux and simply sprinkle the sweet paprika and Vegeta directly into the hot fat. Stir constantly for 30 seconds to unlock the deep red color, then immediately mix in the tomato paste so the paprika doesn't burn.

2. Layer the cabbage.

Pile the chunky cabbage pieces into the pot, toss in the bay leaves and black pepper, and pour the hot water over the top.

3. Simmer without stirring.

Bring the liquid to a gentle boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and cover tightly. Step away from the spoon and let it simmer entirely undisturbed for 35 to 40 minutes—stirring will agitate the softened leaves and turn them to mush, so just give the pot handles a gentle shake if you're paranoid about sticking.

4. Deploy the grandmother's secret.

Remove the lid to reveal the soft cabbage sitting in a rich, reddish-orange broth. Whisk the vinegar and mustard together, drizzle it over the pot, and gently fold the cabbage for the first time before letting it simmer uncovered for a final 5 minutes to balance the smoke.

5. Rest and serve.

Turn off the heat and let the stew sit for at least 10 minutes before ladling into deep bowls, topping with the reserved crispy bacon, and serving with plenty of crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The golden rule of hydration.**

The added liquid should never fully submerge the cabbage. Cabbage is mostly water and releases its own juices as it steams; adding too much water up front results in a thin, watery soup instead of a hearty stew.

- **A thirsty vegetable needs fat.**

If your bacon is incredibly lean and doesn't yield at least two tablespoons of fat during the rendering phase, add a splash of olive oil or a spoonful of butter to the pot before adding the onions.



Boranija sa Mlevenim Mesom

Боранија са млевеним месом

boh-RAH-nee-yah sah MLEH-veh-neem MEH-som

This is the working-class backbone of the post-war Balkan kitchen, adapted for a Thursday night in an Ohio suburb. There are no cheffy flourishes here—just a pragmatic, deeply nourishing weeknight stew that relies on a very specific layering of humble ingredients to build its soul. The secret to the motherland's flavor lies in using wide, flat Romano beans that melt into the broth, laying down a rustic foundation of smoked bacon, and hitting the pot with a handful of raw garlic and parsley strictly off the heat.

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp	neutral oil	1 lb	Romano beans or frozen flat beans
2 oz	thick-cut smoked bacon <i>finely diced</i>		<i>ends trimmed and cut into 2-inch pieces</i>
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i>	2 med	potatoes <i>peeled and cut into small cubes</i>
1 large	carrot <i>peeled and diced</i>	1/2 cup	tomato puree
1/2 lb	ground beef	4 cup	warm water or beef broth
1 tbsp	sweet paprika	1 tbsp	all-purpose flour
1 tbsp	Vegeta or vegetable bouillon	3 tbsp	cold water
1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	5 clove	garlic <i>minced</i>
		1/2 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Render the smoky foundation.

Place a large, heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat, add the oil and the diced bacon, and cook for 3 to 4 minutes until the fat renders and the bacon begins to crisp.

2. Sweat the aromatics.

Add the chopped onion and diced carrot to the rendered pork fat, sautéing for 5 to 7 minutes until the onions are soft and translucent.

3. Brown the ground meat.

Increase the heat slightly, drop in the ground beef, and break it apart with a wooden spoon to cook until it is no longer pink and begins to caramelize.

1. Bloom the paprika carefully.

Lower the heat back to medium, sprinkle the sweet paprika and Vegeta over the meat, and stir continuously for 30 seconds to toast the spices without burning them before immediately deglazing the pot with the tomato puree.

2. Simmer the stew.

Fold in the flat beans and potatoes, pour in just enough warm water to cover the ingredients, and bring to a gentle boil before reducing the heat to low, partially covering the pot, and simmering for 45 minutes until luxuriously tender.

3. Thicken the broth.

Vigorously whisk the flour and cold water into a completely smooth slurry, then slowly pour it into the gently bubbling stew while stirring, letting it cook out for a few minutes until the watery broth transforms into a silky gravy.

4. Execute the grandmother's secret finish.

Remove the pot entirely from the heat, stir in the raw minced garlic and chopped parsley, and cover tightly with the lid for 10 minutes so the residual heat can gently temper the pungent aromatics.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Source the right beans.**

Standard American cylindrical string beans have the wrong cellular structure for a long simmer. You must use fresh Romano beans or frozen flat beans to achieve the authentic, buttery texture.



Kafanski Gulas na Brzinu

Кафански Гулаш на Брзину

kah-FAHN-skee GOO-lahsh nah br-ZEE-noo

In the Balkans, the tavern, or kafana, is the beating heart of social life, and its soul is the goulash. Traditionally, it's a deeply rich, mahogany stew that simmers for hours while old men play cards and drink wine. But when our parents crossed an ocean and worked nine-to-fives, they needed to capture that exact magic on a Tuesday night. The secret to the ancestors' weeknight magic is an uncompromising one-to-one ratio of hand-diced onions to fast-braising pork shoulder, and a single square of dark chocolate slipped in at the end to neutralize the wine and summon a gloss so authentic you'll instantly know you're home.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	yellow onions <i>peeled and finely diced by hand</i>	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
2 lb	boneless pork shoulder <i>trimmed of heavy fat caps and cut into 1 1/2-inch cubes</i>	1 tbsp	tomato paste
3 tbsp	pork lard <i>or neutral oil</i>	1/2 cup	dry red wine
3 small	garlic clove <i>finely minced</i>	3 large	dried bay leaves
2 tbsp	sweet Hungarian paprika	2 cup	warm water
1 tbsp	Vegeta	20 g	dark baking chocolate <i>roughly chopped</i>
		1 pinch	salt <i>to taste</i>

PREPARATION

- **Ditch the food processor.**

You must dice the onions by hand with a sharp knife. Mechanically pureeing onions releases sulfurous compounds that impart a distinct, metallic bitterness to the goulash.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sweat the massive pile of hand-diced onions until they practically melt.**
Heat the lard or oil in a large, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the diced onions and cook them slowly, stirring occasionally, until they reduce by half and turn completely soft, golden, and translucent—about 15 minutes. This forms the absolute foundation of your gravy. Do not cheat with a food processor, which will crush the cell walls and turn the alliums bitter.
- 2. Sear the pork in the onion base to build flavor.**
Increase the heat to medium-high and add the cubed pork shoulder. Cook, stirring frequently, until the pork loses its raw color and begins to brown on the edges, about 8 to 10 minutes. The meat will release its juices; let them cook down.

1. Bloom the spices and introduce the liquids.

Stir in the minced garlic, sweet paprika, Vegeta, and black pepper. Stir constantly for about 60 seconds until highly fragrant, taking care not to let the paprika burn, then stir in the tomato paste. Pour in the red wine to deglaze the pot, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom.

2. Braise the stew gently until the pork is meltingly tender.

Add the warm water and the bay leaves. The liquid should just barely cover the meat. Bring to a gentle boil, then immediately reduce the heat to low, cover the pot tightly, and let it simmer without interfering for 45 to 50 minutes.

3. Perform the tavern chef's final magic trick.

Remove the lid and fish out the bay leaves. If the gravy is too thin, let it bubble uncovered for a few minutes. Turn off the heat entirely, drop the dark chocolate into the center of the pot, and let it sit for two minutes. Gently stir the melted chocolate into the gravy, watching it transform into a glossy, dark masterpiece. Taste for salt, let it rest for 10 minutes, and serve.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the ratio.**

It will look like entirely too many onions for the amount of meat. Trust the ancestors; the strict one-to-one ratio is what thickens the sauce beautifully without relying on heavy flour.

● **Check your paprika.**

American supermarkets heavily stock Spanish smoked paprika. Do not use it here, or the heavy smoke will completely mask the authentic flavor profile. Seek out standard sweet Hungarian paprika.



Brza Begova Corba

br-za be-go-va chor-ba

Begova Čorba is the undisputed queen of the Balkan soup pot—a velvety, tart, and restorative chicken soup historically reserved for Ottoman nobility. For the diaspora kid navigating a Tuesday night in an American suburb, this streamlined version engineers the exact same bone-deep nostalgia without the three-hour simmer. It relies on dark meat, earthy root vegetables, and a grandmother's simple acid trick to tame the okra. It tastes exactly like home, using ingredients you can grab at the local supermarket.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	bone-in skin-on chicken thighs	1 cup	frozen cut okra
6 cup	cold water	1 tbsp	white vinegar
1 large	yellow onion <i>peeled and halved</i>	3 tbsp	unsalted butter
2 med	carrots <i>peeled and left whole</i>	2 tbsp	all-purpose flour
1 small	celeriac <i>peeled and quartered</i>	1 large	egg yolk
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and left whole</i>	1/3 cup	sour cream
1 large	bay leaf	1 tbsp	heavy cream
1 tsp	salt	1 pinch	ground nutmeg <i>freshly grated</i>
1/2 tsp	whole black peppercorns	1 tbsp	lemon juice <i>freshly squeezed</i>
		2 tbsp	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

PREPARATION

- **Start with cold water.**

Always begin your broth with cold water; this slowly extracts the proteins and flavor from the meat and bones, resulting in a deeper, richer soup.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the quick broth.**

Place the chicken thighs, onion, carrots, celeriac, parsnip, bay leaf, salt, and peppercorns in a large pot and cover with the cold water. Bring to a gentle boil, skimming any gray foam that rises, then reduce the heat, cover partially, and simmer for 30 to 35 minutes until the chicken pulls easily from the bone.

1. Treat the okra.

Place the frozen okra in a colander, pour the vinegar over it, and rinse under warm tap water for 30 seconds to completely neutralize the mucilage before setting aside to drain.

2. Strain and shred.

Transfer the chicken and root vegetables to a cutting board, discard the onion and spices, and pour the broth through a fine-mesh strainer into a large bowl. Discard the chicken skin and bones, shred the meat, and dice the cooked carrots, celeriac, and parsnip into neat cubes.

3. Make the light roux.

Return the wiped pot to medium heat, melt the butter, and whisk in the flour for 1 to 2 minutes until it loses its raw flavor but remains pale blonde.

4. Simmer the potage.

Vigorously whisk the strained broth into the roux to create a smooth base, then return the chicken, diced vegetables, and okra to the pot, simmering gently for 5 to 10 minutes to tenderize the okra.

5. Temper the liaison.

Off the heat, whisk the egg yolk, sour cream, and heavy cream together in a small bowl, then slowly drizzle in a ladle of hot broth while whisking constantly to warm the eggs gently.

6. Finish and serve.

Stir the tempered egg mixture, lemon juice, and nutmeg into the soup without letting it boil, adjust the salt to taste, and serve immediately garnished generously with fresh parsley.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Use the right root vegetables.**

Parsnip is the perfect, easy-to-find swap for authentic parsley root. If you cannot locate knobby celeriac, two thick stalks of American celery will still yield a delicious soup.

- **Do not fear the okra.**

Using frozen cut okra skips the arduous preparation of dried okra entirely. The quick vinegar rinse is the exact chemical trick Balkan grandmothers use to eliminate the slime, just applied to a modern convenience ingredient.

- **Replicate authentic mileram.**

Balkan cultured cream is richer and slightly less sharp than American sour cream. Whisking a splash of heavy cream into standard sour cream perfectly mimics that luxurious, velvety mouthfeel.



Pita i Burek: Phyllo Mastery

Demystifying the undisputed kings of Balkan comfort food, from from-scratch weekend rituals to brilliant Tuesday night hacks.

A proper burek is built on concentric coils of pastry. Mastering it from scratch requires the rhythmic thwack of dough on a floured kitchen table, the impossible, translucent stretch of a handmade jufka giving way to farmer's cheese or peppery potatoes. Shaping those layers into a tight spiral of potato and pepper takes patience, wet hands, and a quiet Sunday afternoon.

But let's be brutally honest—nobody has time for that on a rainy Tuesday after a ten-hour shift. That is where a box of supermarket phyllo comes in. The shortcut still yields the sharp crackle of a baked sirnica shattering under your

knife. Here is the traditional weekend method for pulling the dough by hand, followed by the grocery-store hack that gets a hot pie on the table in forty-five minutes.





Domaća Jufka

Домаћа јуфка

doh-MAH-cha YOO-fkah

If there is a line separating a casual cook from a Balkan matriarch, it is drawn across a floured cotton tablecloth. To the uninitiated, coaxing a humble ball of flour and water into a sheet thin enough to read a newspaper through looks like witchcraft, but the truth is strictly mechanical. It is about developing gluten, employing a heavy hand with resting oil, enforcing a strict ban on kitchen drafts, and slipping in a grandmother's ultimate secret: a splash of white vinegar to make the dough relentlessly forgiving. Forget the frozen aisles; with standard American supermarket flour and a little nerve, you can stretch the real thing right on your dining room table.

INGREDIENTS

4 1/2 cup	unbleached all-purpose flour	6 tbsp	neutral oil <i>divided</i>
1 1/2 tsp	fine sea salt	1 1/2 cup	lukewarm water
1 tbsp	distilled white vinegar		

PREPARATION

- **Set up your stretching station with a cotton tablecloth.**

Clear a large dining or kitchen table and drape it with a clean, smooth cotton tablecloth, which provides essential grip during stretching.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the dough ingredients until a shaggy mass forms.**

In a large bowl, whisk the flour and salt, then create a well in the center to pour in 2 tablespoons of the oil, the vinegar, and the lukewarm water, mixing by hand or with a wooden spoon.

- 2. Knead vigorously until the dough is silky and completely clears your hands.**

Turn the dough onto a counter and knead for about 10 minutes, resisting the urge to add excess flour. Alternatively, a stand mixer with a dough hook on medium-low will get you there in 7 minutes.

- 3. Divide the dough, coat generously in the remaining oil, and rest it to relax the gluten.**

Split the dough into two equal spheres, roll them smooth, and place them on a plate. Pour the remaining 1/4 cup of oil over them, rubbing it in to prevent a dry crust, then cover tightly with plastic wrap and rest for 1 hour at room temperature.

- 4. Prepare your stretching station and eliminate all drafts from the room.**

Dust your tablecloth lightly and evenly with flour, and close all windows and doors—moving air will dry out the delicate edges and cause them to shatter.

1. Roll the dough into a disc and massage it with a few drops of oil.

Place one rested ball in the center of the tablecloth and roll it out to a 12-inch circle. Smear a few drops of the resting oil across the surface and let it sit for exactly 3 minutes.

2. Stretch the dough using the backs of your hands until it is transparent.

Slide both hands under the dough, palms facing the table. Gently lift and pull outward from the center, walking around the table until the dough is thin enough to clearly see the tablecloth's pattern underneath.

3. Tear away the thick outer borders before filling and rolling.

The extreme edges will remain slightly thick; pinch them off and discard or save for frying. Your canvas is now ready to be oiled, filled, and rolled into a pan.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The warm oven hack saves time for busy parents.**

If you don't have an hour for the dough to rest, place the covered, oiled dough in an oven slightly warmed to 100°F (turned off) for 15 to 20 minutes to rapidly relax the gluten.

- **Understand the local taxonomy.**

In Bosnian tradition, a 'burek' contains only meat. If you fill this dough with cheese, it becomes sirnica; with potatoes, it is krompiruša.



Pravi Bosanski Burek sa Mesom

Прави босански бурек са месом

prah-vee boh-sahn-skee boo-rek sah meh-som

In Bosnia, all pies are just pies, but burek is the king—and it strictly means meat. Forget the brittle, store-bought phyllo and heavy spices you see in bastardized diaspora recipes. This is the canonical preparation, relying on the tactile magic of hand-stretched dough and two unwritten secrets: hydrating the raw beef to keep it aggressively juicy, and hitting the baked pie with a hot butter-broth called the *zaljev*. It yields a shatteringly crisp top and a tender, savory center that tastes exactly like a Sunday morning in the homeland. It's basic kitchen science, patience, and pure magic.

INGREDIENTS

4 1/2 cup	unbleached all purpose flour	1 tsp	ground black pepper
2 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1 tsp	vegeta
1 1/4 cup	warm water	1/3 cup	cold water
6 tbsp	neutral oil	3/4 cup	water
1 1/4 lb	ground beef	2 tbsp	unsalted butter
1 large	yellow onion <i>grated or very finely minced</i>		

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the flour, 1 1/2 teaspoons of the salt, the warm water, and 2 tablespoons of oil in a stand mixer to form a smooth, highly elastic dough.**

Knead on medium-low for about 8 minutes until it pulls away from the bowl but remains slightly tacky—it should feel as soft as an earlobe.

- 2. Divide the dough into three smooth balls, coat them generously with the remaining oil, cover tightly, and let them rest at room temperature for at least an hour.**

This is non-negotiable; the gluten must relax completely, or the dough will snap back and tear.

- 3. Combine the raw beef, grated onion, remaining teaspoon of salt, pepper, Vegeta, and the cold water in a mixing bowl.**

Mix vigorously with your hands until the meat absorbs the water and becomes swollen and sticky—this ensures it steams from the inside out.

- 4. Roll one dough ball into a pizza-sized circle on a clean, flour-dusted cotton tablecloth, drizzle with oil, and let it sit for 5 minutes.**

The tablecloth provides the necessary friction; do not use a bare counter.

- 1. Slide your hands underneath the dough and use the tops of your knuckles to gently stretch it outwards until it is paper-thin and translucent.**
Walk around the table, pulling evenly, and don't panic over small tears near the edges.
- 2. Scatter a third of the meat mixture in a thin line along the edge of the stretched dough.**
- 3. Lift the edge of the tablecloth to roll the dough over the meat into a long tube, then coil it into a spiral in the center of a greased baking pan.**
Repeat the stretching, rolling, and coiling process with the remaining dough balls, continuing the spiral until the pan is full.
- 4. Bake the burek at 450°F for 15 minutes, then lower the heat to 400°F and bake for another 20 to 25 minutes until deeply golden and crisp.**
- 5. Bring the 3/4 cup water, butter, and a pinch of salt to a rolling boil in a small saucepan to create the zaljev.**
- 6. Remove the baked burek from the oven, immediately pour the boiling zaljev over the sizzling pie, and return it to the turned-off oven for 10 minutes.**
The pie will absorb the liquid, softening the innermost layers while maintaining a shatteringly crisp exterior.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Serve the burek piping hot alongside a cold glass of plain kefir or drinkable yogurt.**

The contrast between the hot, savory pie and the cold, tart dairy is the authentic way to eat it.



Lažne Mantije

Лажне Мантије

lahzh-neh mahn-tee-yeh

If you grew up in a Balkan house, you know the intoxicating, savory smell of mantije—glorious, bite-sized pockets of ground beef smothered in cold, garlicky yogurt straight out of the oven. Traditionally, making them means sacrificing an afternoon to stretch unleavened dough across a table until it's thin enough to read through. But for a Tuesday night in the American suburbs, you need the brilliant, unwritten shortcut of the modern diaspora: lažne (fake) mantije. By brushing store-bought phyllo with a magical, yeasty milk

wash, the dry pastry ferments and rehydrates, mimicking the chewy, delicate layers of hand-pulled dough so perfectly it feels like a beautiful crime. It's unapologetic, deeply authentic home cooking for real life.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 cup	whole milk <i>warmed slightly to lukewarm</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
2/3 cup	neutral oil	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
2 1/4 tsp	active dry yeast	1 lb	thin phyllo dough (#4 or #7 thickness) <i>thawed completely overnight in the fridge</i>
8 tbsp	all-purpose flour	1 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 cup	plain full-fat yogurt
1 pinch	granulated sugar	4 clove	garlic <i>pressed or minced into a paste</i>
1 lb	ground beef (85/15)	1 pinch	kosher salt
2 small	yellow onions <i>very finely minced</i>		
2 tbsp	neutral oil		

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Whisk together the magical yeast wash and let it wake up.

In a medium bowl, combine the lukewarm milk, 2/3 cup neutral oil, dry yeast, sugar, 1 teaspoon salt, and flour. Whisk vigorously until smooth and free of lumps, then let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes to become slightly frothy. This liquid batter is the grandmother's secret weapon, designed to soften the commercial phyllo and provide the signature chewiness of homemade dough.

- 1. Sauté the onions and ground beef until deeply browned and completely dry.**
Place a large skillet over medium heat with 2 tablespoons of oil. Sauté the minced onions for 5 to 7 minutes until translucent, then add the ground beef. Break it apart into very fine crumbles, season with 1 teaspoon salt and black pepper, and cook until all the released moisture has completely evaporated. We have to pre-cook the meat here so it doesn't turn the delicate, fast-baking phyllo into a soggy mess. Let the filling cool slightly.
- 2. Layer the phyllo sheets, painting them generously with the yeast wash.**
Preheat your oven to 400°F. Line a 9x13-inch baking dish with parchment paper. Keep your thawed phyllo covered with a slightly damp towel. Place one sheet on your work surface, spoon 4 tablespoons of the frothy yeast wash over it, and spread it to the edges with a pastry brush. Place a second sheet of phyllo directly on top.
- 3. Cut the double-layered sheets, stuff with the meat filling, and fold into packets.**
Using a sharp knife or pizza cutter, divide the brushed double sheet into four equal squares. Drop a heaping tablespoon of the cooled meat filling into the center of each square. Fold the edges inward toward the center, like an envelope, enclosing the meat entirely to form a neat little packet.
- 4. Pack the pastries snugly into the pan and bake until rich and golden.**
Place each stuffed packet seam-side down in the prepared dish. Pack them tight against each other—they like to touch while baking, which forces the steam upward and keeps the edges soft. Repeat the layering, brushing, cutting, and stuffing until you run out of filling. Brush the assembled mantije generously with any remaining yeast wash. Bake on the center rack for 35 to 40 minutes until they puff up and turn a deep, golden brown.
- 5. Douse the hot pastries with cold, garlicky yogurt immediately upon exit.**
While the mantije bake, whisk the sour cream, yogurt, minced garlic, and a pinch of salt together in a small bowl until smooth. The second you pull that bubbling pan from the oven, immediately spoon the cold garlic-yogurt mixture evenly over the top. The residual heat warms the garlic, releasing a fiercely nostalgic aroma. Serve straight from the pan.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Don't rush the yeast fermentation.**

Skipping the 10 to 15 minute rest for your milk wash is a rookie mistake. The yeast needs that time to hydrate and start acting on the flour and sugar to mimic the slightly fermented, gluten-developed chew of a true hand-pulled dough.

- **Buy the right phyllo thickness.**

This technique strictly requires #4 or #7 thickness phyllo, often simply labeled 'thin' or 'standard'. Avoid #10 'Country Style' dough, which is far too thick, won't absorb the wash properly, and will leave you with a heavy, dense pastry.



Tradicionalna Zeljanica

Зељаница

zel-YAH-nee-tsa

It's just a spinach pie until you realize it's an exercise in structural engineering. The secret of a true Balkan zeljanica lies in a violent duality: ruthlessly wringing all the water out of raw, salted greens so they don't turn your pastry into paste, only to shock the shatteringly crisp, baked pie with a baste of warm milk and cream. It sounds like madness to wet perfectly good phyllo, but that sudden burst of steam creates the tender, dumpling-like interior that separates a dry bakery snack from the genuine soul of the homeland.

INGREDIENTS

3 3/4 cup	all-purpose flour	3 tbsp	sour cream
1 1/2 cup	water <i>lukewarm</i>	2 tbsp	cream cheese <i>softened</i>
3 tbsp	neutral oil	1 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened</i>
1 tsp	fine sea salt	4 large	eggs <i>lightly beaten</i>
10 oz	baby spinach	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
6 oz	Swiss chard <i>stems removed, roughly chopped</i>	1/2 cup	neutral oil
2 med	scallions <i>finely chopped</i>	3 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>
1 tsp	kosher salt	1/2 cup	whole milk
1 lb	whole milk cottage cheese <i>drained in a fine mesh sieve for 10 minutes</i>	2 tbsp	sour cream
8 oz	mild sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>	1/4 tsp	salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Mix and knead the dough.

In a large bowl, whisk the flour and fine sea salt, make a well, and add the lukewarm water and 3 tablespoons of neutral oil. Knead aggressively for 8 to 10 minutes until the dough transforms from rough to incredibly smooth and elastic, resembling the firmness of an earlobe.

2. Rest the dough to relax the gluten.

Divide the dough into three equal balls, pour a little oil into your palms, and coat each ball generously. Cover tightly with plastic wrap and let rest at room temperature for at least 1 hour; without this rest, the dough will snap back and tear during stretching.

1. Extract the water from the greens.

Toss the chopped spinach, Swiss chard, and scallions with the kosher salt in a large colander and let sit for 15 to 20 minutes. Take handfuls of the greens and squeeze them as hard as you physically can over the sink to expel all the dark green liquid, transferring the dry clumps to a mixing bowl.

2. Build the dairy filling.

To the dry greens, add the drained cottage cheese, crumbled feta, 3 tablespoons sour cream, softened cream cheese, softened butter, beaten eggs, and black pepper. Mix thoroughly with a fork until it forms a cohesive, chunky paste.

3. Stretch the dough on a tablecloth.

Preheat your oven to 400°F and lightly oil a 12-inch round metal baking pan. On a large table draped with a lightly floured clean cotton tablecloth, flatten a rested dough ball, smear it gently with a little oil, and slide the backs of your hands underneath to pull outward from the center until the dough is nearly translucent.

4. Roll and coil the pastry.

Mix the 1/2 cup neutral oil and melted butter, and flick it lightly over the stretched dough. Drop a line of filling along the longest edge, lift the tablecloth to roll the dough into a long neat tube, and coil it gently into a tight spiral in the center of the pan. Repeat with the remaining dough.

5. Bake the zeljanica until crisp.

Brush the top of the assembled spiral lightly with oil and bake on the middle rack for 30 to 35 minutes, or until the pastry is deep golden brown and audibly crispy.

6. Perform the final baste.

While the pie bakes, heat the milk, 2 tablespoons sour cream, and a pinch of salt in a small saucepan until just simmering. Pull the hot pie out of the oven, immediately pour the hot milk mixture evenly over the top so it hisses violently, and return to the oven for 3 to 5 minutes so the liquid absorbs.

1. Trap the steam to soften the crust.

Remove from the oven and immediately drape a clean cotton kitchen towel over the pan. Let it rest for 15 minutes before slicing to create that authentic soft-yet-crispy texture.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Use carbonated water for store-bought phyllo.**

If you can't pull dough on a weeknight, use thawed commercial phyllo sheets. Vigorously whisk 1/2 cup neutral oil with 1/2 cup carbonated mineral water and generously dab it between every layer of commercial dough to mimic the airy, tender chew of hand-pulled jufka.

● **Hack the kajmak with cream cheese and butter.**

True Balkan kajmak is a slightly fermented clotted cream that is notoriously hard to find in American supermarkets. A whipped mixture of cream cheese and softened butter accurately mimics its rich fat content and mild tang.



Posna Krompiruša

Посна кромпируша

poh-snah krom-pee-roo-shah

In the Balkan diaspora, reproducing the shattering crunch and tender chew of a grandmother’s hand-stretched pita using American grocery store phyllo is the ultimate kitchen white whale. This meatless, fasting-compliant potato pie bridges the gap. By deploying a heavily peppered, finely diced potato filling and manipulating the store-bought dough with a carbonated water wash and a violent post-bake steam drench, the cook forces modern convenience to yield deeply ancestral, unfussy flavor.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	Russet or Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and finely diced</i>	1 1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	16 oz	commercial phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the fridge</i>
3 tbsp	neutral oil	1/2 cup	carbonated mineral water
1 tbsp	Vegeta	1/3 cup	neutral oil
1 tsp	Kosher salt	1/2 cup	water
		1 tbsp	neutral oil
		1/2 tsp	Kosher salt

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Cook the onions and potatoes to build the flavor base.

Heat 3 tablespoons of neutral oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Sauté the diced onions until translucent, about 5 minutes. Add the potatoes—diced as finely as humanly possible—and cook for 3 to 4 minutes just to coat them in the infused oil and knock off the raw edge. Remove from heat and stir in 1 teaspoon salt, the Vegeta, and the black pepper. The mixture should smell intensely peppery.

2. Whisk the magic preliv wash.

In a small bowl, vigorously whisk together the carbonated mineral water and 1/3 cup of neutral oil. The mixture will naturally want to separate, so keep a pastry brush in the cup and give it a quick stir before every single application. This carbonated hydration is the absolute secret to mimicking hand-stretched dough.

1. Assemble the phyllo rolls.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Lay one sheet of phyllo flat on a dry surface and lightly speckle it with the wash using your brush. Place a second sheet directly on top and wash it again. Spoon a thin line of the potato filling along the long edge, leaving a one-inch border. Roll it tightly into a long cylinder. Coil this log into an oiled round baking pan, or lay it straight in a 9x13 dish. Repeat until all filling and dough are used, packing the rolls snugly.

2. Bake until shattering and golden.

Brush any remaining mineral water wash generously over the top of the assembled pie. Bake in the center of the oven for 35 to 45 minutes, or until the top is a deep, resonant golden brown and a paring knife easily pierces the potatoes inside.

3. Boil the zaljev and steam the hot pie.

Five minutes before the pie is done baking, bring 1/2 cup of water, 1 tablespoon of oil, and 1/2 teaspoon of salt to a rolling boil in a small saucepan. Pull the golden pie from the oven and immediately pour the boiling liquid evenly over the hot crust. It will hiss and crackle violently. Instantly cover the pan tight with a clean kitchen towel or foil and let it rest undisturbed for 15 minutes to force steam back into the pastry.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Don't skimp on the black pepper or the Vegeta.**

In the absence of meat or dairy, the sharp heat of the black pepper and the dehydrated root vegetable umami from the Vegeta provide the entire depth of the dish.

● **Serve it simply.**

Because this is a strict fasting (posna) dish, traditionalists serve it alongside a simple tomato and cucumber salad dressed in oil and vinegar. If you aren't fasting, a dollop of sour cream or pourable plain yogurt is canonical.



Posna Pita sa Pečurkama i Prazilukom

Посна пита са печуркама и празилуком

pos-nah pee-tah sah peh-choor-kah-mah ee prah-zee-loo-kom

When the Orthodox fasting calendar rolls around, the rules dictate no meat, no dairy, and no eggs. But grandmothers in the Balkans don't let dietary restriction get in the way of a spectacular meal. This vegan mushroom and leek pita is a masterclass in making magic from nothing, building profound umami with cheap aromatics. The real trick here isn't a secret spice; it's a structural hack—a wash of sparkling water, oil, and semolina that aerates papery, store-bought American phyllo into the tender, chewy, hand-stretched dough of your memories.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	white button or cremini mushrooms <i>finely diced</i>	1/2 tsp	salt
2 large	leeks <i>white and light green parts only, thoroughly washed and sliced into thin half-moons</i>	16 oz	#4 phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the refrigerator</i>
3 tbsp	neutral vegetable oil	1 cup	club soda
1 tbsp	Vegeta	1/3 cup	neutral vegetable oil
1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	3 tbsp	fine semolina flour
		1 tsp	double-acting baking powder

PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough safely.**

Leave the frozen phyllo dough in the refrigerator overnight so it becomes pliable. Thawing it at room temperature will cause the sheets to stick together and tear.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Cook down the aromatics.**

Heat 3 tablespoons of oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat, then sauté the sliced leeks until soft and translucent, about 5 to 7 minutes.

- 2. Evaporate the mushroom moisture completely.**

Add the diced mushrooms to the skillet. They will dump a staggering amount of water into the pan; let them cook until absolutely all the liquid evaporates and the mushrooms begin to brown.

- 3. Season and cool the filling.**

Remove the skillet from the heat and stir in the Vegeta, salt, and freshly ground black pepper. Set it aside to cool completely before rolling, otherwise the residual heat will melt the pastry wash.

1. Mix the secret grandma wash.

In a bowl, whisk together the club soda, 1/3 cup oil, semolina flour, baking powder, and a pinch of salt. The baking powder and carbonation will fizz; this aerated slurry is the secret to mimicking hand-stretched dough.

2. Layer and wash the phyllo.

Lay one sheet of phyllo on your work surface and lightly brush or splatter it evenly with the semolina wash. Top with a second sheet, wash it again, and finish with a third sheet.

3. Fill and roll the logs.

Spoon about one-fifth of the cooled mushroom filling along the bottom edge of the top sheet. Fold the side edges in by half an inch to seal the ends, then roll the dough away from you into a tight cylinder.

4. Glaze and bake the pita.

Arrange the logs in a greased 9x13-inch baking dish. Brush the tops generously with any remaining wash, then bake at 375°F for 35 to 45 minutes until audibly crispy and deeply golden brown.

5. Rest under a towel.

Pull the hot pita from the oven, flick a few drops of cold water over the top, and cover immediately with a clean kitchen towel for 15 to 20 minutes. The trapped steam softens the brittle crust into a perfect, chewy, handmade texture.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the dry-out phase.**

Do not rush the mushrooms. Any residual liquid left in the pan will leach into the dough and ruin the bottom layer of your pita.

● **Whisk the wash frequently.**

The oil and water in the semolina wash will naturally separate as it sits. Give it a quick whisk before brushing each layer to ensure the semolina is evenly distributed.



Šareni Burek

Шарени бурек

sha-reh-nee boo-rek

In the strict taxonomy of Bosnian pies, true burek is an uncompromising affair: meat only. But toss finely diced potatoes into the fray and you get šareni burek—a colorful mosaic born of working-class necessity that evolved into a deeply nostalgic masterpiece. The potatoes act as earthy little sponges, soaking up the rendered beef fat and sweet onion juices as the pie roasts. Hand-stretching dough across a kitchen table demands patience, but the payoff is absolute. Hit the blistering, golden crust with a splash of hot liquid at the end, and you summon a savory, steam-filled interior that tastes exactly like a Balkan grandmother's kitchen.

INGREDIENTS

3 1/2 cup	unbleached all-purpose flour	1 1/2 tsp	fine sea salt
1 tsp	fine sea salt	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
1 1/4 cup	warm water	1 tsp	Vegeta seasoning
1/4 cup	neutral oil	1 tbsp	neutral oil
1 lb	ground beef	1/2 cup	boiling water
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely grated or minced</i>	2 tbsp	unsalted butter
2 med	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and finely diced into tiny cubes</i>	1/4 tsp	fine sea salt

PREPARATION

- **Let the dough rest for at least one hour.**

This resting phase relaxes the gluten; without it, the dough will snap back like a rubber band and refuse to stretch paper-thin.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Vigorously knead the dough until it feels as soft as an earlobe.**

In a large bowl, whisk the flour and 1 teaspoon of salt, create a well, and pour in the warm water and 2 tablespoons of the oil. Bring it together into a shaggy mass, turn it out onto the counter, and knead for 8 to 10 minutes to build the resilient gluten structure essential for stretching.

- 2. Divide, oil, and rest the dough to relax the gluten.**

Cut the dough into three equal pieces and flatten each into a small disc. Place them on a generously oiled baking sheet, pour a little more oil over the top to coat them completely, cover with plastic wrap, and let them rest at room temperature for at least one hour.

1. Prepare the meat and potato filling.

In a bowl, combine the finely diced potatoes, ground beef, minced onion, 1 1/2 teaspoons of salt, black pepper, Vegeta, and 1 tablespoon of oil. Mix gently with your hands until just combined, allowing the flavors to meld.

2. Hand-stretch the dough on a floured tablecloth until practically transparent.

Preheat the oven to 425°F and grease a large round baking pan or cast-iron skillet. Place a rested dough disc on a lightly floured clean cotton tablecloth, flatten it to the size of a dinner plate with a rolling pin, and brush with oil. Put the pin away, slide your hands underneath, palms down, and use your knuckles to gently tease the dough outward until it hangs over the table's edges, then tear off the thick, ropey overhang.

3. Stuff, roll, and coil the pastry into the baking pan.

Drizzle the stretched dough lightly with oil or melted butter, scatter a third of the filling sparsely around the outer edges, and lift the tablecloth to naturally roll the dough over the filling into a long tube. Coil the tube into a spiral in the center of the pan, repeating with the remaining dough discs to fill the pan, then brush the top with melted butter.

4. Bake the pie until deeply golden and blistered.

Bake at 425°F for 20 minutes, then lower the heat to 400°F and bake for an additional 15 to 20 minutes until the crust is highly blistered and deeply browned.

5. Baste the pie with hot zaljev to fuse the crisp crust with a succulent interior.

Five minutes before the burek is done, boil 1/2 cup of water in a saucepan with 2 tablespoons of butter and 1/4 teaspoon of salt. Pull the pan from the oven, spoon this hot liquid all over the top of the crispy pastry so it sizzles wildly, and return to the oven for the final 5 minutes. Let rest 10 minutes before slicing.

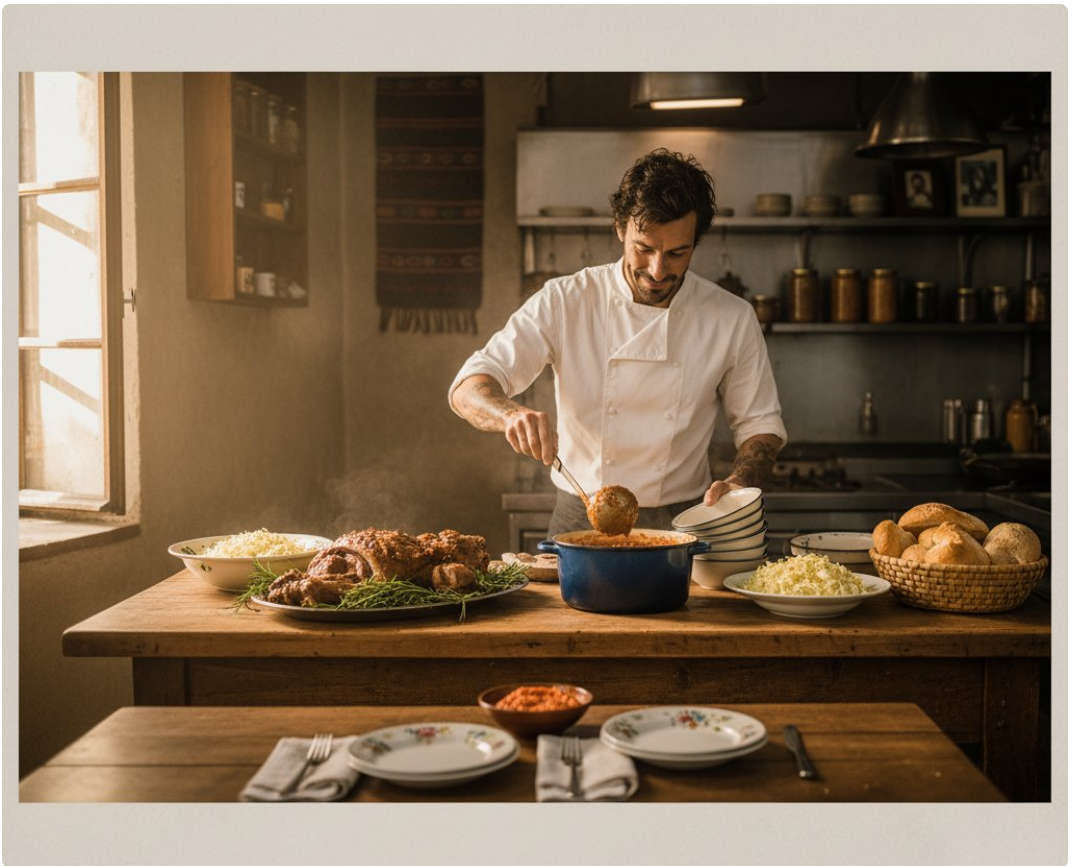
CHEF'S NOTES

- **Store-bought phyllo diaspora hack.**

For a weeknight shortcut, skip making the dough and instead hydrate store-bought phyllo sheets with a mixture of 1 cup highly carbonated mineral water and 1/4 cup neutral oil. Brush two sheets generously with this mixture, scatter the filling sparsely, roll, coil, and bake as directed, including the crucial final zaljev step.

- **Respect the potato dice.**

Do not grate the potatoes, as they will turn to mush, release excess water, and essentially boil the beef. Dicing them finely into cubes no larger than a green pea ensures they hold their shape and provide the requisite textural pop.



Nedeljni Ručak: The Sacred Sunday Supper

The ritualistic cornerstone of Balkan family life and a blueprint for recreating legendary multi-course Sunday feasts.

Sunday at noon begins an endurance event born of love, obligation, and the unspoken rule that no one leaves the table until they are dangerously full. In the diaspora, this is how a family anchors its week.

The ritual starts with the quiet, methodical rolling of sarma from fermented cabbage leaves, moves to the slow, steady roasting of a lamb shoulder, and begins, as all things must, when the clear broth shimmers—a golden chicken broth swimming with plump semolina dumplings. It's the heavy, multi-course reality of a Balkan Sunday, faithfully rebuilt using a standard 325-degree oven and supermarket ingredients. The fat renders out of the lamb, the steam hits the windows, and the long afternoon begins.





Brza Domaća Supa sa Griz Knedlama

Брза домаћа супа са гриз кнедлама

br-za do-ma-cha su-pa sa greez kned-la-ma

In a Balkan household, Sunday lunch isn't a meal; it's an institution. That ritual always begins with a restorative bowl of domaća supa. While grandmothers might simmer an old hen for hours, this weeknight version captures the exact soul-warming depth using collagen-rich wings and a brilliantly simple trick: a deeply charred onion half. The real stars, however, are the griz knedle—little golden clouds of semolina. Use Cream of Wheat instead of American durum semolina, give the batter its mandatory rest, and suddenly you're tasting the exact aroma of the old country, right in your own kitchen.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	chicken wings or backs	8 cup	cold water
1 med	yellow onion <i>left unpeeled and halved equatorially</i>	1 large	egg <i>room temperature</i>
2 large	carrots <i>peeled and left whole</i>	1 tbsp	neutral oil or melted pork lard
1 med	parsnip <i>peeled and left whole</i>	4 tbsp	Cream of Wheat or farina <i>2.5-minute variety, not instant</i>
1 small	celery root or celery stalks <i>peeled and quartered if using root</i>	1 pinch	salt
1 small	fresh parsley stems	1 tbsp	Vegeta or kosher salt
handful		1 small	fresh parsley leaves
10	whole black peppercorns	handful	<i>finely chopped</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Char the onion halves until heavily blackened.

Place a dry cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat. Press the cut sides of the unpeeled onion halves down and let them sit, undisturbed, for 4 to 5 minutes until heavily charred. This is the non-negotiable secret to a golden, deeply flavorful broth.

2. Build the broth from cold water.

In a large pot, combine the chicken, charred onion halves, carrots, parsnip, celery root, parsley stems, and peppercorns. Pour in the cold water. Bring to a gentle boil, skim off any gray foam that rises to the surface, then reduce the heat to low, cover partially, and simmer lazily for 45 minutes.

3. Mix the dumpling batter gently.

While the soup simmers, vigorously beat the egg in a small bowl with a fork until frothy. Beat in the oil and a pinch of salt. Gradually sprinkle in the Cream of Wheat one tablespoon at a time, folding gently with the fork to form a thick, soft paste. Do not overmix.

1. Let the dumpling batter rest.

Set the bowl aside on the counter for at least 15 to 20 minutes. This mandatory resting period allows the wheat granules to hydrate and swell. Skip this, and your dumplings will fall apart in the pot.

2. Strain the soup into a clean pot.

After 45 minutes, carefully strain the broth through a fine-mesh sieve into a clean pot. Discard the onion, parsley stems, and peppercorns. Slice the cooked carrots and parsnips and return them to the clear broth. Pick the meat off the wings and add it back if desired.

3. Form and simmer the dumplings.

Bring the strained broth to a very gentle simmer—a rolling boil will physically tear the delicate dumplings apart. Dip a small teaspoon into the hot broth, scoop a half-teaspoon of the rested batter, and drop it into the soup. Repeat until the batter is gone. Let them simmer gently for 5 to 7 minutes until they float.

4. Execute the covered swell off the heat.

Turn off the heat completely, cover the pot tightly, and let it sit on the warm stove for 15 minutes. The trapped steam puffs the dumplings into perfect, cloud-like spheres. Stir in the Vegeta or salt to taste, ladle into shallow bowls, and garnish heavily with chopped parsley.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Use the right wheat.**

Do not use American pasta semolina. It's milled from hard durum wheat and will yield dense, heavy dumplings. Cream of Wheat (farina) is the precise textural match for Balkan soft-wheat griz.

● **Respect the golden ratio.**

For every large egg, you need exactly 4 to 5 level tablespoons of Cream of Wheat and 1 tablespoon of fat. The batter should look like a thick paste, not a stiff, rollable dough.

- **A note on fats.**

While neutral oil works perfectly, using a tablespoon of rendered pork lard (svinjska mast) is the ultimate grandmother's secret for the most delicate, savory dumplings imaginable.



Slagana Sarma

Слагана сарма

slah-gah-nah sar-mah

True sarma is a labor of love that demands hours of meticulous rolling. This deconstructed version is the ultimate open secret of Balkan mothers. Slagana Sarma delivers the exact soul-warming, smoky, sour-savory profile of the original dish, layered effortlessly like a lasagna. It requires a fraction of the time but fills a suburban American kitchen with the unmistakable, intoxicating aroma of a childhood winter in the diaspora.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb

sauerkraut
drained

1 lb

ground pork

1/2 lb	80/20 ground beef	1 tsp	black pepper
6 slices	thick-cut smoked bacon <i>4 chopped, 2 left whole</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	2 large	dried bay leaves
3 clove	garlic <i>minced</i>	3 cup	low-sodium chicken broth
3/4 cup	medium-grain white rice <i>rinsed</i>	2 tbsp	neutral oil
1 tbsp	sweet paprika	1 tbsp	all-purpose flour
		1 tsp	sweet paprika

PREPARATION

- **Assess the sauerkraut.**

Taste your cabbage first. If it makes your eyes water with overwhelming salt or acid, place it in a colander, rinse it briefly under cold water, and squeeze out the excess moisture. If it tastes balanced, just drain it and proceed.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the flavor base.**

In a large skillet over medium heat, add a splash of oil and the chopped bacon. Cook until the fat renders, then add the diced onion. Sauté until deeply softened, about 8 minutes, before stirring in the garlic to cook for 30 seconds.

- 2. Brown the meat partially.**

Add the ground pork and beef to the skillet, using a wooden spoon to break it apart. Cook only until the meat loses its raw red color, about 5 minutes. Do not cook it dry; it needs to finish in the oven to stay tender.

- 3. Incorporate the rice and spices.**

Remove the skillet from the heat. Fold in the rinsed raw rice, 1 tablespoon of sweet paprika, salt, and black pepper, stirring until the rice is completely coated in the residual meat fats.

1. Layer the casserole.

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Grease a deep Dutch oven or 9x13 inch baking dish. Spread one-third of the sauerkraut across the bottom, top with half the meat mixture, another third of the sauerkraut, the remaining meat, and finish with a final layer of sauerkraut to cover the meat entirely.

2. Tuck in the aromatics.

Nestle the bay leaves and the reserved whole strips of bacon into the top layer of cabbage.

3. Make the traditional završka.

In a small saucepan, heat 2 tablespoons of oil. Whisk in the flour and cook for 1 minute until toasted. Off the heat, whisk in 1 teaspoon of sweet paprika, then slowly whisk in the broth until smooth.

4. Flood the dish and bake.

Pour the warm završka liquid evenly over the casserole so it barely peeks through the top layer. Cover tightly with heavy-duty foil or a lid and bake on the middle rack for 1 1/2 to 2 hours.

5. Crisp the top.

Remove the foil for the final 20 minutes of baking. Allow the top layer of cabbage and bacon to brown and develop slightly charred, crispy edges.

6. Rest before serving.

Let the casserole rest for 15 minutes to allow the starches to set, making it easier to slice into cohesive portions. Serve hot with crusty bread and a dollop of sour cream.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The second-day rule.**

Like all great braises, Slagana Sarma is scientifically proven to taste better the next day as the glutamates meld and the rice firms up. Bake this on a Saturday night for an effortless Sunday supper.

- **Freezing for later.**

Assemble the casserole entirely, freeze it raw, and bake directly from frozen by adding approximately 45 minutes to the covered baking time.



Kafanske Pohovane Šnicle

Кафанске поховане шницле

kah-FAHN-skeh po-HO-vah-neh SHNEE-tsleh

In the boisterous, smoke-stained kafanas of the Balkans, a breaded pork cutlet isn't just a meal; it's a display of sheer culinary bravado. They call it the 'Elephant Ear'—a slab of meat pounded unapologetically thin until it spills over the edges of the plate. Recreating that legendary tavern energy at home comes down to a few unwritten secrets whispered by grandmothers: pounding the meat gently between plastic to save the fibers, slipping sour cream into the egg wash for ruthless juiciness, and pressing the crumbs in by hand. It isn't delicate. It's just perfectly, undeniably right.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	boneless pork loin chops <i>trimmed of hard fat</i>	2 tbsp	sour cream
1 tbsp	Vegeta seasoning	1 tbsp	milk
1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	2 cup	plain fine breadcrumbs
1 cup	all-purpose flour	1 cup	sunflower oil
3 large	large eggs	1 med	lemon <i>cut into wedges</i>

PREPARATION

- **Allow the pork to lose its chill.**

Pull the pork chops from the refrigerator 20 minutes before you begin pounding. Meat that is too cold will seize up in the pan and drop the temperature of your frying oil.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Pound the pork into massive 'elephant ears' between two sheets of plastic wrap.**

Place a cutlet between heavy-duty plastic wrap or inside a large freezer bag. Strike from the center outward with the smooth side of a mallet until uniformly about 1/4-inch thick and doubled in surface area. The plastic protects the delicate muscle fibers from tearing under the assault.

- 2. Season the pounded cutlets generously with Vegeta and black pepper.**

Sprinkle both sides evenly and let them rest on a plate for 10 minutes so the meat can properly absorb the salty, savory flavors of the seasoning.

1. Set up a three-bowl breading station to build the crust.

Place the flour in the first wide bowl. In the second, whisk the eggs, sour cream, milk, and a tiny pinch of salt until completely smooth—the sour cream is the grandmother's secret to an incredibly juicy interior. Pour the plain breadcrumbs into the third bowl.

2. Dredge, dip, and firmly press the cutlets into the breading.

Coat a cutlet entirely in flour, shaking off the excess. Submerge it in the egg wash so no dry spots remain, then lay it into the breadcrumbs. Use the flat palm of your hand to aggressively press the crumbs into the meat on both sides so the crust locks in place and won't flake off in the pan.

3. Fry the schnitzels in batches in shimmering oil.

Heat a half-inch of oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat. When a single breadcrumb immediately sizzles and dances, lay the cutlets in away from you so the fat doesn't splash. Fry for 3 to 4 minutes per side until fiercely crispy and deeply golden brown.

4. Drain immediately on paper towels and serve while audibly crisp.

Transfer the golden schnitzels to a paper towel-lined plate to absorb the excess oil. If frying multiple batches and the oil turns black from burnt crumbs, stop, carefully wipe the pan clean, and start with fresh oil. Serve immediately with a squeeze of fresh lemon.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not use Panko or Italian seasoned breadcrumbs.**

The flavor and texture profile will be entirely wrong. If you cannot find plain, fine breadcrumbs at the market, pulse stale, high-quality white bread in a food processor until fine.

- **Mashed potatoes and cabbage salad are non-negotiable.**

A proper Sunday lunch demands a massive scoop of unfussy, buttery mashed potatoes and a sharply vinegared shredded cabbage salad to cut through the rich fat of the fried pork.



Vojvodanski Pekarski Krompir

Војвођански пекарски кромпир

voy-vo-jan-ski pe-kar-ski krom-peer

In the agricultural heartland of Vojvodina, before the luxury of reliable home ovens, families hauled heavy metal roasting pans to the neighborhood pekara. There, potatoes and smoked pork slow-roasted in the residual heat of massive brick bread ovens while the town attended Sunday service. This is not a delicate French gratin. It is a masterclass in rustic Balkan alchemy: no fancy stocks or heavy cream, just the magic that happens when potatoes, onions, sweet paprika, and a splash of water meet the profound, smoky depth of rendered bacon fat. It is the undisputed heavyweight champion of the Sunday supper.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	Russet or Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch thick rounds</i>	1 tbsp	sweet Hungarian paprika
2 med	yellow onions <i>halved and sliced into thin half-moons</i>	1 tsp	dried thyme
1 tbsp	pork lard	1 tsp	Kosher salt
8 oz	thick-cut hardwood-smoked bacon <i>cut into 2-inch segments</i>	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
		1 1/2 cup	water

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 425°F.**

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Score the bacon into traditional crests.**

On the fatty edge of each two-inch bacon segment, make three or four small vertical slits halfway through the meat so they fan out and render aggressively in the oven.

2. **Sauté the onions in lard to build the flavor base.**

Melt the lard in a large skillet over medium-high heat and cook the onions until totally softened and deeply browned, about 8 to 10 minutes. Do not rush this step; it is where the dish gets its soul.

3. **Season the potatoes.**

In a large mixing bowl, toss the sliced potatoes with the sweet paprika, dried thyme, salt, and black pepper, ensuring every slice is evenly coated.

1. Assemble the baking pan.

Grease a 9x13-inch metal roasting pan or ceramic baking dish. Spread the caramelized onions and all the leftover lard from the skillet across the bottom, then layer the seasoned potatoes over them in a slightly overlapping, shingled pattern.

2. Add the water line.

Carefully pour the water down the inside edge of the dish so you don't wash the spices off the potatoes. You want just enough water so the bottom layer is submerged, but the top layer remains exposed to the dry heat of the oven.

3. Crown with the crested bacon and roast.

Arrange the bacon pieces evenly over the top layer of potatoes and place the dish in the center of the hot oven. Bake for 45 to 55 minutes, using tongs to flip the bacon pieces halfway through so they crisp on both sides.

4. Bake until all the water has completely evaporated.

The dish is ready only when the potatoes are tender and golden-brown on top, and you can hear them gently frying in the rendered bacon fat at the bottom of the pan. Let rest for 5 minutes before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Use real pork lard if you can find it.**

For decades, first-generation Americans abandoned lard for inferior vegetable oils. Reintroducing high-quality leaf lard or reserved bacon grease is the single most impactful way to recreate the genuine tastes of a Balkan homeland.

● **Stick to metal pans for the best crisp.**

Traditionally baked in a shallow metal tepsija, metal conducts heat aggressively to aid the final frying stage once the water evaporates. If using a glass or ceramic casserole dish, you may need to extend the baking time by 5 to 10 minutes.



Brzi Rinflajš i Starinski Sos od Mirođije

Брзи ринфлајш и старински сос од мирођије

bur-zee reen-fly-sh ee stah-reen-skee sos od mee-roh-jee-yeh

If you grew up in a Balkan household, you know the holy trinity of Sunday lunch: soup, sauce, and meat. Rinflajš is a masterclass in grandmotherly ingenuity—pulling the meltingly tender beef and root vegetables from the morning's soup pot and serving them smothered in a bright, sweet-and-sour dill sauce. This quick adaptation uses a pressure cooker to extract that same deeply gelatinous, marrow-rich perfection in under an hour. The secret to the old-school flavor lies entirely in the sauce: bloom the fresh dill directly in a pale white roux, and thin it out with a ladle of the hot, fresh beef broth.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 lb	bone-in beef short ribs	2 tbsp	pork lard
1 large	yellow onion <i>halved with skin left on</i>	3 tbsp	all-purpose flour
4 large	carrots <i>peeled and cut into 2-inch chunks</i>	1 cup	fresh dill <i>stems removed and leaves finely chopped</i>
2 med	parsnips <i>peeled and cut into large chunks</i>	1 cup	whole milk <i>cold</i>
1 small	celeriac <i>peeled and quartered</i>	1 cup	hot beef broth <i>reserved from the cooked meat</i>
1 1/2 lb	yellow potatoes <i>peeled and left whole</i>	1 small clove	garlic <i>finely minced</i>
1 tbsp	kosher salt	1 tbsp	white vinegar
1 tsp	black peppercorns	1 tsp	granulated white sugar
8 cup	water	1/4 tsp	white pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Char the onion.

Set your Instant Pot to the sauté function and sear the onion halves cut-side down on the dry insert until deeply blackened to give the broth its authentic golden color.

2. Pressure cook the meat and vegetables.

Turn off the sauté function, add the beef, carrots, parsnips, celeriac, potatoes, kosher salt, peppercorns, and water, then cook on high pressure for 45 minutes.

3. Separate the broth from the feast.

Allow a ten-minute natural release, then carefully transfer the tender meat and root vegetables to a warm platter, reserving the liquid.

1. Build a white roux.

In a medium saucepan, melt the lard over medium-low heat and whisk in the flour for two minutes, ensuring it stays entirely pale without taking on any brown color.

2. Bloom the dill.

Toss the chopped fresh dill and minced garlic directly into the hot fat and flour for sixty seconds to aggressively release the herb's essential oils.

3. Whisk in the liquids.

Slowly stream in the cold milk while whisking vigorously to prevent lumps, followed by a cup of the hot, freshly reserved beef broth.

4. Balance the sweet and sour.

Simmer until the sauce thickens to the consistency of a rich gravy, then remove from heat and stir in the vinegar, sugar, salt, and white pepper.

5. Serve it family-style.

Smash the soft potatoes on your plate, pull apart the incredibly tender beef, and drown absolutely everything in the warm dill sauce.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not brown the roux.**

The defining characteristic of this sauce is that it's cooked "na belo" (on the white). If the flour takes on color, you lose the signature pale green hue and delicate flavor.

● **Embrace the fat.**

While unsalted butter or a neutral oil will technically work, rendered pork lard is the undisputed secret to unlocking the true, nostalgic flavor of a Balkan grandmother's kitchen.

● **Don't waste the extra broth.**

You'll have plenty of gelatinous beef broth left over in the pressure cooker. Strain it and serve it as a first course with a handful of noodles.



Sočno Jagnjeće Pečenje "Na Brzinu"

Сочно јагњеће печење

soch-no yag-nye-che pe-che-nye

A true Balkan Sunday requires the scent of roasting meat waking the house. Traditionally, that means hours tending a whole animal over wood coals under a heavy cast-iron sač. But for the diaspora cook with a standard suburban oven and limited time, you cheat using the old village secrets. Thick-cut shoulder chops mimic the rich flavor of a whole roast in a fraction of the time, heavy foil traps the steam just like the iron bell, and a brief soak in milk strips away any gamey edge. It is the taste of home, uncompromising and unembellished.

INGREDIENTS

4 large	bone-in lamb shoulder chops	1 large	yellow onion <i>peeled and cut into thick wedges</i>
2 cup	whole milk	2 large	carrots <i>cut into thick chunks</i>
6 large	garlic cloves <i>3 sliced into thin slivers, 3 roughly chopped</i>	3 tbsp	extra virgin olive oil
3 small	fresh rosemary sprigs <i>1 stripped of leaves, 2 left whole</i>	1/2 cup	dry white wine
1 1/2 lb	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>cut into thick wedges</i>	1/4 cup	water
		1 tbsp	coarse sea salt
		1 tsp	black pepper

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C).**

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Submerge the lamb chops in whole milk for at least one hour.**
This old village secret relies on lactic acid to break down tough fibers and neutralize the strong, gamey odor native to the meat. After soaking, discard the milk and pat the meat bone-dry with paper towels.
- 2. Pierce the meat deeply and forcefully stuff the slits with garlic slivers and rosemary leaves.**
Poke three or four deep holes in each chop with a sharp paring knife. This technique, called špikovanje, ensures the fat renders and cooks the aromatics from the inside out. Season both sides aggressively with coarse salt and pepper.
- 3. Toss the potatoes, onions, carrots, chopped garlic, and whole rosemary in a deep roasting pan.**
Drizzle with a tablespoon of olive oil, season heavily with salt and pepper, and mix by hand. Do not substitute Russets here; waxy Yukon Golds are required to hold their shape in the savory pan juices.

- 1. Lay the lamb over the vegetables, add the liquids, and seal the pan hermetically with heavy foil.**

Drizzle the remaining oil over the meat, then carefully pour the wine and water down the sides of the pan so you don't wash the seasoning off the lamb. Crimp the foil hard around the edges to trap the steam, mimicking the traditional cast-iron sač, and bake for 40 minutes.

- 2. Remove the foil and roast for a final fifteen minutes until a golden, crispy crust develops.**

Watch out for the rush of hot steam when peeling back the foil. Baste the lamb with the hot pan juices before returning it to the oven uncovered. Keep a close eye on the meat; the edges should caramelize and the potatoes should turn brown where they meet the rendered fat.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Use a dry white wine you would actually drink.**

Sauvignon Blanc or Pinot Grigio works best. As the old saying goes: if you wouldn't drink it, don't cook with it.



Nedeljna Šopska Salata

Недељна шопска салата

neh-del-nya shop-ska sah-lah-tah

Born on the Black Sea coast and perfected in the taverns of the Balkans, this is the undisputed king of the Sunday table. Most American restaurants get it entirely wrong with cubed cow's milk feta and a bed of sad lettuce. The true genius lies in the grandmotherly architecture: massaging the onions to kill their bite, aggressively draining the vegetable juices, and burying everything under a snowy mountain of finely grated sheep's milk cheese that melts into the dressing only when your fork hits the plate.

INGREDIENTS

1 small	red onion <i>finely diced</i>	2 large	jarred roasted red peppers <i>rinsed, patted perfectly dry, and cut into short strips</i>
1/2 tsp	kosher salt	3 tbsp	unrefined sunflower oil
1 lb	ripe tomatoes <i>cut into bite-sized chunks</i>	1 tbsp	red wine vinegar
1 large	English cucumber <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
		6 oz	sheep milk feta block <i>chilled</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Macerate the diced onion with salt in the bottom of your serving bowl.**
Using your clean fingertips, gently massage the salt into the onions for about 30 seconds until they soften and release their juices, effectively killing the harsh raw burn.
- 2. Add the tomatoes, cucumbers, and roasted peppers to the bowl, tossing gently to combine.**
Let the vegetables sit for 10 minutes so the salt can pull out their excess water, then carefully tip the bowl and drain most of the liquid away to prevent a soggy salad.
- 3. Drizzle the drained vegetables with the oil and vinegar, and fold in the parsley.**
Give everything one very gentle toss from the bottom up to keep the tomatoes intact, and taste a cucumber to see if you need a tiny pinch more salt before the cheese goes on.
- 4. Grate the cold feta directly over the bowl to form a thick, opaque white dome.**
Use the medium or fine holes of a box grater. Do not mix the salad after adding the cheese; carry it to the table exactly like this so the diners can dig through the snow into the dressed vegetables below.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Seek out unrefined sunflower oil for the true flavor of the homeland.**

If you can't find it, a mild extra-virgin olive oil is a perfectly acceptable adaptation.

- **Never use pre-crumbled American cow's milk feta.**

You need a firm block of Bulgarian Sirene or a high-quality Greek sheep's milk feta stored in brine to achieve the proper melt-in-your-mouth texture.

- **Use the best tomatoes you can find.**

If you are cooking out of season in the US, rely on Campari or halved cherry tomatoes, which retain a higher concentration of sweetness and acidity year-round.



Roštilj & Meza: Porch Gatherings and Grilled Meats

The art of Balkan hospitality and abundance, featuring authentic charcuterie and the secrets to legendary, juicy grilled meats.

Late Saturday afternoon on the patio, the plastic table is already bowed, and the gathering begins with the meza—a sprawling board of smoked meats, sharp cheeses, and raw white onions meant to be chased with strong plum brandy while the charcoal catches fire.

By the time the charred lepinja hits the grate to soak up the dripping beef fat, the air is thick with the smoke of roasting ćevapi and pljeskavica, and you can hear the hiss of fat on the coals. The secret to that bouncing texture is just a pinch of baking soda, a lot of garlic, and resting the meat overnight in the refrigerator. The smoke drifts over the fence, the platter empties, and someone inevitably goes back inside for another round of cold drinks.





Balkanska Meza

Балканска меза

bal-KAHN-skah MEH-zah

Long before charcuterie boards were gentrified for social media, the Balkans had the meza. It is less an appetizer than an institution—a rustic, abundant assault of smoke, salt, fat, and tang meant to be eaten slowly between pulls of plum rakija. With a few smart supermarket hacks, like whipping feta into mock kajmak or charring a fresh pepper to wake up jarred ajvar, you can conjure the exact flavors of the old country right in your weeknight kitchen.

INGREDIENTS

1/2 lb smoked beef or bresaola
thinly sliced

1/2 lb speck or prosciutto
thinly sliced

1/2 lb	spicy dry salami or chorizo <i>sliced</i>	1/4 cup	olive oil
1 1/4 lb	sheep's milk feta in brine <i>divided (8 oz cubed, 12 oz crumbled)</i>	1/4 cup	sunflower oil <i>divided</i>
8 oz	mild provolone or havarti cheese <i>cut into thick matchsticks</i>	4 med cloves	garlic <i>divided (2 sliced, 2 minced)</i>
1/2 cup	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i>	2 tsp	sweet paprika
4 oz	cream cheese <i>softened to room temp and divided</i>	1 tsp	hot paprika or chili flakes <i>divided</i>
2 tbsp	sour cream	1 pinch	dried oregano
16 oz	store-bought ajvar	1 cup	pickled cucumbers or kalamata olives <i>drained</i>
1 large	red bell pepper <i>roasted, peeled, and finely chopped</i>	1 large	rustic bread or lepinja <i>warmed and cut into generous wedges</i>

PREPARATION

- **Roast the red bell pepper.**

Place the pepper directly over a gas flame or under a broiler until the skin is entirely blackened. Place in a bowl, cover with a plate for 10 minutes to steam, then rub off the charred skin and discard the seeds.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Marinate the feta to make Sir u Ulju.**

Pat 8 ounces of the block feta completely dry with paper towels. Cut it into 1-inch cubes and place in a small jar with the sliced garlic, oregano, and a half-teaspoon of chili flakes. Cover entirely with equal parts olive and sunflower oil, and let sit at room temperature for at least 30 minutes.

1. Whip the Lažni Kajmak.

Real kajmak is hard to find, but we can fake it. Aggressively mash the softened butter in a bowl until fluffy. Fold in 4 ounces of crumbled feta, 2 ounces of cream cheese, and the sour cream. Mash until creamy but still retaining tiny curds from the feta, then chill for 20 minutes to set.

2. Revive the store-bought ajvar.

Stir the freshly charred, finely chopped red bell pepper directly into the jarred ajvar. Drizzle with a little olive oil to instantly reintroduce the authentic wood-fire smoke and char of a homemade batch.

3. Bloom the spices for the Urnebes.

In a small cup, mix the sweet paprika, remaining half-teaspoon of chili flakes, and 1 tablespoon of sunflower oil. Let it sit for 5 minutes. This releases the fat-soluble flavor compounds and creates a vibrant red oil.

4. Mix the fiery Urnebes spread.

Mash the remaining 8 ounces of crumbled feta with the remaining 2 ounces of cream cheese. Pour in the bloomed red oil and the minced garlic, folding together until beautifully marbled.

5. Assemble the board.

Anchor a massive wooden board or ceramic platter with small rustic bowls of the Kajmak, upgraded Ajvar, and Urnebes. Create alternating, overlapping rivers of the sliced smoked beef, prosciutto, and salami—what Balkan cooks call a zigzag pattern.

6. Fill the gaps and serve.

Tuck the provolone matchsticks, marinated feta cubes, and pickles into the empty spaces. Serve immediately in the center of the table alongside the warm bread and a chilled bottle of your favorite spirit.



Pikantna Urnebes Salata

Пикантна урнебес салата

pee-KAHNT-nah OOR-neh-bess sah-LAH-tah

Urnebes literally translates to chaos. It's an unapologetic, fiery spread born in Southern Serbia, engineered to cut through the heavy, smoky fat of a proper charcoal grill. We're swapping the hard-to-find stari sir and kajmak of the old country for full-fat block feta and sour cream, spiked with a spoonful of ajvar for roasted sweetness. It's exactly how diaspora grandmothers do it on a weeknight. Leave the food processor in the cupboard; this demands the rustic, jagged texture of a fork and a little elbow grease.

INGREDIENTS

10 oz	full-fat block Feta cheese <i>drained</i>	3 med clove	garlic <i>minced or pushed through a press</i>
3 tbsp	full-fat sour cream	1 tbsp	olive oil
3 tbsp	mild ajvar	2 tsp	sweet paprika
		1 tsp	crushed red pepper flakes

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mash the cheese into small, uniform crumbles in a medium bowl using the back of a sturdy fork.**
Step away from the food processor. Real urnebes demands a rustic, chunky texture, not a silky puree.
- 2. Stir in the sour cream, ajvar, and oil until the liquids bind the cheese into a thick paste.**
The sour cream perfectly mimics the fatty, tangy moisture of traditional kajmak.
- 3. Fold in the minced garlic, sweet paprika, and crushed red pepper flakes.**
Mix vigorously until the spread takes on a uniform, vibrant reddish-orange hue.
- 4. Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least one hour.**
Do not skip this. The resting period allows the fats to absorb the paprika oils and mellows the bite of the raw garlic.
- 5. Portion the cold spread into neat spheres using an ice cream scoop.**
Serve immediately alongside grilled sausages, ćevapi, or a simple basket of warm, crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Always buy block feta sitting in brine.**
Pre-crumbled feta is coated in anti-caking agents and lacks the creamy moisture needed to bind this salad together properly.

- **Check your paprika.**

Ensure you are using sweet, unsmoked paprika. Standard American chili powder or heavily smoked varieties will entirely overpower the delicate balance of the cheese.



Kafanski Ćevapi

Кафански Ћевапи

kah-FAHN-skee cheh-VAH-pee

If there is a cardinal sin of Balkan diaspora cooking, it is treating ćevapi like meatloaf. There are no eggs here, no breadcrumbs, and absolutely no chopped parsley. The magic of a true, bouncy tavern-style sausage lies entirely in chemistry and patience. A precise hit of baking soda alters the pH so the meat stays incredibly juicy instead of seizing on the grill, while a steeped garlic broth flavors the links from the inside out without leaving acrid burnt bits over the fire. Knead it until it binds, let it rest overnight, and you'll understand exactly why these smoky, fat-basted sausages are the ultimate late-night comfort food.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	ground beef 80/20	1 tsp	sweet paprika
1 lb	ground pork	4 large	lepinja or thick pita bread
1/4 cup	water	1 large	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>
3 large	garlic cloves <i>smashed</i>	1 tsp	white vinegar
1 tsp	baking soda	1/2 cup	ajvar
1 tbsp	sparkling water	1/2 cup	mascarpone cheese
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1/4 cup	feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>
1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	1 tbsp	sour cream

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Brew the tavern secret garlic water.

In a small saucepan, bring the water and smashed garlic to a gentle simmer for 2 minutes, then turn off the heat and let cool completely. Discard the garlic solids, then mix the infused water with the baking soda and sparkling water in a small cup until it fizzes.

2. Emulsify the meat by hand.

In a large bowl, combine the ground beef, ground pork, kosher salt, black pepper, and paprika, then pour the fizzing garlic water over the top. Knead vigorously with your hands for 5 to 10 minutes, folding and punching the meat until it transitions from a crumbly texture into a cohesive, sticky paste that pulls cleanly away from the sides.

3. Let the mixture rest in the refrigerator.

Press the meat flat in the bowl, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and chill for at least 4 hours, or ideally 12 to 24 hours, to allow the baking soda to alter the pH and tenderize the proteins.

1. Shape the sausages.

Dip your hands in a bowl of warm water to prevent sticking, scoop out 1 1/2 tablespoon portions of meat, and roll them firmly into smooth, finger-shaped cylinders about 3 inches long and 3/4 inch thick, ensuring there are no air pockets.

2. Sear the cévapi over medium-high heat.

Lightly oil a large cast-iron skillet and cook the sausages in a single layer without overcrowding for 10 to 12 minutes. Turn them every 2 minutes so they brown deeply on all sides and puff up slightly.

3. Steam the bread in the pan drippings.

During the final 2 minutes of cooking, slice your flatbreads open and press the inside of the bread directly onto the sizzling sausages to soften and absorb the rendered fat.

4. Assemble the spread and serve immediately.

Toss the diced onion with the white vinegar and a pinch of salt. Serve the hot sausages tucked inside the fat-soaked bread, loaded with the acidic onions, a spoonful of ajvar, and a mixture of the mascarpone, feta, and sour cream.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The vital importance of kneading.**

If you skip the vigorous hand-kneading, your sausages will fall apart. Kneading mechanically extracts myosin, a sticky protein that naturally binds the meat together without relying on blasphemous fillers like eggs or breadcrumbs.

● **Hacking authentic kajmak.**

True kajmak is an unpasteurized clotted dairy skin practically impossible to find in a standard American supermarket. The blend of mascarpone, feta, and sour cream listed here perfectly replicates its rich, tangy, melt-in-your-mouth profile.



Južnjačka Pljeskavica

Јужњачка пљескавица

yoozh-nyach-kah plyes-kah-vee-tsah

The smell of pljeskavica hitting a hot grill is the undisputed aroma of a Balkan summer. Often lazily dismissed as a hamburger, the true southern Serbian patty is its own fiercely guarded institution—savory, springy, and aggressively garlicky. The grandmother’s secret to that distinct bounce doesn’t require importing magic ingredients from the old country; it lies entirely in the kitchen chemistry of baking soda, a splash of sparkling water, and a willingness to fiercely knead the meat like bread dough until the proteins surrender. Serve it properly: heavily charred, never squished, and buried under a mountain of raw onions and ajvar.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	ground beef chuck	1 tsp	baking soda
1/2 lb	ground pork	1/4 cup	sparkling mineral water
1 med	yellow onion <i>grated or very finely minced</i>	1 tbsp	vegetable oil
3 clove	garlic <i>minced into a paste</i>	4 large	ciabatta rolls <i>warmed</i>
1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt	1 large	white onion <i>finely diced</i>
1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	1/2 cup	ajvar
1 tsp	sweet paprika	1/4 cup	cream cheese <i>softened</i>
1/2 tsp	crushed red pepper flakes	1/4 cup	unsalted butter <i>softened</i>

PREPARATION

- **Whip the mock kajmak.**

True kajmak is nearly impossible to find in a standard American grocery store, so mimic it by vigorously mixing the softened cream cheese and butter with a pinch of salt until smooth and airy.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the meat and the chemical catalyst.**

In a small cup, stir the baking soda into the sparkling water until it fizzes, then pour it over the beef, pork, grated yellow onion, garlic, salt, and spices in a large mixing bowl.

- 2. Knead the mixture without mercy.**

Using clean hands, knead the meat vigorously for 5 to 10 minutes, folding, squeezing, and punching it down until the proteins break down and the mixture becomes a highly tacky, unified mass.

1. Let the meat cure in the cold.

Smooth the meat into an even layer, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 2 to 4 hours, or ideally overnight.

2. Shape into wide, thin discs.

Rub a little oil on your hands, divide the meat into four portions, and flatten them out to 6 or 7 inches across, pressing a slight dimple into the center of each to keep them from swelling into baseballs on the heat.

3. Sear hard and leave it alone.

Preheat a cast-iron skillet or outdoor grill to medium-high heat, cook the patties for 4 to 5 minutes per side until a deep, dark crust forms, and never press down on the meat with your spatula.

4. Build the proper Balkan burger.

Warm the bread, slather the bottom with ajvar and the top with the mock kajmak, drop in the hot patty, bury it under an aggressive handful of raw diced onions, and serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Why we overwork the meat.**

Unlike American burgers, pljeskavica requires heavy kneading to extract myosin, a protein that acts as a natural binder and gives the patty its signature bouncy texture without needing eggs or breadcrumbs.

● **The sparkling water secret.**

Baking soda alters the pH of the meat to prevent proteins from seizing, while the sparkling water aerates the heavy mixture, working together to keep the meat incredibly tender and juicy.



Šareni Ražnjići sa Povrćem

Шарени ражњићи са поврћем

shah-REH-nee rahzh-NYEE-chee sah POH-vuhr-chem

Growing up, the smell of woodsmoke and rendering fat meant the weekend had officially arrived. Ražnjići are the undisputed centerpiece of any Balkan porch gathering. The grandmother's secret isn't magic; it is a calculated beer-and-mustard marinade that tenderizes pork to an unbelievable softness, perfectly uniform knife cuts, and the strategic placement of smoked bacon to self-baste the meat as it grills. This is exactly what a Sarajevo summer afternoon tastes like, adapted for a weeknight cast-iron pan in an American suburb.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	pork shoulder or well-marbled pork tenderloin <i>cut into 1-inch cubes</i>	1 tsp	Vegeta or vegetable bouillon powder
4 oz	thick-cut smoked bacon <i>cut into 1-inch squares</i>	1 med	zucchini <i>cut into 1-inch squares</i>
1/3 cup	neutral oil	1 small	eggplant <i>cut into 1-inch squares</i>
1/3 cup	light lager beer	1 large	red bell pepper <i>cut into 1-inch squares</i>
1 tbsp	Dijon or yellow mustard	1 large	yellow bell pepper <i>cut into 1-inch squares</i>
3 med cloves	garlic <i>finely minced</i>	1 large	red onion <i>peeled and cut into 1-inch squares</i>
1 tbsp	sweet paprika	1 tbsp	olive oil
1 tsp	kosher salt	1/4 tsp	kosher salt
1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Soak the skewers.**

If using wooden skewers, submerge them in hot water for at least 30 minutes prior to threading. This prevents them from splintering and burning to a crisp on the grill.

- **Sweat the moisture from the squash.**

Place the cubed eggplant and zucchini in a colander, sprinkle with a pinch of salt, and let them sit for 30 minutes. This draws out the bitter water and prevents them from turning to mush when cooked.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Marinate the pork.**

In a large bowl or zip-top bag, whisk together the neutral oil, beer, mustard, minced garlic, sweet paprika, 1 teaspoon salt, black pepper, and Vegeta. Massage the pork cubes into the marinade until fully coated. Refrigerate for at least 4 hours, or ideally overnight. Keep the bacon and vegetables separate.

2. **Toss the vegetables.**

Pat the prepared eggplant and zucchini completely dry with a paper towel. Just before you are ready to assemble the skewers, toss all the cubed vegetables lightly in the olive oil and 1/4 teaspoon kosher salt.

3. **Assemble the architecture.**

Thread the ingredients onto the soaked skewers. Start with a piece of pork, followed by red onion, bell pepper, and zucchini. The critical secret: place a square of bacon directly next to every second piece of meat. When it hits the heat, the bacon fat will melt directly over the lean pork.

4. **Grill the skewers.**

Heat an outdoor grill or an indoor cast-iron grill pan over medium-high heat until it begins to smoke lightly. Brush lightly with oil. Cook the skewers for 15 to 20 minutes total, turning them a quarter-turn every 4 to 5 minutes until the pork is caramelized and the vegetables sport charred edges.

5. **Rest and serve.**

Remove the skewers from the heat and let them rest on a platter for 5 minutes. If desired, lightly brush the skewers with any leftover liquid from the vegetable bowl before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The golden rule is uniformity.**

Cut your meat and vegetables into exactly 1-inch pieces. If they are too large, the outside will burn before the inside cooks; if they are mismatched, the skewer won't sit flat on the pan.

- **Give the ingredients breathing room.**

Ensure the ingredients on the skewer are touching, but do not pack them tight. They need space for the heat to circulate so they caramelize rather than steam in their own juices.

- **Make it a weeknight meal.**

Mix the marinade and prep the meat on Sunday night. By Monday evening, the pork is deeply flavored, and chopping the vegetables, skewering, and grilling takes under 40 minutes.



Brza Kafanska Kupus Salata

Брза кафанска купус салата

br-zah kah-fahn-skah koo-poos sah-lah-tah

You grew up eating this next to a smoky grill, piled high with ćevapi. It is the quintessential kafana side dish, perfectly engineered to cut through heavy meat fats. For years, diaspora kids have tried to replicate it by tossing shredded cabbage with vinaigrette, only to end up with a stiff, dry mess. The secret isn't a magical homeland ingredient; it is physical manipulation. You salt it, you squeeze it with your bare hands, and you leave it alone. That, along with a tiny pinch of sugar to kill the cabbage's natural bitterness, is the difference between a mediocre slaw and the melt-in-your-mouth ribbons of your childhood.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 lb	green cabbage <i>outer leaves removed</i>	3 tbsp	apple cider vinegar
1 1/2 tsp	fine sea salt	1/4 cup	sunflower oil
1/2 tsp	granulated white sugar	to taste	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Shave the cabbage as thin as humanly possible.**

Quarter the cabbage and cut out the thick, solid core. Using a very sharp chef's knife or a mandoline, shave the cabbage into translucent ribbons. Do not use a box grater, which will destroy the cellular integrity and turn the cabbage into a watery mush. Transfer everything to your largest mixing bowl.

2. **Add the salt and sugar, then knead the cabbage aggressively with your bare hands.**

Sprinkle the salt and sugar evenly over the cabbage. Get your hands in the bowl and aggressively massage and knead the cabbage, literally squeezing it in your fists. Knead for about a minute or two until you feel the volume drop by half and the ribbons take on a slightly translucent, glassy look.

3. **Walk away and let the cabbage rest.**

Let the bowl sit at room temperature for at least 15 to 30 minutes. The salt will draw water out of the cellular walls, pooling a natural, flavorful juice at the bottom of the bowl. Do not drain this liquid under any circumstances.

4. **Dress with the oil and vinegar only after the cabbage has rested.**

Pour the vinegar and the oil over the top of the softened cabbage. Toss thoroughly from the bottom up to emulsify the fats with the natural cabbage juices. Finish with a few generous cranks of black pepper, adjust the seasoning if needed, and serve cool alongside charred meats.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Respect the order of operations.**

Never pour oil onto the cabbage before salting it and letting it rest. Oil coats the cellular walls and creates a waterproof barrier, preventing the salt from doing its job and drawing out the moisture. Salt, squeeze, wait, and only then add the dressing.



Brza Lepinja

Брза лепиња

BUR-zah leh-PEEN-yah

Real bakery *somun* demands hours of proofing and a blistering wood-fired oven. But when the *ćevapi* hit the grill and a Balkan grandmother realizes there is no bread on the table, she doesn't panic. She reaches for the baking powder and fermented milk. This is the ultimate weeknight trick of the diaspora—a deeply authentic, yeast-free flatbread that relies on highly accessible grocery store kefir to replicate the sharp tang of homeland jogurt. It comes together in minutes, but its true magic lies in the old-school post-bake steam bath that softens the crust into a perfect, pliant pocket for roasted meats.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 cup	all-purpose flour <i>plus extra for dusting</i>	1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt
1 cup	whole milk kefir or liquid buttermilk	1 tbsp	baking powder
		2 tbsp	neutral vegetable oil
		1 tbsp	nigella seeds

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to a blistering 450°F.**

Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper. Traditional lepinja needs an initial blast of intense heat to get the right lift and color.

- **Ready your steam station.**

Locate a thick, clean cotton kitchen towel and a small bowl of cold water (or a spray bottle) before the bread goes into the oven.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the dry ingredients and hydrate.**

In a large bowl, combine the flour, baking powder, and salt. Make a well in the center and pour in the kefir and oil, bringing the mixture together with a wooden spoon or your hands until a shaggy dough forms.

- 2. Knead gently, but do not overthink it.**

Turn the dough onto a lightly floured surface and knead for just one to two minutes until cohesive. Because this relies on baking powder, overworking the dough will tighten the gluten and make the bread unpleasantly chewy.

- 3. Divide and shape the dough.**

Cut the dough into four to six equal pieces. Roll each into a smooth ball, then gently flatten them into discs about half an inch thick and six inches across before transferring to the baking sheet.

1. Score the signature grid.

Using the dull back of a butter knife, press a deep criss-cross or diamond pattern into the top of each flatbread. This essential step prevents the bread from blowing up into an empty pita pocket in the oven. Lightly brush the tops with water and sprinkle with nigella seeds.

2. Bake until puffed and blistered.

Bake for 10 to 15 minutes. Watch them closely; at this intense heat, they go from beautifully golden-brown to burnt in a matter of seconds.

3. Execute the hot towel wrap.

When you pull the bread from the oven, the crusts will feel alarmingly hard.

Immediately spritz or flick the hot breads with cold water, stack them in the center of a thick, clean kitchen towel, and wrap them tightly. Let rest for 10 to 15 minutes; the trapped steam will miraculously soften the crust into the tender, pliable bread of your childhood.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Stovetop Method**

If you don't have an oven or want to avoid heating up the kitchen during summer grilling, fry the flattened dough discs in a cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat with a little oil for two to three minutes per side until blistered. Immediately transfer to the damp towel wrap.

● **Use the Right Dairy**

Balkan yogurt is thin and drinkable. American whole-milk kefir or liquid buttermilk perfectly mimics this hydration and tang. Avoid thick Greek yogurt unless you thin it heavily with water.



Hladna Salata od Pasulja i Luka

Хладна салата од пасуља и лука

hlad-nah sah-lah-tah od pah-sool-yah ee loo-kah

If you grew up anywhere near a Balkan diaspora community—maybe an Ohio suburb or a Queens apartment block—you know what happens when the grill gets fired up. Out come the platters of sizzling ćevapi, the smoky sausages, and the inevitable heavy meats that demand an acidic, crunchy counterweight. This simple, miraculous salad of beans and onions is that necessary palate cleanser. It is a masterclass in culinary restraint, relying entirely on a grandmother's

unwritten trick of taming raw onions in cold water and allowing the beans time to drink in the vinegar. Forget the internet variations laden with corn or mayonnaise; this is the true, unfussy taste of home.

INGREDIENTS

30 oz	Cannellini or Great Northern beans <i>rinsed aggressively under cold water and drained</i>	4 tbsp	sunflower oil or extra-virgin olive oil
1 med	red onion <i>peeled and sliced very thinly into half-moons</i>	1 1/2 tsp	kosher salt
3 tbsp	apple cider vinegar	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
		1/4 cup	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

PREPARATION

- **The traditional dry bean method.**

If time allows, soak 1 lb of dry white beans overnight and boil until tender.

Crucially, drain and dress them while they are still warm so they absorb the dressing deeply into the starch matrix. Do not dress them boiling hot, or they will turn to mush.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Tame the harshness of the raw onion by soaking the slices in cold water.**

Place the thinly sliced onion in a small bowl and cover completely with cold tap water. Let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes to pull out the sulfurous bite, leaving it crisp and sweet. Drain well and pat dry with a paper towel.

- 2. Rinse the canned beans aggressively to remove all starchy canning liquid.**

Pour the beans into a colander and wash them under cold running water until the water runs completely clear. Shake the colander well so the beans are as dry as possible.

1. Combine the base ingredients in a large serving bowl.

Add the drained beans, the dried onions, apple cider vinegar, oil, kosher salt, and a generous amount of black pepper to the bowl.

2. Fold the salad gently from the bottom up to protect the beans.

Using a large spoon or rubber spatula, turn the ingredients together without mashing the beans. Add the chopped parsley and fold once more to distribute.

3. Allow the salad to macerate in the refrigerator for at least one hour.

Taste the salad—it should taste slightly too acidic at this stage, but the beans will absorb the vinegar as they rest. Cover with plastic wrap and chill overnight for the most authentic flavor. Take it out of the fridge 15 minutes before serving to take the chill off.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Northern Croatian variation.**

If your family hails from Northern Croatia or Slovenia, swap the neutral oil for pure bučino ulje (roasted pumpkin seed oil) for an incredibly nutty, dark green, and deeply authentic regional profile.

- **Storage and longevity.**

This salad is practically indestructible and keeps in a sealed container in the fridge for up to 5 days, actually tasting best around day three.



Pikantni Šampinjoni sa Žara

Пикантни шампињони са жара

pee-KAHNT-nee shahm-peen-YOH-nee sah ZHAH-rah

Before the heavy platters of sausages and ćevapi hit the table, there is the meza—a time to sip rakija, tear into fresh bread, and eat things right off the fire. These spicy, garlicky mushrooms are a staple of those porch gatherings. The secret your grandmother knew, but probably never wrote down, is all about the moisture: never wash them with water, and never salt them before they hit the heat. Grill them hard and fast, then toss them directly into a punchy, spicy garlic oil while they are still steaming hot. They drink up the dressing like a sponge, delivering the true, unadulterated taste of the homeland.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	cremini or white button mushrooms <i>stems removed</i>	3 tbsp	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
2 tbsp	neutral cooking oil	1 tbsp	fresh lemon juice
1/4 cup	extra virgin olive oil	1 tsp	crushed red pepper flakes
4 large	garlic cloves <i>very finely minced</i>	1 tsp	kosher salt
		1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
		1/4 tsp	Vegeta seasoning

PREPARATION

- **Wipe the mushrooms clean.**

Resist the urge to rinse the mushrooms under the sink. Instead, take a slightly damp paper towel and gently wipe any dirt off the caps.

- **Pop the stems carefully.**

Pop the stems out with your thumb, ensuring the caps remain completely intact so they act like little cups for the juices and marinade.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Make the dressing.**

In a large mixing bowl big enough to eventually hold all the mushrooms, whisk together the extra virgin olive oil, minced garlic, parsley, lemon juice, red pepper flakes, salt, black pepper, and Vegeta. Set this aside.

- 2. Oil the mushrooms without salting.**

Place the cleaned mushroom caps on a plate and drizzle them lightly with the neutral oil. Toss gently to coat, but absolutely do not add salt yet.

- 3. Fire up the grill.**

Preheat your outdoor gas or charcoal grill, or an indoor cast-iron grill pan, to medium-high heat.

1. Sear the caps.

Place the mushrooms onto the grill, cup-side down first. Let them sizzle undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes until a deep, dark grill mark forms, then flip them over onto their rounded tops and grill for another 3 minutes until tender.

2. Sizzle and toss.

The moment you pull the hot mushrooms off the grill, dump them directly into the bowl with the dressing and toss vigorously.

3. Serve immediately.

Transfer to a platter, pouring any leftover dressing from the bottom of the bowl right over the top, and serve alongside grilled meats or crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The ban on washing.**

Mushrooms act like sponges. If washed under a heavy stream of water, they will steam rather than sear on the grill, completely bypassing the savory crust.

● **The osmotic penalty of early salting.**

Adding salt to raw mushrooms draws out their intracellular moisture. Waiting to introduce salt until the post-grill dressing ensures the juices remain trapped inside the mushroom structure.



Zimnica: The Balkan Pantry & Modern Shortcuts

Preserving the late summer harvest through authentic canning recipes and curated grocery store hacks.

Forty glass jars. That is the baseline inventory for zimnica—the winter pantry—when the air gets heavy with the smell of roasting peppers and sharp vinegar. It means bottling up the smoke, the blistered skins, and the sharp tang of autumn so you can crack it open in February when you need to remember what life tastes like.

But let's be brutally honest: you don't always have a weekend to babysit a cauldron of red peppers. Sometimes you just have peppers blistering under the broiler. That's okay. The diaspora demands compromise, not martyrdom. Here are the weekend-long projects of blistering and peeling for ajvar, alongside curated cheats from Trader Joe's shelves for when time is short.





Brzi Ajvar iz Tiganja

Брзи ајвар из тигања

br-zee eye-var eez tee-gahn-yah

True Balkan winter pantry rituals require an open fire, a giant vat, and an eight-hour communal endurance test. This is not that. This is the pragmatic, unwritten secret of diaspora aunties and busy modern cooks: the skillet hack. By blistering raw peppers under a heavy lid to capture that essential wood-fired smokiness, then driving off the moisture in a hard pan-fry, the deep, jammy, caviar-like soul of real ajvar is extracted in under an hour. Unfussy, exactingly authentic, and undeniably true to the flavor of home.

INGREDIENTS

6 large	red bell peppers <i>left whole</i>	2 med	garlic <i>smashed and finely minced</i>
1 small	eggplant <i>cut in half lengthwise</i>	1 tbsp	white vinegar
1/4 cup	sunflower oil	1 tsp	kosher salt
		1/2 tsp	granulated sugar

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Place the whole peppers and halved eggplant into a dry, heavy skillet over medium-high heat.**
Cover immediately with a tight-fitting lid. The trapped heat softens the vegetables while direct contact with the hot iron heavily chars the skins. Turn them every few minutes until blackened on all sides and fully collapsed, about 15 to 20 minutes.
- 2. Transfer the blackened vegetables to a large glass bowl and cover tightly with plastic wrap.**
Let them rest for 15 minutes. This is a non-negotiable grandmother's secret: the trapped steam separates the charred skin from the flesh, making peeling effortless.
- 3. Peel the skins off the peppers and eggplant.**
Discard the stems and seeds from the peppers, and scrape the eggplant flesh away from its skin. Do not rinse the peppers under water; this washes away the precious roasted oils and smoky flavor.
- 4. Pulse the peeled vegetables, garlic, vinegar, salt, and sugar in a food processor.**
You are looking for a slightly chunky, caviar-like consistency. Do not over-process into a watery smoothie.
- 5. Wipe the skillet clean, add the sunflower oil, and place over medium-low heat.**

1. Pour the mash into the oil and fry, stirring constantly, for 15 to 25 minutes.

This reduction is critical for American bell peppers. It drives out excess moisture and forces the mash to emulsify with the oil. It is done when a wooden spoon dragged across the bottom leaves a clear, dry path.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The ultimate first-generation hack is the freezer stash.**

In the fall, families roast peppers in bulk, peel them, and freeze them in bags. On a weeknight, you simply pull a bag of pre-roasted peppers from the freezer, thaw them, tear them into strips, and fry directly in a skillet with oil and garlic for 10 minutes before blending.



Brza Ljutenica

Брза љутеница

bur-za lyoo-teh-nee-tsa

Ask any Balkan grandmother how she makes her ljutenica, and she'll describe a grueling two-day marathon of roasting peppers over an open fire and stirring a cauldron of tomatoes until her arms give out. But diaspora grandmas adapting to American suburbs in the nineties hacked the system. High-quality Italian passata perfectly mimics the texture of tomatoes boiled for six hours. Combine that with a violent splash of smoking-hot oil—the ancient thermodynamic trick of *vrelo ulje*—to instantly cook the raw garlic and emulsify the spread. It delivers all the smoky, garlicky nostalgia of the homeland, pulled off on a Tuesday night.

INGREDIENTS

3 lb	sweet red peppers <i>mix of red bell and long sweet peppers (like Romano or Anaheim)</i>	1/3 cup	neutral oil <i>sunflower, canola, or avocado oil</i>
1 med	globe eggplant	1 tbsp	sugar or honey
24 oz	tomato passata <i>ensure ingredients are only tomatoes and salt (do not use tomato paste)</i>	1 tbsp	kosher salt <i>plus more to taste</i>
4 med clove	garlic <i>pressed or very finely minced</i>	1 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
2 med	jalapeño or red Fresno chiles <i>seeded for mild heat, or left whole for spicy</i>	1/4 cup	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped (optional)</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Char the peppers and eggplant under the broiler.

Place the sweet peppers, hot peppers, and whole eggplant on a foil-lined baking sheet directly under your oven's broiler or on a very hot grill. Turn them occasionally with tongs until the pepper skins are completely black and the eggplant is deflated and soft to its core, about 20 to 30 minutes for the peppers and up to 40 for the eggplant.

2. Steam the blackened peppers to loosen their skins.

Transfer the hot peppers immediately to a bowl and cover tightly with plastic wrap. Let them steam for 15 minutes. Once cool enough to handle, peel the burnt skins off the peppers and the eggplant, discarding the skins, stems, and seeds. Do not rinse them under water, or you'll wash all that hard-earned smoke down the drain.

3. Pulse the roasted vegetables into a rustic mash.

In a food processor, pulse the peeled pepper and eggplant flesh until it breaks down into a chunky, cohesive mash. Do not puree it into a smoothie; you want a rustic texture. Transfer this mash to a large, heat-proof pot or Dutch oven, keeping the stove off for now.

1. Stir in the tomato base and seasonings.

Add the tomato passata, raw minced garlic, sugar or honey, kosher salt, and black pepper to the cold pepper mash. Stir until completely combined.

2. Temper the mixture with smoking-hot oil.

Heat the neutral oil in a small saucepan over medium-high heat until it shimmers aggressively and just begins to smoke (around 350°F). Stand back and carefully pour the boiling oil directly into the cold vegetable puree. It will violently sputter and pop—this flash-fries the raw edge off the garlic and emulsifies the fat into the tomato water. Stir vigorously with a wooden spoon until the oil is completely absorbed.

3. Simmer briefly to marry the flavors.

Turn the stove to medium-low heat and bring the pot to a gentle bubble. Cook for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring frequently, until the mixture thickens enough to leave a clear path when you drag a spoon across the bottom of the pot. Remove from the heat and stir in the fresh parsley if using.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **A note on the sugar.**

Tomatoes and red peppers have natural malic and citric acids. Since we're skipping the traditional six-hour reduction, the quick simmer doesn't give those acids time to mellow. A tablespoon of sugar or honey isn't there to make it sweet; it's a necessary acid-balancer.

● **Storing your ljutenica.**

Ladle the hot spread into clean mason jars, seal, and let cool. They'll keep in the fridge for weeks. Serve smeared thick on crusty bread with feta, or alongside grilled sausages.



Šarena Salata iz Frižidera

Шарена салата из фрижидера

shah-reh-nah sah-lah-tah eez free-zhee-deh-rah

If you grew up Balkan, you know the smell of late September: sharp vinegar and mountains of fresh vegetables destined for the cellar. For those of us living in American suburbs without cold storage, recreating that giant barrel of winter survival feels impossible. But here is the secret the grandmas never wrote down: you don't need a barrel, you don't need obscure chemical preservatives, and you certainly don't need to boil a single drop of water. This is the exact, fiercely crunchy, sweet-and-sour taste of home, relying purely on time, salt, and the modern miracle of the refrigerator.

INGREDIENTS

2 1/2 lb	green cabbage <i>core removed and finely shredded by hand or mandoline</i>	1/2 small	cauliflower <i>broken into tiny bite-sized florets</i>
3 large	mixed bell peppers <i>cored seeded and sliced into very thin strips</i>	1 small	red onion <i>halved and sliced into paper-thin half-moons</i>
5 med	Persian cucumbers <i>sliced into thin coins without peeling</i>	1 1/2 cup	white distilled vinegar
3 med	carrots <i>peeled and sliced into thin coins</i>	1/4 cup	fine sea salt
		1/3 cup	granulated sugar
		1 tsp	whole black peppercorns

PREPARATION

- **Wash three or four quart-sized glass Mason jars with hot, soapy water.**
Since we aren't canning these in a hot water bath, standard cleanliness is sufficient before packing.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine all the prepared vegetables in the absolute largest bowl or clean plastic basin you own.**
Use your hands to toss everything thoroughly so the colors are evenly distributed throughout the mixture.
- 2. Sprinkle the salt, sugar, and peppercorns evenly over the vegetables, then pour the vinegar directly over the top.**
Dig in with your hands and toss the salad completely, lightly massaging the salt and vinegar into the cabbage until it begins to soften. It will seem like there is not nearly enough liquid, but trust the process.

- 1. Cover the bowl tightly with a clean kitchen towel and leave it sitting at room temperature on your counter for 24 hours.**

Every 6 to 8 hours, return to the bowl and give it a thorough toss from the bottom up. As time passes, the salt will pull the natural water out of the vegetables via osmosis, dramatically reducing their volume and creating a deep pool of naturally balanced sweet-and-sour brine.

- 2. Pack the macerated vegetables tightly into clean quart-sized glass jars.**

Push down firmly as you pack them to eliminate as many air pockets as possible.

- 3. Ladle the fragrant liquid remaining at the bottom of your bowl evenly into the jars right up to the brim.**

Ensure all the vegetables are submerged in the liquid, then wipe the rims clean, screw on the lids tightly, and place them straight into the refrigerator.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Wait a few days before eating for the best flavor.**

The salad is technically ready to eat immediately after the 24-hour counter rest, but the flavors marry and deepen beautifully if you let the jars sit in the fridge for 3 to 5 days before opening. It will stay fresh and crunchy for up to 3 months.

- **Do not use pre-shredded bagged cabbage.**

Bagged cabbage has lost too much moisture sitting on the grocery store shelf. It will not release enough natural water to create the required brine, leaving you with dry vegetables instead of a proper pickle.

- **The vinegar ratio has been adjusted for the American kitchen.**

Standard American white vinegar is 5 percent acidity, whereas traditional Balkan culinary vinegar is 9 percent. We use a slightly higher volume of vinegar here to guarantee you get that fiercely authentic bite without diluting the salad.



Slatko od Malina

Слатко од малина

SLAHT-koh ohd MAH-lee-nah

Slatko literally means 'sweet,' but across the Balkans, it is an absolute ritual of hospitality. Offered the moment a guest walks through the door alongside a glass of cold water, it is a testament to a grandmother's patience—perfectly whole raspberries suspended in a thick, jewel-clear syrup. To recreate this magic in an American suburb, forget commercial pectin. The secret relies on three unyielding rules: macerate the fruit overnight, never let a spoon touch the cooking pot, and cool the hot preserve under a damp cloth. It is a masterclass in culinary architecture, designed to make life just a little sweeter.

INGREDIENTS

2 lb	raspberries <i>rinsed and patted completely dry; must be exceptionally firm and structurally intact</i>	2 1/2 lb	granulated sugar
		1 med	lemon <i>juiced</i>

PREPARATION

- **Place a small ceramic plate in the freezer.**
You will need this properly chilled to accurately test the thickness of your syrup.
- **Sterilize four half-pint mason jars.**
Ensure they are clean and completely dry before the slatko finishes cooling.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Layer the raw raspberries and sugar in a wide, heavy-bottomed pot.**
Add a handful of berries, cover with a layer of sugar and a squeeze of lemon juice, repeating until everything is in the pot. Ensure the final top layer is sugar.
- 2. Cover the pot and let it sit at room temperature overnight.**
Leave it undisturbed for 8 to 12 hours. The sugar will naturally draw the moisture out of the berries through osmosis, creating a heavy syrup while firming the fruit's structure.
- 3. Move the pot to the stove over medium-high heat and absolutely do not stir.**
This is the golden rule of slatko: stirring crushes the delicate berries into jam. If you must agitate the mixture to distribute heat, grab the handles and gently swirl the pot in a circular motion.
- 4. Meticulously skim the pink foam from the surface as the syrup reaches a rolling boil.**
Stand by the stove with a wide spoon. Removing these impurities is the secret to a crystal-clear, ruby syrup. Keep the heat at a steady, bubbling simmer for 20 to 30 minutes.

1. Test the syrup consistency on an ice-cold saucer.

Drop a small spoonful of the hot syrup onto the chilled plate. Wait 30 seconds, then drag a spoon through it. If it leaves a clear, clean path that doesn't immediately fill back in, it is done.

2. Remove from the heat and cover the pot tightly with a damp cotton towel.

Run a clean kitchen towel under cold water, wring it out completely, and stretch it over the hot pot. Leave it on the stove for 10 to 12 hours until completely cool. This prevents a sugar crust and allows the berries to reabsorb the syrup, plumping back into perfect spheres.

3. Ladle the fully cooled slatko into sterilized jars.

Store in a cool, dark pantry. Serve the authentic way: one heaping teaspoon in a tiny glass dish alongside ice water and a cup of strong domestic coffee.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not use overripe or frozen berries.**

Structural integrity is the entire point of slatko. Soft berries will disintegrate into mush when boiled. Save them for smoothies.

● **Do not reduce the sugar.**

The precise ratio of sugar to fruit is what preserves the berries and creates the proper viscosity. Less sugar yields a watery, perishable compote.



Brzi Pekmez od Šljiva

br-zee pek-mez od shlee-vah

If there is a scent that defines the shift from summer to autumn in the Balkans, it is the intoxicating smoke and caramelized sugar of roasting plums. Traditionally, the region's legendary pekmez—a dense, inky plum butter—demanded village women stand for twelve hours over open fires, stirring massive copper cauldrons. But grandmothers are brilliant pragmatists. When they moved into modern apartments, they took to the oven. This ambient, dry heat shortcut perfectly mimics the rustic fire, reducing the fruit without the stovetop splatter or endless stirring. Just do not compromise on the fruit: standard supermarket plums are waterlogged and useless here. You must use Italian Prune Plums.

INGREDIENTS

5 lb	Italian Prune Plums <i>halved and pitted, with skins left on</i>	1 tbsp	vanilla sugar
2 cup	granulated sugar	2 tbsp	dark rum
1 tsp	ground cinnamon	1 pinch	salt

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Toss the plums and sugar in a large roasting pan and let them macerate.**
Leave them on the counter for 30 to 60 minutes. The sugar will draw out the natural juices, creating a light syrup that kickstarts the caramelization process.
- 2. Roast the plums uncovered at 400°F for an hour and a half.**
Place the pan on the bottom rack. Every 30 minutes, pull the rack out and give the collapsing fruit a gentle stir with a wooden spoon.
- 3. Reduce the heat to 300°F, add the aromatics, and continue roasting for another hour to an hour and a half.**
Stir in the cinnamon, vanilla sugar, dark rum, and salt. Check and stir every 20 minutes as the liquid evaporates and the bright red stew condenses into a dark, dense paste.
- 4. Test the jam for the proper thick and dense consistency.**
Drag a wooden spoon firmly across the bottom of the pan; if it leaves a dry path that takes a second or two to fill back in, the pekmez is ready.
- 5. Sterilize your canning jars in the oven during the final minutes of roasting.**
Wash five glass canning jars and their lids in hot, soapy water, then place the wet jars upright on a baking sheet in the oven so the hot glass won't shatter when filled.
- 6. Pack the boiling hot pekmez into the heated jars and seal them.**
Leave half an inch of headspace at the top, wipe the rims completely clean with a damp towel, and screw the metal lids on tightly.

1. Return the sealed jars to the warm, turned-off oven to cool overnight.

Leave them completely undisturbed. This gentle, gradual drop in temperature creates a powerful vacuum seal, keeping the jam shelf-stable for up to a year.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Standard supermarket plums will ruin this recipe.**

Large, round red or black plums hold too much water and lack the necessary natural pectin. You must seek out the egg-shaped Italian Prune Plum, often labeled Empress or Damson, to achieve the dense, obsidian-dark result.

● **Use this pekmez exactly like a Balkan grandmother would.**

Smear it thickly on a slice of buttered artisan bread, roll it into crepes, or use it as a filling for sweet yeast doughs where its density prevents it from boiling out in the oven.



Brzi Kiseli Krastavčići sa Mirođijom

Брзи кисели краставчићи са мирођијом

br-zee kee-seh-lee krah-stahv-chee-chee sah mee-roh-jee-yohm

If you grew up Balkan, the sharp, nose-tingling vapor of boiling vinegar meant winter was coming. The grueling multi-day ritual of making zimnica sustained a family until spring, but every grandmother kept a stash of brzi—quick pickles—for the immediate gratification of a heavy weeknight pork roast. We cheat the weak American vinegar by hiking the ratio, and we use a village trick: quartering the cucumbers without severing the stem. The result is a fiercely garlicky, wildly crunchy bite of the homeland that’s ready in twenty-four hours.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb	Kirby cucumbers <i>rinsed</i>	1 1/2 cup	white distilled vinegar
6 clove	garlic clove <i>peeled and lightly smashed</i>	2 1/2 tbsp	kosher salt
1 bunch	fresh dill <i>stems and fronds included</i>	1 tbsp	granulated sugar
2 cup	water	1 tsp	whole black peppercorns
		1 tsp	yellow mustard seeds
		1/2 tsp	dried dill seed

PREPARATION

- **Slice a quarter-inch off the blossom end of each cucumber and discard it.**
The blossom end contains an enzyme that turns pickles to mush; removing it guarantees a crisp bite.
- **Stand the cucumber on its flat end and slice straight down the middle, stopping a half-inch before you hit the bottom stem.**
Rotate the cucumber ninety degrees and make another cut, stopping at the exact same point, so the cucumber is quartered into spears but remains held together at the base.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Divide the smashed garlic, fresh dill, black peppercorns, mustard seeds, and dried dill seed evenly between two clean 1-quart glass mason jars.**
Pack the scored cucumbers into the jars tightly, standing them upright so they are snug and won't float.
- 2. In a medium saucepan, bring the water, kosher salt, and sugar to a rolling boil over medium-high heat.**
Stir until the salt and sugar are completely dissolved, then turn off the heat entirely and pour in the white vinegar to prevent the harsh acid from evaporating into the air.

- 1. Immediately pour the hot brine into the jars over the cucumbers, leaving about a half-inch of space at the top.**

This rapid heat shock minimally blanches the exterior, opening the pores of the vegetable to absorb the garlic and dill instantly without cooking the crisp interior.

- 2. Secure the lids tightly and let the jars sit on the kitchen counter until they cool completely to room temperature.**

Transfer them to the refrigerator; they are ready to eat in twenty-four hours, reach absolute perfection at forty-eight hours, and keep for up to a month.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not substitute standard slicing or English cucumbers.**

They hold entirely too much water and will disintegrate into mush; you need the firm, thick skin of a Kirby or small Persian cucumber.

- **Stick to cheap white distilled vinegar.**

Do not attempt to elevate this with apple cider or white wine vinegar; the pure, sharp bite of cheap white vinegar is absolutely essential to replicate the authentic flavor of Balkan alcohol vinegar.



Zimnička Testenina

Зимничка тестенина

zeem-nee-ch-ka tes-te-nee-na

If you grew up in a Balkan household—whether in Belgrade, Sarajevo, or some quiet suburb in Ohio—you know the smell of the late-summer zimnica ritual, roasting peppers to capture the sunshine for the dark winter ahead. But on a freezing Tuesday night, what did grandmothers actually do with those jars of ajvar? They made this. It's pure, unapologetic home cooking: cheap, pantry-staple macaroni tossed with a rich egg custard, tangy feta, and a generous scoop of smoky ajvar, baked until the top is a fiercely contested landscape of charred, chewy, bubbling cheese. No fancy techniques, just the unwritten secret of trusting concentrated, smoky magic to do the heavy lifting.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb	dried short pasta	1/2 cup	full-fat sour cream
1 tbsp	kosher salt	1 cup	feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>
3/4 cup	ajvar	1 1/2 cup	low-moisture mozzarella and monterey jack cheese blend <i>shredded</i>
3 oz	spicy pepperoni or thick-cut bacon <i>diced</i>	1 tbsp	olive oil
3 large	eggs	1/2 tsp	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 400°F.**

Grease a 9x13-inch ceramic or glass baking dish with a little butter or oil.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Parboil the pasta in heavily salted water.**

Boil the pasta for two minutes less than the package instructions so it remains al dente, reserving a quarter cup of the starchy water before draining.

- 2. Whisk together the custard base.**

In a large bowl, vigorously whisk the eggs, sour cream, and olive oil until smooth, then stir in the ajvar until the mixture turns a vibrant sunset orange.

- 3. Fold in the cheeses and meat.**

Add the crumbled feta, one cup of the shredded melting cheese, black pepper, and the diced pepperoni or bacon.

1. Bloom the ajvar with the hot pasta.

Dump the hot, drained pasta directly into the bowl to let the residual heat instantly bloom the smoky paprika oils and temper the eggs. If the mixture feels too thick, splash in a little of the reserved pasta water to loosen it into a creamy consistency.

2. Bake until golden and bubbling.

Spread the coated pasta into the greased baking dish, scatter the remaining half cup of shredded cheese over the top, and bake uncovered on the middle rack for 20 to 25 minutes until the edges are dark and crispy.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **You can skip the bake for a fifteen-minute stovetop shortcut.**

Sauté garlic and onion, add the ajvar and a splash of heavy cream, then toss with the cooked pasta and feta for a quick weeknight alternative.

● **Source the right ajvar.**

Look for jars labeled 'blagi' (mild) or 'ljuti' (hot) where the primary ingredients are simply roasted red peppers and eggplant, avoiding brands heavily diluted with tomato paste.



Slatkiši: Celebration Sweets

Heritage desserts reflecting the rich Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian history of the Balkans.

Balkan sweets map the borders of old empires. The Ottomans left a legacy of chopped walnuts and soaked pastry, while Austro-Hungary brought an obsession with delicate, cream-filled exactitude. These are the heavy hitters—the sticky, walnut-dense baklava and the caramelized trileće that demand a dark, bitter coffee and an empty afternoon.

Layering forty sheets of phyllo into a 9x13 metal baking pan takes uninterrupted focus, but it doesn't require a commercial bakery. Just patience, a shameful amount of butter, and the fundamental understanding that some

things are simply meant to be rich. The syrup hisses against the hot pastry, the plates are scraped clean, and the coffee grounds settle at the bottom of the cup.





Kafanski Trileće sa Karamelom

Кафански трилеће са карамелом

kah-fahn-skee tree-leh-cheh sah kah-rah-meh-lohm

Here is a secret about one of the most famous, beloved desserts in the modern Balkans: it isn't ancient. In the late 1990s, Latin American soap operas took the post-war region by storm, and locals watching 'Kassandra' became obsessed with a beautiful, milk-soaked cake on the screen. Bakers reverse-engineered it using only the name, swapping out whipped cream for a rich, unapologetic golden caramel because a Balkan celebration dessert requires absolute decadence. Today, you can't walk into a kafana in Belgrade or Sarajevo without encountering

this literal sponge of sweet dairy and burnt sugar. It is an extraordinary masterpiece of culinary adaptation, recreated here to deliver that melt-in-your-mouth nostalgia perfectly in an American kitchen.

INGREDIENTS

6 large	large eggs <i>separated while cold</i>	2 cup	whole milk
1/2 cup	granulated sugar	1 1/2 cup	heavy whipping cream
1 tsp	vanilla extract	14 oz	sweetened condensed milk
1 cup	all-purpose flour	1 cup	granulated sugar
2 tbsp	cornstarch	3 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i>
1 1/2 tsp	baking powder	1 cup	heavy whipping cream <i>warmed slightly</i>
1 pinch	salt	1 pinch	salt

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven and prepare the baking dish.**

Preheat your oven to 350°F. Grease a 9×13-inch glass or ceramic baking dish and line the bottom with a sheet of parchment paper.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whip the egg whites to stiff, glossy peaks.**

Add a pinch of salt to the egg whites and whip with an electric mixer on medium-high speed until frothy, then slowly rain in the half cup of sugar. They are ready when you can turn the bowl upside down and the foam does not move.

1. Fold in the egg yolks and sifted dry ingredients.

Lower the mixer speed and add the yolks one at a time, mixing just until the yellow disappears. Stop the mixer, sift the flour, cornstarch, and baking powder over the foam in two batches, and gently fold from the bottom up with a spatula to keep the air intact.

2. Bake the sponge until golden.

Pour the batter into your prepared pan, smooth the top, and bake for 20 to 25 minutes until a toothpick inserted in the center comes out clean. Let it cool for exactly 10 minutes.

3. Prepare the three-milk soak.

While the cake bakes, whisk the whole milk, cold heavy cream, and the entire can of sweetened condensed milk in a large pitcher until perfectly smooth.

4. Saturate the warm cake with the milk mixture.

Poke dozens of holes all over the top of the warm cake with a fork or skewer. Slowly pour half the milk over the cake, let it absorb for a minute, then pour the rest and move the covered dish to the fridge.

5. Melt the sugar into a dry caramel.

Sprinkle the remaining cup of sugar evenly across the bottom of a wide, heavy saucepan over medium heat. Let it melt without stirring, swirling the pan gently once the edges liquify, until it reaches a deep amber color and smells faintly toasted.

6. Whisk in the butter and warmed cream.

Carefully add the room-temperature butter and whisk vigorously as it bubbles up. Slowly pour in the warm heavy cream, whisking over the heat for another minute until smooth and velvety, then remove from heat, stir in a pinch of salt, and let it cool for 15 minutes.

7. Glaze the chilled cake.

Pour the warm caramel evenly over the milk-soaked cake, using an offset spatula to spread it gently to the edges. Chill for at least 4 hours, or ideally overnight, before slicing into squares.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Cornstarch is the secret to a sponge that drinks milk without turning to mush.**
American all-purpose flour has highly variable protein content. Cutting the flour with cornstarch mimics the soft, low-protein Balkan flours that keep the crumb perfectly tender but structurally sound enough to hold four cups of liquid.
- **Manage the thermal shock of the caramel.**
Adding cold cream to hot sugar causes it to seize instantly into hard candy crystals. Taking a minute to warm the cream and use room-temperature butter guarantees that glossy, sliceable tavern finish without a panic at the stove.



Prizrensko Tespishte

Призренско теспиште

preez-REN-sko tess-PEESH-teh

It smells like toasted walnuts and hot sugar—the universal Balkan signal that a holiday is imminent. In Prizren, they make Tespishte. Locals affectionately call this dessert 'fake baklava,' a pragmatic, working-class piece of kitchen magic that delivers the decadent punch of its phyllo-layered cousin with a fraction of the labor. The grandmother's secret here is an old-world sleight of hand: boiling the oil and water before violently stirring in the flour to pre-cook the starches. It creates a tender, short dough that acts like an indestructible sponge, drinking up massive quantities of vanilla-lemon syrup without ever turning to mush.

INGREDIENTS

2 cup	water <i>divided</i>	2 cup	walnuts <i>pulsed in a food processor to coarse crumbs</i>
1 cup	neutral oil	2 1/2 cup	granulated sugar
3 1/3 cup	all-purpose flour	1 tsp	vanilla extract
1 1/2 tsp	baking powder	1 large	lemon slice <i>cut 1/4-inch thick, seeds removed</i>

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Boil the liquids.

In a medium saucepan, combine 1 cup of the water and the neutral oil. Bring to a rolling boil over medium-high heat, then immediately remove from the heat.

2. Cook the dough.

Dump all the flour and the baking powder into the hot liquid at once, stirring vigorously with a wooden spoon until it forms a thick, oily ball that pulls away from the sides of the pan.

3. Rest and knead in the walnuts.

Let the dough cool in the pan for 15 minutes until it is safe to handle, then add the crushed walnuts and knead with your hands until they are evenly distributed.

4. Press and score the cake.

Preheat the oven to 390°F. Press the dough evenly into a lightly greased 9x13-inch baking pan to the thickness of a pinky finger, then use a sharp knife to score the dough into a traditional diamond pattern by cutting parallel lines down the length, then diagonal lines across.

5. Bake until deep golden brown.

Bake on the middle rack for 30 to 35 minutes. Remove and set aside to cool completely to room temperature before adding the syrup.

1. Prepare the sherbet.

When the cake is completely cool, combine the sugar, the remaining 1 cup of water, vanilla, and the lemon slice in a saucepan. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, then let it boil undisturbed for exactly 3 to 5 minutes to thicken slightly.

2. Drown the cake.

Remove the boiling syrup from the heat and immediately pour it evenly over the cold cake. Leave the lemon slice on top for aroma, and let the pan sit uncovered on the counter for at least two hours so the cake can fully absorb the syrup.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Serve with bitter coffee.**

This dessert is intensely sweet by design; it is best balanced by serving alongside a cup of strong, unsweetened black tea or bitter Turkish coffee.

- **A naturally vegan showstopper.**

Because this is a traditional posni (fasting) recipe, it contains no dairy or eggs, making it a spectacular dessert for vegan guests requiring zero modern substitutions.



Starinske Oblande sa Čokoladom i Orasima

Старинске обланде са чоколадом и орасима

stah-RIN-skeh oh-BLAHN-deh sah cho-ko-LAH-dom ee oh-RAH-see-mah

If there is a scent that universally triggers the feeling of a Balkan celebration, it is milk and sugar slowly turning to caramel on a stovetop. Oblande isn't some high-patisserie gimmick; it is the ultimate expression of rustic, grandmotherly love. A true starinski (old-fashioned) filling demands patience, not shortcuts, requiring a slow, two-hour reduction until it hits a deep, dulce de leche-like perfection. Press it overnight, slice it thin, and taste exactly what home is supposed to be.

INGREDIENTS

1 l	whole milk	5 1/2 oz	dark baking chocolate or semi-sweet chocolate chips
3 cup	granulated sugar		
250 g	unsalted butter <i>cubed and softened to room temp</i>	2 cup	English walnuts <i>pulsed in a food processor until they resemble coarse sand</i>
		150 g	large tort wafer sheets

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Simmer the milk and sugar to a slow caramel.**
Combine the milk and sugar in a large, heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat until dissolved, then drop to a gentle simmer for 1 1/2 to 2 hours, stirring more frequently as it reduces by half to a thick, golden caramel.
- 2. Melt in the fats and chocolate.**
Pull the pot off the heat and immediately stir in the cubed butter and chocolate until glossy, then fold in the ground walnuts.
- 3. Beat out the steam for exactly two minutes.**
Vigorously whisk the filling in the pot to release trapped steam, ensuring the moisture doesn't transfer to your delicate wafers and turn them soggy.
- 4. Cool the filling until lukewarm.**
Aim for a thick, spreadable paste; spreading it piping hot will melt the wafers, while waiting until it's completely cold will cause them to tear.
- 5. Layer the wafers on their rough side.**
Place your first wafer flat side down and spread a quarter of the filling over the deeper, rough square divots, repeating until you cap it with the final wafer flat side up.
- 6. Press overnight.**
Wrap the assembly tightly in plastic, place a heavy cutting board or cookbooks on top, and leave it in a cool spot for at least 6 hours to bond the layers together.

1. Trim and slice with a cold blade.

Use a sharp, thin, cold knife to trim the edges, then cut the block into neat diamonds or rectangles just before serving.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The weeknight shortcut.**

If you lack two hours to stir milk on a Tuesday night, boil the milk and sugar for 15 minutes, stir in the chocolate, butter, and walnuts, then add 2 1/2 cups of crushed Graham crackers to instantly thicken the hot liquid before assembling.

- **Buy an extra pack of wafers.**

Wafers are incredibly fragile and frequently break in transit, so having an extra package ensures you have pristine sheets for the critical top and bottom layers.



Domáci Sutlijaš

doh-mah-chee soot-lee-yash

This isn't your stiff, baked American rice pudding, nor is it some fussy French custard. It is the ultimate expression of Balkan frugality and love—three basic ingredients coaxed into velvet. The smell of warm milk and vanilla filling the house on a cold evening is a direct line back to a grandmother's kitchen. To get there, you follow her rules: use the right rice, give it a head start in water, stir with patience, and never, ever add the sugar until the very end.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	Arborio rice <i>rinsed under cold water until mostly clear</i>	1 pinch	kosher salt
2 cup	cold water	4 cup	whole milk

1/2 cup granulated sugar

1 pinch ground cinnamon

1 tbsp vanilla extract

PREPARATION

- **Prepare your serving bowls.**

Briefly rinse 4 to 6 glass or ceramic serving bowls under cold water, shaking out the excess but not drying them. This old-world trick prevents the hot pudding from sticking to the bowl as it sets.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Simmer the rice in water to give it a safe head start.**

In a large, heavy-bottomed pot, combine the rinsed rice, water, and salt over medium heat. Simmer and stir occasionally until the rice has absorbed almost all the water and looks plump, about 7 to 10 minutes. Boiling raw rice directly in milk is a guaranteed scorched pot, so this step is critical.

- 2. Add the milk and reduce the heat to the absolute lowest setting.**

Pour in the whole milk. You want the milk to gently steam and barely bubble. Cook uncovered for 20 to 25 minutes, stirring frequently and scraping the bottom of the pot to massage the starch out of the rice.

- 3. Stir in the sugar and vanilla at the very end.**

When the rice is completely tender and the milk has thickened to the consistency of a loose porridge, stir in the sugar and vanilla extract. Cook for just 2 to 3 more minutes to dissolve the sugar. Never add the sugar earlier, or it will create a barrier around the grains and prevent them from softening.

- 4. Rest the pudding before serving.**

Remove the pot from the heat, cover with a lid, and let it sit undisturbed for 10 minutes to allow the final absorption of liquid. Ladle into the prepared serving bowls and dust generously with ground cinnamon before serving warm or transferring to the fridge to chill.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not swap the rice.**

The velvet texture relies entirely on short-grain rice. Never use long-grain or Basmati; Arborio is the perfect, accessible substitute for the traditional Balkan round-grain rice.

- **Recreating farm-fresh milk.**

Standard American milk lacks the rich fat of traditional unhomogenized Balkan farm milk. To replicate that authentic mouthfeel, you can replace half a cup of the whole milk with heavy cream.



Brza Bosanska Baklava sa Orasima

Брза босанска баклава са орасима

brza bosanska baklava sa orasima

If you grew up in a Balkan household, the smell of toasted walnuts and lemon syrup bubbling on the stove means it's a holiday. Making baklava the old way meant rolling dough so thin you could read a newspaper through it. Nobody has time for that anymore. This is the 'brza' (quick) version used by every modern auntie in the diaspora. It relies on store-bought phyllo and three non-negotiable rules: use clarified butter so the milk solids don't burn, add plain breadcrumbs to

the nuts to mimic the traditional moisture-wicking 'tirit' crumb, and strictly follow the law of thermodynamics—hot pastry, cold syrup. Do this right, and it tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

4 cup	granulated sugar	1 lb	raw walnuts
3 1/2 cup	water	1/4 cup	plain unseasoned breadcrumbs
1 tsp	vanilla extract	2 tbsp	granulated sugar
1/2 med	lemon <i>sliced into thin rounds</i>	1 cup	unsalted butter
1 lb	phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the fridge</i>	2 tbsp	neutral oil

PREPARATION

- **Make the agda (syrup) first so it has time to chill.**

Combine the 4 cups of sugar, water, and vanilla in a medium pot. Bring to a boil over medium-high heat, stirring just until the sugar dissolves. Simmer uncovered for 15 minutes, dropping in the lemon slices for the last 5 minutes. Transfer to a heat-proof bowl and refrigerate until completely cold.

- **Clarify the butter to make maslo.**

Melt the butter in a small saucepan over very low heat without stirring. Skim off and discard the white foam rising to the top—these milk solids will burn and turn black during a long bake. Pour the remaining golden butter into a bowl and stir in the neutral oil.

- **Prepare the walnut filling with a dual texture.**

Pulse half the walnuts in a food processor until finely ground like coarse sand, then pulse the remaining half just until roughly chopped. Combine them in a bowl with 2 tablespoons of sugar and the breadcrumbs, which act as a sponge to soak up the syrup and prevent the nuts from clumping into a greasy paste.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Build the base of the baklava.**

Preheat your oven to 350°F (180°C) and brush a 9x13-inch pan with your butter mixture. Lay down one sheet of phyllo, brush it lightly but entirely with butter, and repeat until you have a sturdy foundation of 5 buttered sheets.

2. **Alternate the phyllo and the walnut mixture.**

Scatter a large handful of the walnut mixture evenly over the base. Place two sheets of phyllo over the nuts, brushing the top sheet generously with butter, and add another layer of walnuts. Repeat this sequence until you run out of the nut mixture.

3. **Build the protective top crust.**

Stack the remaining 4 to 5 sheets of phyllo on top, brushing every single layer with butter, including the very top sheet. Smooth the top with your hands, pressing down gently to compact the pastry.

4. **Cut the baklava into classic diamond shapes before baking.**

Using a very sharp knife, cut the pastry all the way down to the bottom of the pan into long parallel strips about 1.5 inches apart. Cut diagonal lines across the pan to create rombove (diamonds), and pour any remaining butter evenly into the cut lines.

5. **Bake to dry out the pastry.**

Bake in the center of the oven for 15 minutes until the top just begins to turn golden. Immediately lower the heat to 300°F (150°C) and bake for another 60 to 75 minutes. You are essentially drying the pastry out so every layer becomes incredibly crisp.

6. **Drench the hot pastry with the cold syrup.**

The moment you pull the screaming hot baklava out of the oven, immediately pour the completely chilled lemon syrup evenly over the top. You should hear a loud, satisfying sizzle as the crisp dough drinks the liquid.

1. Let the baklava rest at room temperature.

Do not eat it yet, and do not put it in the fridge, or the butter will congeal and turn cloudy. Let it sit at room temperature for at least 4 hours, preferably overnight, to allow the syrup to fully penetrate the layers and set.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Buy the right dough.**

Seek out #4 thickness phyllo dough in the freezer section. Thicker versions used for savory pies will yield a heavy, doughy dessert.

● **The ghee shortcut.**

To skip clarifying the butter entirely, simply melt 1 cup of store-bought ghee and stir in the 2 tablespoons of neutral oil.



Magične Plazma Bombice

Магичне Плазма Бомбице

mah-geech-neh plahz-mah bom-bee-tseh

If you grew up in a Balkan household, the honey-malted scent of Plazma biscuits is the undisputed smell of home. But to make proper bombice—the bite-sized truffles that grace every family Slava or holiday—you need the unwritten grandmother's secret: a splash of carbonated orange soda. The bright, citric fizz cuts right through the dense butter and biscuit crumb, turning a heavy dough into something genuinely magical. Forget the fancy substitutions; just use your hands, a mixing bowl, and the ingredients you can find at your local European market to taste exactly what it was like growing up.

INGREDIENTS

300 g	ground Plazma biscuits	120 ml	orange soda
100 g	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temperature</i>	150 g	semi-sweet baking chocolate <i>roughly chopped</i>
100 g	powdered sugar	1 tbsp	neutral oil
50 g	walnuts <i>very finely ground</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Grind the dry ingredients.**

If you can only find whole Plazma biscuits, pulse them in a food processor until they resemble fine sand, and do the same for the walnuts.

- **Line a baking sheet.**

Prepare a baking sheet with parchment paper or aluminum foil so the truffles won't stick once formed.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Cream the butter and sugar until smooth.**

In a large mixing bowl, beat the softened butter and powdered sugar together until pale and creamy.

- 2. Work in the dry ingredients.**

Add the ground Plazma biscuits and finely ground walnuts, mixing with your hands or a spatula until the mixture resembles coarse sand.

- 3. Bind the dough with the orange soda.**

Gradually pour in the soda, kneading with your hands until you get a smooth, cohesive dough that holds its shape when squeezed without being sticky.

- 4. Roll the mixture into bite-sized truffles.**

Pinch off small pieces and roll them between your palms to form one-inch balls, placing them on a parchment-lined baking sheet.

1. Chill the truffles to set.

Refrigerate for at least 30 to 45 minutes so they hold together when dipped in the warm chocolate.

2. Melt the chocolate and oil together.

Set up a double boiler and gently melt the chopped chocolate with the neutral oil until smooth and glossy to ensure a shiny coat that won't crack.

3. Dip the truffles and garnish.

Drop the chilled truffles one by one into the chocolate, tap off the excess, and slide them back onto the parchment before sprinkling with a little extra ground Plazma or walnuts.

4. Refrigerate briefly to harden the glaze before serving.

Let them set for 15 minutes in the fridge, but pull them out 5 minutes before eating for the perfect texture.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the biscuits is non-negotiable.**

Bambi exports Plazma to the US under the name 'Lane Biscuits'. Do not substitute graham crackers or vanilla wafers; they fundamentally lack the honeyed, malted depth required here.

● **Adapting for Orthodox fasting.**

To make these 'posno' (which also makes them vegan), swap the butter for a high-quality vegan stick margarine, use Posna Plazma, and ensure your chocolate is dairy-free.

● **Embrace the lazy coating on a weeknight.**

If you lack the time or patience for melting chocolate, just roll the sticky, freshly formed balls directly in dry ground Plazma, shredded unsweetened coconut, or cocoa powder.



Lažne Princes Krofne

Лажне принцес крофне

lahzh-neh prin-tzes krohf-neh

Sunday afternoons in a Balkan household are heavy with the scent of butter, vanilla, and toasted pastry. True Princes Krofne require piping dozens of delicate puffs—a noble pursuit, but an unreasonable demand for a busy parent pulling off a weeknight miracle in Ohio. Enter the 'lažne' or fake version, a brilliant, pragmatic hack born of necessity. It uses the exact same eggy choux pastry and rich vanilla egg-yolk custard, but bakes into wild, rustic mountain peaks in a cake pan. No piping, no pretense. You stack it, slice it, and take a bite, and it tastes exactly like the old country.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup	water	2/3 cup	granulated sugar
8 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>cut into cubes</i>	1/4 cup	cornstarch
1 tbsp	granulated sugar	1/4 cup	all-purpose flour
1/4 tsp	salt	1 tsp	vanilla extract
1 cup	all-purpose flour	8 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temperature</i>
4 large	large eggs <i>at room temperature</i>	1 cup	heavy whipping cream <i>cold</i>
2 1/2 cup	whole milk <i>divided</i>	1 tbsp	powdered sugar
4 large	large egg yolks	2 tbsp	powdered sugar <i>for dusting</i>

PREPARATION

- **Line the baking gear.**

Line the bottoms of your pans with parchment paper, but do not grease the sides. The dough needs to physically grip the metal to climb and puff properly in the oven.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk the custard slurry.**

In a medium bowl, vigorously whisk together the egg yolks, two-thirds cup of sugar, cornstarch, one-quarter cup of flour, and a half cup of the milk until completely smooth, pale, and free of lumps.

- 2. Heat the remaining milk and temper the eggs.**

In a medium saucepan, bring the remaining two cups of milk to a gentle simmer over medium heat. Slowly pour about half of the hot milk into the egg yolk slurry while whisking constantly so the eggs don't scramble, then pour the entire mixture back into the saucepan.

1. Cook the custard into a thick pudding.

Return the saucepan to medium heat and whisk continuously for 2 to 4 minutes. The mixture will suddenly thicken into a dense, bubbling pudding. Remove from the heat and stir in the vanilla extract.

2. Cool the custard under plastic wrap.

Transfer the hot custard to a clean bowl and press a piece of plastic wrap directly onto its surface to prevent a rubbery skin from forming. Let it sit at room temperature for 30 minutes, then refrigerate until completely chilled.

3. Boil the choux base.

Preheat your oven to 400°F. In a medium saucepan, combine the water, cubed butter, one tablespoon of sugar, and salt. Bring to a rolling boil over medium-high heat, making sure the butter melts completely.

4. Cook out the raw flour.

Remove the pot from the heat and dump in the one cup of flour all at once, stirring vigorously with a wooden spoon. Put the pot back over low heat for 1 to 2 minutes, mashing and stirring the dough ball to cook out the raw flour taste and evaporate excess moisture.

5. Beat in the eggs one at a time.

Transfer the hot dough to a mixing bowl and let it cool for 10 minutes so it doesn't cook the eggs. Using a mixer on medium speed, beat in the whole eggs one by one, ensuring each is fully absorbed before adding the next, until you are left with a thick, glossy, sticky paste.

6. Bake the pastry and keep the oven shut.

Divide the sticky dough in half and spread it unevenly into two parchment-lined 9-inch round pans. Bake in the center of the oven for 25 to 30 minutes until puffed and deeply golden. Do not open the oven door under any circumstances.

1. Cool the pastry in the cracked oven.

Turn off the oven, crack the door slightly by wedging a wooden spoon in it, and let the pastry sit inside for 10 minutes to slowly adjust to room temperature. This dries it out and prevents the structure from collapsing. Remove and cool completely.

2. Whip the butter into the custard and whip the cream.

Beat the softened butter until pale and fluffy, then beat it into the chilled custard until silky. In a separate clean bowl, whip the cold heavy cream and one tablespoon of powdered sugar to stiff peaks.

3. Assemble and chill the cake.

Place one layer of the cooled pastry on a platter, spread the vanilla custard into its peaks and valleys, and top evenly with the whipped cream. Gently place the second pastry layer on top, then refrigerate for at least 2 hours. Dust generously with powdered sugar before slicing.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The cardinal rule of the oven door.**

If you open the oven before the pastry is fully set, the steam escapes, the pressure drops, and your beautiful mountain peaks will collapse into dense, rubbery disks. Leave it shut.

● **Using a rectangular dish.**

If you don't have two round pans, you can bake the dough in two batches using a single parchment-lined 9x13-inch baking dish.



Lažna Ruska Kapa

Лажна руска капа

lahzh-nah roos-kah kah-pah

Balkan grandmothers are the undisputed queens of the kitchen hack. When they wanted the majesty of traditional Ruske Kape without losing an entire weekend to baking, they ingeniously swapped homemade sponge for store-bought Jaffa cakes. A quick vanilla custard binds them, the fridge works its magic to soften the biscuit into delicate cake, and the result is a staggering illusion that tastes exactly like the painstaking original.

INGREDIENTS

500 ml whole milk

1/3 cup cornstarch

1/4 cup all-purpose flour

1/2 cup granulated sugar

2 tbsp vanilla sugar

9 tbsp unsalted butter
softened to room temp

40 med Jaffa cakes

1 cup unsweetened desiccated
coconut

PREPARATION

- **Soften the butter properly.**

Leave the butter on the counter well in advance. If it is too cold, it will not emulsify into the pudding; if you melt it in the microwave, your cream will turn to soup.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the dry ingredients with a splash of milk to form a lump-free slurry.**

Combine the cornstarch, flour, sugar, and vanilla sugar with a half cup of the cold milk in a small bowl, whisking vigorously until perfectly smooth.

- 2. Bring the remaining milk to a gentle simmer over medium heat.**

Do not let it reach a rolling boil; it should just be hot enough to accept the slurry.

- 3. Whisk the slurry into the hot milk and cook continuously until it thickens into a glossy pudding.**

Reduce the heat to medium-low and do not walk away. Within minutes it will transform into a heavy paste. Cook for one more minute to eliminate the raw flour taste, then remove from heat.

- 4. Cover the hot pudding directly with plastic wrap and cool completely to room temperature.**

Pressing the wrap tight against the surface prevents a rubbery skin from forming. Do not rush the cooling process.

- 5. Whip the softened butter into the cooled pudding until light and fluffy.**

Beat the butter with an electric mixer for a minute, then incorporate the room-temperature pudding a few spoonfuls at a time.

- 1. Sandwich a generous dollop of cream between two Jaffa cakes, ensuring the chocolate tops face outward.**

Place about a tablespoon of cream on the sponge side of one cake, press the second cake sponge-side down on top, and smooth the edges with a knife to form a perfect cylinder.

- 2. Roll the creamy edges through the desiccated coconut until fully coated.**

Hold the cakes gently by their chocolate ends so you only coat the exposed vanilla cream.

- 3. Chill the assembled cakes in the refrigerator for at least three hours before serving.**

This resting period is non-negotiable; it allows the moisture from the custard to soften the biscuit back into a tender, delicate sponge cake.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Use real desiccated coconut.**

American sweetened shredded coconut is too wet and clunky, and keto-style coconut flour will ruin the texture. You need finely ground, dry, unsweetened coconut flakes.

- **Respect the starch matrix.**

Cornstarch makes the custard silky, but flour provides the structural backbone needed to hold the heavy hats together without the cream weeping out the sides.



Kafanske Tufahije

Туфахије

too-FAH-hee-yeh

A proper kafana doesn't fuss with trends; it serves strong, unfiltered coffee and sweets steeped in history. Tufahije—a relic of the Ottoman empire—is a masterclass in culinary alchemy, transforming humble apples, walnuts, and sugar into something luxurious. This isn't a baked apple. It's a study in restraint, relying on the tart spine of a Granny Smith to withstand a boiling syrup bath and emerge translucent, deeply infused, and perfect. Cooled overnight and crowned with cream, it is the definitive taste of a Balkan Sunday afternoon.

INGREDIENTS

6 med	Granny Smith apples <i>peeled and cored, peels reserved</i>	3 1/2 tbsp	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>
4 cup	water	3 tbsp	whole milk <i>heated</i>
2 1/2 cup	granulated sugar	3 tbsp	powdered sugar
1 large	lemon <i>halved</i>	1 tsp	vanilla extract
2 cup	walnuts <i>finely ground</i>	1 cup	heavy whipping cream <i>chilled</i>
		6 large	walnut halves

PREPARATION

- **Peel and hollow the apples.**

Using a vegetable peeler, remove the skins and reserve them in a bowl. Use an apple corer or a narrow paring knife to extract the seeds and tough core, leaving walls at least half an inch thick.

- **Acidulate the apples.**

Immediately rub the exposed flesh of the apples with a squeezed lemon half or submerge them in lemon water to prevent oxidation while you prepare the syrup.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Steep the syrup.**

In a wide, heavy-bottomed pot, combine the water, granulated sugar, the juice from the squeezed lemon half, the remaining lemon half (sliced), and the reserved apple peels. Bring to a rolling boil over medium-high heat, stirring until the sugar completely dissolves.

1. Poach the apples.

Gently lower the hollowed apples into the rolling syrup, reduce the heat to a steady simmer, and cook for 10 to 15 minutes. Use tongs to carefully flip them halfway through; pull them the moment they shift from opaque to slightly translucent and a paring knife meets the resistance of a ripe pear.

2. Cool the apples and reduce the syrup.

Transfer the poached apples to a glass baking dish using a slotted spoon and let them cool to room temperature. Leave the syrup and peels simmering on the stove for another 15 to 20 minutes until it reduces to a light, sticky nectar, then strain out the solids, stir in the vanilla extract, and let the syrup cool.

3. Mix the walnut paste.

In a bowl, combine the finely ground walnuts, melted butter, 2 tablespoons of powdered sugar, and hot milk, stirring vigorously until the mixture resembles wet sand. Add a spoonful of the warm syrup if it feels too dry to hold together.

4. Stuff and chill.

Spoon the walnut paste into the hollowed centers of the cooled apples, packing it down gently and mounding a little on top. Generously drown the stuffed apples in the cooled, thickened syrup, cover the dish, and banish them to the refrigerator for at least two hours—or ideally overnight—to marinate.

5. Garnish and serve.

Just before serving, whip the chilled heavy cream and the remaining 1 tablespoon of powdered sugar to stiff peaks. Plate each chilled apple in an individual bowl, spoon over the syrupy juices pooling at the bottom of the dish, and crown with a towering dollop of whipped cream and a single walnut half.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Mind the mush factor.**

Do not substitute Gala, Fuji, or Red Delicious apples here; the tart, structural integrity of a Granny Smith and the acid from the lemon are non-negotiable insurance policies against the apples collapsing into sauce.

- **Grind the nuts properly.**

Store-bought chopped walnuts won't cut it. Pulse them in a food processor or a hand-crank grinder until they form a fine meal, ensuring the filling becomes a dense, fudgy paste rather than a crumbly mess.

- **Embrace the Plazma hack.**

For a deeply authentic modern diaspora adaptation, stretch the filling by swapping half the ground walnuts for finely crushed Plazma biscuits or graham crackers.



Непечена Бјадера

Непечена Бјадера

neh-PEH-cheh-nah bah-yah-DEH-rah

In the Balkans, a holiday table without a platter of petit fours is a quiet tragedy, and Bajadera is the undisputed king of that spread. Born from a 1980s domestic urge to replicate an expensive commercial praline, home cooks engineered a flawless marriage of crushed Plazma biscuits, ground walnuts, and dark chocolate. The grandmotherly secrets here aren't mystical ingredients, but strict thermal discipline: a syrup boiled just to the vanishing point of the sugar crystal, doughs fused while radiating heat, and the monk-like patience required to slice the glassy chocolate glaze with a scalding hot blade. This is the unvarnished taste of a Yugoslav childhood, engineered for an American kitchen.

INGREDIENTS

2 cup	granulated sugar	3 cup	walnuts <i>halves briefly toasted, cooled, and processed to a fine sand</i>
2/3 cup	water	3 1/2 oz	dark baking chocolate <i>melted</i>
1 cup	unsalted butter <i>cubed</i>	5 oz	dark baking chocolate <i>chopped</i>
1 tsp	vanilla extract	3 tbsp	vegetable oil
3 1/2 cup	Plazma biscuits <i>finely ground</i>		

PREPARATION

- **Prepare the baking pan.**

Line a 9x13 inch rectangular baking pan with parchment paper, leaving a generous overhang for easy removal later.

- **Mix the dry ingredients.**

Combine the finely ground Plazma biscuits and toasted ground walnuts in a large bowl so they are ready the moment the syrup is done.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Boil the binding syrup with precision.**

Combine the water, sugar, and vanilla in a large saucepan over medium heat. The second it reaches a rolling boil and the sugar dissolves, yank it off the heat to avoid evaporating too much water and drying out your dough.

- 2. Melt the butter and hydrate the dry ingredients.**

Immediately stir the cubed butter into the hot syrup until completely melted, then pour this hot liquid over the mixed biscuits and walnuts. Mix vigorously with a heavy wooden spoon until a cohesive, heavy dough forms.

- 3. Divide the dough and spike one half with chocolate.**

While the mass is still hot, divide it exactly in half. Stir the 3 1/2 ounces of melted dark chocolate into one half until the color is entirely uniform.

1. Execute a warm lamination.

Press the warm, dark dough into the bottom of your prepared pan in an even layer. Immediately, while the bottom is still radiating heat, crumble the light dough evenly over the top and press it down firmly so the residual heat fuses the two strata together.

2. Apply the glassy chocolate glaze.

Gently melt the 5 ounces of chopped dark chocolate with the vegetable oil until perfectly smooth, then pour it over the light layer. Tap the pan gently on the counter to smooth the surface and eliminate air bubbles.

3. Chill overnight.

Place the pan in the refrigerator and leave it overnight; fully setting the butter structure is non-negotiable for a clean cut.

4. Slice with surgical patience.

Let the pan sit at room temperature for 15 minutes to microscopically soften the glaze. Lift the block out by the parchment, use a ruler to mark small rectangles, and slice with a thin knife that has been dipped in hot water and wiped completely dry between every single cut.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the right biscuit.**

Do not substitute graham crackers. Plazma biscuits (often sold as Lane Biscuits in the international aisle of American grocery stores) have a distinct honeyed snap that defines the authentic Balkan flavor profile.

● **The hot knife technique.**

Wiping the hot blade completely dry before each cut ensures the glassy chocolate top doesn't shatter or seize, preserving the bakery-perfect geometric aesthetic of the traditional slice.