



**Cook**

# Bulgarian

**in America**

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

# **Cook Bulgarian in America**

*Authentic Family Recipes and Balkan Traditions for the Modern  
Kitchen*

The Robot Book Club

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# Table of Contents

Bapche's Breakfasts & Popara Mornings

---

The Meze Table & Summer Salads

---

After-School Krenvirshi & Princesi

---

Mish-Mash & The 15-Minute Skillet

---

The Tuesday Pot: Bob Chorba & Stews

---

Sunday Moussaka & Stuffed Comforts

---

# 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: Bulgarian Home Cooking.

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

— Ted Benson

# Prologue

There are tastes that cling. Flavors that haunt the edges of memory, stubborn and insistent. For many, it's the specific tang of *sirene* in a *Shopska* salad, the warm, yielding embrace of *popara* on a cold morning, or the savory whisper of *lyutenitsa* slathered thick on fresh bread. These aren't just dishes; they're anchors. Connections to a grandmother's kitchen, to a homeland left behind, to a childhood spent in that delicious liminal space between two worlds.

But life, as it always does, moves on. The relentless demands of work, school, and the American weeknight leave little room for the multi-hour rituals of the old country. No one expects you to spend an afternoon roasting peppers for a single batch of *lyutenitsa*, nor should you. This isn't about sacrificing authenticity for convenience. It's about recognizing a fundamental truth of food and culture: it adapts to survive. It finds a way.

This is a book for those caught in that beautiful, delicious tension. A pragmatic guide, yes, but one born from a deep, unsentimental respect for the genuine article. We've taken Bapche's secrets—the honest, unpretentious, flavor-first approach—and meticulously translated them. Not watered down, never white-washed, but intelligently engineered for the modern American kitchen. You'll find the strategic shortcuts she'd approve of, the accessible ingredients that deliver the same unmistakable punch, the meals that taste exactly like home, even when home is now a suburb in Ohio.

From quick breakfasts that comfort the soul to skillet dinners that sing with tradition, to the Sunday projects that yield spectacular leftovers, consider this your essential roadmap. The taste of Bulgaria, unapologetically real, is waiting.



# Bapche's Breakfasts & Popara Mornings

*The weekend rituals of dough and the weekday comforts of the motherland.*

Morning is a divided country. On a Tuesday, it's about survival: three minutes to tear yesterday's crusty bread into a bowl with hot tea, butter, and a fistful of sirene before the commute. Popara is the great equalizer, an unapologetic, utilitarian comfort that doesn't care about your schedule—it just gets you through the day.

But the weekend? That is sacred territory. Saturday mornings belong to the slow, deliberate religion of dough. The house wakes up to the scent of hot oil, proofing yeast, and shattering phyllo. This is the quiet inheritance of the

diaspora. Sizzling mekitsi, a towering banitsa, the Bapche standing over your shoulder judging your folds. It's the taste of the old world, uncompromising and alive in the new.





# Banitsa

Вита баница

*vee-tah bah-nee-tsay*

If you grew up in a Balkan household, the smell of banitsa baking on a weekend morning is etched into your DNA. This isn't the puffed-up, heavy cream, Hollywood version of the dish; it is the canonical, uncompromising spiral cheese pie exactly as the grandmothers—the *babches*—make it. Relying on accessible supermarket staples, the magic here is entirely methodological: aerating the yogurt with baking soda, blending fats to prevent a burnt crust, and the sacred post-bake "stifling" under a kitchen towel. It is a flawless, soul-comforting taste of the homeland that fits without fuss into a chaotic American weeknight.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>16 oz</b>	frozen phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the fridge</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	baking soda
<b>1/2 cup</b>	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>	<b>4 large</b>	eggs <i>room temperature</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	sunflower or canola oil	<b>12 oz</b>	Greek feta cheese block <i>crumbled by hand into distinct chunks</i>
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	plain whole-milk Greek yogurt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	club soda

## PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough properly.**

Commercial phyllo must be thawed overnight in the refrigerator, not on the counter, to prevent condensation from turning the sheets to mush.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 375°F and prepare the baking pan.**

Lightly grease a 10- or 12-inch round baking dish or cast-iron skillet, and whisk the melted butter and neutral oil together in a small bowl.

- 2. Activate the baking soda in the yogurt.**

Stir the baking soda directly into the Greek yogurt in a large mixing bowl and let it sit for 3 to 5 minutes until it bubbles and foams. This chemical reaction is the non-negotiable secret to a light, airy interior.

- 3. Finish the cheese filling.**

Whisk the eggs smoothly into the foaming yogurt, then gently fold in the crumbled feta and a splash of club soda.

- 4. Set up a rolling station for the phyllo.**

Unroll the thawed phyllo on a clean surface, keeping a slightly damp kitchen towel draped over the stack so the gossamer sheets do not dry out and shatter while you work.

**1. Assemble and fill the phyllo ropes.**

Lay down one sheet of phyllo, brush lightly with the butter-oil mixture, and top with a second sheet. Brush the top sheet, dot 3 to 4 tablespoons of the cheese filling evenly across the dough, and roll from the wide end into a long cylinder.

**2. Coil the banitsa into a spiral.**

Take the first rolled cylinder and coil it into a tight snail shape in the dead center of your greased pan. Repeat the rolling process, wrapping each new rope around the central spiral until the pan is completely full.

**3. Bake until perfectly golden.**

Brush the entire coiled top generously with any remaining butter and oil. Bake on the middle rack for 40 to 45 minutes until the pastry is puffed and boasts a deep, golden-brown crust.

**4. Stifle the hot pastry under a towel.**

The moment you pull the pan from the oven, flick a few drops of cold water across the hot crust so it hisses, then immediately cover the pan tightly with a clean, dry kitchen towel for 15 minutes.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The sacred stifling technique is not optional.**

Do not skip the post-bake water flick and towel cover; trapping the steam softens the brittle top layers into the perfectly tender bite that distinguishes a true homeland banitsa from a dry restaurant pastry.

● **Do not overstuff the rolls.**

The magic of banitsa lies in the stratification of thin dough and cheese, not thick pockets of dense filling, so keep it to just 3 or 4 tablespoons per roll.



# Mlechna Banitsa

Млечна баница

*mlech-nah bah-neet-sah*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know the stark line drawn between the savory cheese banitsa of the afternoon and the deeply comforting, sweet mlechna banitsa of Sunday mornings. In America, it's easy to find food blogs that confuse the two, telling you to mix feta and yogurt into your sweet milk pies. Bapche would be horrified. True mlechna banitsa relies on a pure, simple custard of fresh milk, eggs, and sugar, poured over a toasted, waterproofed armor of buttery phyllo. It has no starch, no flour, and absolutely no cheese. It's light, fragrant with vanilla and a whisper of lemon, and tastes exactly like the authentic warmth of a homeland kitchen.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>16 oz</b>	fine phyllo dough <i>thawed overnight in the fridge</i>	<b>5 large</b>	eggs
<b>8 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	vanilla extract
<b>4 cup</b>	whole milk	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	lemon zest <i>finely grated</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1/4 cup</b>	powdered sugar <i>for dusting</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough correctly.**

Leave the box of fine phyllo dough in the refrigerator overnight. Do not attempt to quick-thaw it on the counter, as the condensation will cause the delicate sheets to stick together and tear.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 350°F and prep your pan.**

Brush the bottom and sides of a 9x13-inch rectangular baking dish or a large 12-inch round pan with a little of the melted butter.

- 2. Fold the phyllo sheets using the traditional harmonika method.**

Take one sheet of phyllo and gently scrunch it from the long side to form a loosely pleated accordion or ruffled fan. Lay it in the pan, and repeat with the remaining sheets until the pan is packed loosely side-by-side like a sea of ruffled pastry.

- 3. Par-bake the buttered phyllo to build a waterproof armor.**

Drizzle the remaining melted butter evenly over the ruffled phyllo and bake for 15 to 20 minutes until golden brown and crispy. Do not skip this; it is the grandmother's secret to preventing the delicate dough from turning into a soggy paste when the milk is added.

**1. Warm the milk and sugar on the stove.**

While the pastry is baking, pour the milk and granulated sugar into a saucepan. Heat it over medium heat just until it's warm to the touch and the sugar is completely dissolved, being careful not to let it boil.

**2. Temper the warm milk into the beaten eggs.**

In a large bowl, whisk the eggs vigorously. Slowly pour the warm, sweetened milk into the eggs in a thin stream while whisking constantly so the eggs don't scramble, then whisk in the vanilla extract and lemon zest.

**3. Pour the custard over the hot pastry.**

Carefully pull the hot, golden phyllo from the oven and immediately pour the egg and milk mixture slowly and evenly over the top so the liquid seeps deep into all the accordion folds.

**4. Return the pan to the oven for the final bake.**

Bake for another 25 to 30 minutes until the custard is set and the top ruffles of the phyllo are a deep, rich golden brown. The center should no longer jiggle like liquid.

**5. Trap the steam immediately with a kitchen towel.**

Remove the pan from the oven and instantly cover the dish with a clean, dry kitchen towel for 10 to 15 minutes. This traps the evaporating steam, gently softening the sharpest edges of the crust so it slices beautifully without shattering.

**6. Dust with powdered sugar and serve.**

Dust generously with powdered sugar. Serve warm for a comforting breakfast, or chilled straight from the fridge the next day.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

● **Hack the timeline for an effortless morning bake.**

If you want this for breakfast without the early wake-up call, do the entire par-bake and folding step the night before, leaving the dry baked phyllo covered on the counter. In the morning, just whisk your milk, sugar, and eggs, pour over the pastry, and bake.



# Mekitsi

Мекици

*meh-KEET-see*

There is no aroma more evocative of a Bulgarian weekend than mekitsi frying in a hot skillet. These aren't pristine, uniform doughnuts; they are deeply nostalgic, blistered clouds of fried dough born in a village kitchen. The magic lies in a wet, sticky, dual-leavened dough that rests overnight, alongside the ultimate grandmother's secret: a splash of vinegar that miraculously prevents the dough from absorbing oil. It is an unapologetic, rustic masterpiece designed to be ripped apart by hand, swiped through homemade jam, and chased with a bite of salty sirene cheese.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 1/4 tsp</b>	active dry yeast	<b>1 tbsp</b>	white vinegar
<b>1 cup</b>	warm water	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil
<b>1 tbsp</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>3/4 cup</b>	plain whole milk Greek yogurt	<b>4 cup</b>	unbleached all-purpose flour
<b>1/4 cup</b>	whole milk	<b>3 cup</b>	sunflower oil
<b>1 tsp</b>	baking soda	<b>1/2 lb</b>	Bulgarian sirene cheese or firm feta <i>cut into thick slabs</i>
<b>1 large</b>	egg <i>brought to room temperature</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	strawberry or raspberry jam

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Bloom the yeast in a large mixing bowl.

Combine the warm water, active dry yeast, and granulated sugar. Stir gently and let it sit for about 10 minutes until it becomes highly foamy and smells strongly of yeast.

### 2. Quench the baking soda in the thinned yogurt.

In a separate small bowl, whisk the Greek yogurt, milk, and baking soda together. The acidity of the yogurt will immediately react with the soda, causing the mixture to puff up and become bubbly over the next few minutes.

### 3. Mix the wet ingredients into the foamy yeast.

Add the bubbly yogurt mixture, egg, white vinegar, one tablespoon of sunflower oil, and kosher salt into the large bowl with the yeast. Whisk everything together until fully combined.

- 1. Incorporate the flour without overworking or kneading the dough.**  
Add the flour one cup at a time, mixing with a sturdy wooden spoon. The dough will look incredibly sticky, shaggy, and wet. Stop mixing once the dry streaks disappear; attempting to knead it or add more flour for a smooth texture will ruin the light, airy crumb.
- 2. Retard the dough in the refrigerator overnight.**  
Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and leave it in the refrigerator for 8 to 24 hours. This slow, cold fermentation develops a complex flavor and relaxes the gluten so the highly-hydrated dough won't snap back when stretched.
- 3. Heat the frying oil in a heavy skillet.**  
Remove the dough from the fridge 30 minutes before frying to take the chill off. Pour about an inch and a half of sunflower oil into a heavy-bottomed skillet or Dutch oven and heat over medium-high until the oil reaches 350°F.
- 4. Stretch the dough outward from the center using heavily oiled hands.**  
Pour a couple of tablespoons of cooking oil into a small dish to coat your fingers—do not use flour on a board. Tear off a piece of wet dough slightly larger than a golf ball and use your oiled fingers to gently stretch it into a rustic, uneven circle about 5 inches across, leaving the edges thicker than the middle.
- 5. Fry the dough while basting the top with hot oil to create massive bubbles.**  
Carefully lower the stretched dough into the hot oil. Immediately use a spoon to splash some of the hot frying oil over the exposed top of the dough. This forces the trapped gases to violently expand upward, forming beautiful, crispy blisters. Fry for 1 to 2 minutes per side until deep golden brown.
- 6. Drain on paper towels and serve immediately.**  
Remove with a slotted spoon or tongs, allowing the excess oil to drip away. Serve hot, taking alternating bites of the crispy dough swiped in jam and the salty sirene cheese.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Replicating authentic Bulgarian yogurt.**

Standard American Greek yogurt is too heavily strained. Thinning it out with a small amount of milk perfectly mimics the tart, fluid consistency of Bulgarian kiselo mlyako, which is absolutely necessary to correctly trigger the baking soda.

- **The grandmother's grease-repelling secret.**

Traditional village recipes utilize a splash of strong fruit brandy (rakia) in the dough, which flashes into steam upon hitting the hot oil, creating a barrier that physically pushes grease out of the crumb. White vinegar performs the exact same chemical trick without altering the flavor.

- **Embrace the rustic, uneven shape.**

True mekitsi are meant to look handmade and irregular. Never use a rolling pin; it will crush the delicate pockets of gas developed by the dual-leavening system overnight.



# Klin

Родопски клин

*ro-DOP-ski klin*

Standard banitsa is the undisputed queen of the Bulgarian table, but deep in the rugged, isolated terrain of the Rhodope Mountains, you find her rustic, heavy-hitting cousin. This is Klin. It's a dense, comforting slab of starchy rice and sharp sheep's milk feta squeezed between two thick pastry crusts. The true grandmother's secret—the thing that separates an authentic homeland taste from diaspora imitations—is that you never put this in an oven. You fry it directly in a heavy skillet over the stovetop, slowly coaxing out a deeply nutty, golden crunch with a generous amount of butter. It is an

unpretentious, magnificent use of leftover white rice, meant to be eaten hot off the cast iron or pulled cold from the fridge the next morning alongside a glass of sharp, salty ayran.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	cooked medium-grain white rice <i>cooled completely</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>
<b>8 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta <i>crumbled</i>	<b>2 large</b>	country-style phyllo dough sheets <i>thawed</i>
<b>4 large</b>	eggs <i>lightly beaten</i>	<b>4 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>divided</i>
		<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral oil

## PREPARATION

- **Plan ahead for the rice.**

This recipe is the ultimate destiny for leftover white rice from the night before. Using day-old, chilled rice turns a time-consuming process into a simple weeknight assembly.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix the filling.**

In a large bowl, combine the thoroughly cooled cooked rice, crumbled feta, beaten eggs, and two tablespoons of melted butter into a cohesive, thick slurry.

- 2. Prepare the skillet.**

Place a heavy ten or twelve-inch skillet over medium-low heat, melting two tablespoons of butter with the neutral oil to prevent burning, then remove from the heat.

**1. Build the base.**

Drape one large sheet of the thick country-style phyllo across the skillet so it covers the bottom with the excess hanging over the edges.

**2. Add the filling and seal.**

Pour the rice and cheese mixture into the pan, spreading it to an even thickness. Lay the second sheet of phyllo directly on top and fold the overhanging bottom edges inward to seal the pie completely.

**3. Fry the bottom crust.**

Return the skillet to medium-low heat and cook for ten to twelve minutes. Rotate the pan a quarter-turn every few minutes to ensure the heat distributes evenly and creates a perfect golden crust without burning.

**4. Execute the flip.**

When the bottom is deeply browned and crispy, place a large flat lid or cutting board over the skillet. Confidently invert the pan to drop the pie onto the lid, then drop the remaining two tablespoons of butter into the empty hot pan.

**5. Finish the second side.**

Once the butter is foaming, carefully slide the pie off the lid back into the skillet, raw side down. Cook for another ten minutes until the crust shatters to the touch and the interior is firmly set.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Rice temperature matters.**

Never mix warm rice into the raw eggs and cheese, or you will end up with prematurely scrambled eggs instead of a cohesive pie filling.

● **Phyllo alternatives.**

If you can only find standard, paper-thin phyllo dough, use a stack of three to four sheets for the bottom and another stack for the top, brushing lightly with melted butter between each layer to mimic the thicker country-style dough.



# Popara

Попара

*poh-PAH-rah*

There is perhaps no dish more universally tied to the Bulgarian childhood than popara. Born out of an absolute, beautiful frugality to use up stale bread, it is a rustic bread-mash that transcends its humble ingredients. The real magic happens when the sharp, salty bite of white brine cheese meets the deeply comforting, floral aroma of hot linden tea, all smoothed out by melting butter and a pinch of sugar. It might sound unusual to American palates to mix tea, cheese, and bread, but one bite of those perfectly steamed morsels will transport you straight back to a grandmother's kitchen.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 cup</b>	rustic white bread or sourdough <i>torn into bite-sized chunks</i>	<b>1 1/2 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta in brine <i>crumbled</i>
<b>1 small</b>	linden flower tea bag	<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>at room temperature</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	boiling water	<b>1 tsp</b>	granulated sugar

## PREPARATION

- **Spread the torn bread chunks out on a plate or baking sheet to dry uncovered overnight.**

Bapche's true secret is patience. If you use soft, fresh sandwich bread, you will end up with a sad, gelatinous paste. The bread must be hard and dry to the touch so it can drink up the hot tea while maintaining its structure.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Steep the linden tea in the boiling water for three to five minutes until fragrant and golden.**

Remove and discard the tea bag once it is fully steeped.

- 2. Place the completely dried bread chunks into a deep soup bowl.**
- 3. Layer the crumbled feta, butter, and sugar directly on top of the dry bread.**

- 4. Pour the steaming hot tea over the bowl's contents and immediately cover it tightly with a plate.**

This is the essential steaming technique known as *задушаване*. The trapped steam gently hydrates the bread into distinct, satisfying morsels without aggressively agitating it into mush.

- 5. Let the covered bowl sit entirely undisturbed for three to five minutes.**

- 1. Remove the plate and gently toss with a spoon just enough to distribute the melted butter and softened cheese.**

Eat immediately while hot and deeply fragrant.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **For a grown-up, savory variation, skip the tea and sugar in favor of toasted paprika.**

Melt the butter in a small saucepan. Once foaming, stir in a half-teaspoon of sweet paprika and let it toast for five seconds. Pour one cup of boiling salted water into the pan, then pour that savory red broth over your dry bread and feta, steeping covered exactly as before.



# Princesi s Kaima i Kashkaval

Принцеси с кайма и кашкавал

*prin-TSEH-see s kai-MAH ee kash-kah-VAHL*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of rendering pork fat and piney summer savory on a Saturday morning is permanently burned into your sensory memory. Princesi—literally "princesses"—are the ultimate utilitarian comfort food. Born out of an era where stretching ingredients was a survival skill, this dish elevates slightly stale bread, minced meat, and yellow cheese into something transcendent. It's street food, school canteen food, and home food all rolled into one. The secret to separating a grandmother's masterpiece

from a soggy, sad American patty melt? A paper-thin butter barrier to protect the bread, and binding the meat with an egg and a splash of milk so it doesn't shrink into a puck under the broiler.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>8-10 slices</b>	standard sandwich bread <i>slightly stale</i>	<b>2 large</b>	eggs
<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temperature</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	whole milk
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground pork	<b>1 tsp</b>	summer savory (chubritsa)
<b>1/2 lb</b>	80/20 ground beef	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	Monterey Jack or young Gouda cheese <i>grated on the large holes of a box grater</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt
		<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Preheat the oven and prepare the hardware.

Set an oven rack in the upper-middle position and preheat to 400°F. Line a large rimmed baking sheet with foil and place a wire cooling rack inside. The wire rack mimics the top-down radiant heat of a classic Bulgarian parti gril, allowing air to circulate so the bread doesn't get soggy on the bottom.

### 2. Apply the butter barrier.

Lay the bread out on a cutting board and spread a paper-thin layer of softened butter across each slice, going all the way to the edges. This waterproofs the bread against the raw meat juices.

### 3. Mix the kaima.

In a large bowl, aggressively mash together the ground pork, ground beef, grated cheese, eggs, milk, summer savory, paprika, salt, and pepper. You want a uniform, slightly wet, sticky paste.

**1. Frost the bread.**

Divide the meat mixture evenly among the slices, using about 2 to 3 tablespoons each. Spread it in a thin, even layer completely over the edges of the crusts so the bread doesn't burn before the meat cooks.

**2. Bake the Princesi.**

Transfer the loaded bread to the wire rack and bake for 12 to 15 minutes, until the meat is sizzling and the cheese forms beautiful golden-brown caramelized spots.

Broil for the final 60 seconds if you want an extra crispy top, watching them like a hawk.

**3. Cool and serve.**

Let them rest for a minute so you don't burn the roof of your mouth, then serve immediately alongside a cold glass of ayran or milk.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The Strandzhanka Exception.**

If your family hails from the coastal city of Burgas, you likely know these as Strandzhanki, and you'd skip the cheese entirely. For the rest of Bulgaria, the classic Princesa demands it.

● **Don't skip the chubritsa.**

Summer savory is the undisputed soul of Bulgarian savory cooking. Replacing it with generic thyme or oregano will destroy the authenticity of the dish.



# Parzheni Filiiki

Пържени филийки

*par-zhe-ni fi-liy-ki*

In a Bulgarian household, weekend mornings don't smell like maple syrup and vanilla. They smell like hot oil, sizzling eggs, and the sharp tang of brine cheese. This is the Balkans' answer to French toast—a fiercely savory dish born from the peasant necessity of never throwing away bread. The genius lies in a single grandmotherly secret: whisking a spoonful of flour into the batter to form a micro-crust that seals the bread against the grease. Eaten hot from the skillet, you alternate bites with salty feta and sweet sour cherry preserves. It is straightforward, deeply comforting, and tastes exactly like the old country.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1/2 med</b>	country white bread <i>sliced 1/2-inch thick and left out overnight to dry</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	salt
<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1/4 cup</b>	sunflower oil
<b>100 ml</b>	whole milk	<b>4 oz</b>	firm sheeps milk feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>
<b>3 large</b>	eggs	<b>1/4 cup</b>	sour cherry preserves

## PREPARATION

- **Stale bread is mandatory.**

If your bread is too fresh, it will disintegrate in the batter. Lay the slices out on a wire rack on the counter the night before you plan to cook.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Create the slurry.

In a wide, shallow bowl, whisk the flour with just enough of the milk to form a smooth, lump-free paste.

### 2. Build the batter.

Add the remaining milk, eggs, and salt to the bowl, whisking vigorously until the mixture is uniform and pale yellow.

### 3. Heat the oil.

Place a large, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat and pour in enough sunflower oil to generously coat the bottom. Let it heat until a drop of batter sizzles instantly upon contact.

### 4. Dip, don't soak.

Working in batches, dip a slice of stale bread into the batter for no more than three seconds per side. Let the excess drip off. Do not let the bread sit in the liquid; the goal is a protective outer coating, not a soggy, oil-logged sponge.

**1. Fry to golden perfection.**

Carefully lay the coated slices into the hot oil. Fry for about two minutes on the first side until deeply golden brown and a crispy crust forms, then flip and fry for another minute or so.

**2. Drain and serve.**

Transfer the fried bread immediately to a paper towel-lined plate to absorb excess surface oil. Serve hot, letting everyone at the table construct their own bites with the crumbled cheese and preserves.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Do not use butter.**

Butter burns at the temperatures needed to instantly set the egg batter. Sunflower oil has a high smoke point and provides the authentic, slightly savory flavor profile intrinsic to Balkan cooking. Canola or vegetable oil can be substituted.

● **Keep it savory.**

Do not add vanilla, sugar, or cinnamon to the batter. The magic of this dish relies entirely on the post-fry collision of hot, savory bread with cold, salty cheese and sweet jam.



# Mish-Mash

Миш-маш

If you ask ten Bulgarians how to make Mish-Mash, you will get ten different recipes—and at least one argument. But if you want the real deal, the kind that tastes exactly like a late summer evening in a village backyard, you need sweet roasted peppers, onions, and a little patience. It's a magnificent, fast mess born of necessity, relying entirely on the magic of reducing your tomatoes until they're rich and sticky, then gently folding in eggs and chunks of brine cheese at the absolute last second. Serve it straight out of the pan with crusty bread to mop up the juices; it's mandatory.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 tbsp</b>	neutral oil	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	chubritsa or dried oregano
<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>4 large</b>	eggs <i>lightly beaten with a fork</i>
<b>14 oz</b>	jarred roasted red peppers <i>thoroughly drained and chopped into bite-sized pieces</i>	<b>5 oz</b>	Bulgarian sirene or high-quality sheep's milk feta <i>crumbled into large chunks</i>
<b>1 large clove</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	canned diced tomatoes <i>drained of excess liquid</i>		

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Sauté the onions and peppers until perfectly sweet and tender.

Heat the oil and butter in a large, deep skillet over medium heat. Add the diced onion and cook until completely soft and translucent, about 5 to 7 minutes. Stir in the chopped roasted peppers and garlic, and cook for another 3 minutes until fragrant and slightly caramelized.

### 2. Simmer the tomatoes down to a thick, chunky paste.

Add the diced tomatoes, chubritsa, and black pepper. Let the mixture simmer over medium-low heat for 10 to 15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the water completely evaporates. Rushing this step guarantees a watery, disappointing soup instead of a rich base.

### 3. Gently fold in the eggs to achieve a soft, creamy veil.

Pour the lightly beaten eggs evenly over the hot tomato-pepper mixture. Let them sit untouched for a few seconds to slightly set on the bottom, then use a wooden spoon to slowly fold and stir. Cook for 2 to 3 minutes until the eggs are just set but still incredibly moist—do not overcook them into dry, hard curds.

**1. Remove the pan from the heat before folding in the cheese.**

Take the skillet completely off the stove and add the crumbled cheese. Gently fold it into the warm eggs a maximum of two or three times. The residual heat will partially melt the edges, but the cheese must remain in distinct, intact chunks for crucial bursts of salty tang.

**2. Garnish and serve immediately.**

Sprinkle generously with fresh chopped parsley. Taste for salt, adding a pinch only if the cheese wasn't salty enough, and serve straight from the pan with warm, crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Avoid pre-crumbled, dry feta at all costs.**

To achieve the correct texture and melt, you must buy a block of feta packed in brine and crumble it yourself by hand. Dry crumbles will not soften properly.

● **Hold the salt until the end.**

Bulgarian sirene and brined feta are both aggressively salty. Wait to season the dish with additional salt until after the cheese has been incorporated and tasted.



# Strandzhanka

Странджанка

*strahn-JAHN-kah*

A true Strandzhanka from the Black Sea coast is nothing like the ubiquitous, oven-baked Princessa. It is rustic, utilitarian street food: ground meat pounded with summer savory, spread thin onto crusty bread, and thrown meat-side down onto a ripping hot grill. The secret is kneading bubbly carbonated water directly into the meat, transforming it into a sticky paste that clings fiercely to the bread and stays perfectly juicy while it chars in the cast iron.

## INGREDIENTS

**1/2 lb** ground pork

**1/2 lb** ground beef  
*80/20 lean-to-fat ratio*

<b>1/4 cup</b>	carbonated water	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 tbsp</b>	chubritsa	<b>1 med loaf</b>	rustic white bread <i>cut diagonally into 1/2-inch slices</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral cooking oil
<b>1 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	lyutenitsa
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	ground cumin	<b>1 cup</b>	ayran

## PREPARATION

- **The meat paste can be made well ahead of time.**

Mix the meat and spices up to two days in advance and keep it tightly sealed in the refrigerator until you are ready to cook.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the meats, carbonated water, and spices in a large bowl.**  
Knead and squeeze the mixture vigorously with your hands for three to four minutes until it transforms from crumbly ground meat into a cohesive, sticky paste.
- 2. Cover the bowl tightly and refrigerate for at least four hours or overnight.**  
This resting period is non-negotiable, as it allows the proteins to extract and bind so the meat stays firmly attached to the bread on the grill.
- 3. Spread a thin, even layer of the meat paste over each slice of bread.**  
Using a wet butter knife or spoon, ensure you spread the meat entirely over the crusty edges of the bread to cap them and prevent them from burning in the pan.
- 4. Heat a heavy cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until lightly smoking.**  
Brush the pan very lightly with the neutral cooking oil.
- 5. Place the bread meat-side down directly onto the hot cast iron.**  
Press down gently with a spatula so the entire surface makes contact, and let it sear undisturbed for three to four minutes to develop a deep, smoky char.

**1. Flip the bread and toast the underside for just under a minute.**

Remove the bread from the pan, instantly spread a generous spoonful of lyutenitsa over the hot meat, and serve immediately with an ice-cold glass of ayran.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Source real summer savory.**

If you absolutely cannot find chubritsa, use a half-and-half blend of dried oregano and thyme, but the true homeland flavor relies on authentic summer savory.



# Kiselo Mlyako s Med i Orehi

Кисело мляко с мед и орехи

*kee-seh-lo mlya-ko s med ee oh-reh-hee*

If you ask any Bulgarian what truly tastes like home, the answer almost always circles back to *kiselo mlyako*. Thanks to a unique native bacteria, true Bulgarian yogurt has a vibrant, unapologetic tartness that cuts through sweetness in a way generic grocery store tubs never will. To reproduce the decadent texture a grandmother might serve for a weekend breakfast, you practice the ancient, patient art of making *tsedeno*—straining the yogurt overnight until it becomes a velvety, thick cream. Layered with raw local honey and a heavy handful of toasted walnuts, it is a three-ingredient masterpiece that demands no embellishments, just the honest, elemental taste of the Balkans.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 cup</b>	authentic plain Bulgarian yogurt	<b>1/2 cup</b>	raw walnuts
		<b>4 tbsp</b>	raw honey

## PREPARATION

- **Strain the yogurt the night before.**

Line a fine-mesh sieve with clean cheesecloth or thick paper towels and set it over a deep bowl. Pour in the yogurt, cover loosely, and refrigerate overnight to drain the whey, leaving you with luxurious tsedeno kiselo mlyako by morning.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Toast the walnuts to awaken their essential oils.**

Place a dry skillet over medium heat. Add the walnuts and toast for 4 to 5 minutes, shaking the pan frequently until they smell rich and fragrant. Transfer them to a board to cool, then roughly chop or crush them in a mortar and pestle.

- 2. Portion the strained yogurt.**

Divide the thick, strained yogurt between two small serving bowls. Use the back of your spoon to create a small swirl or well in the center of the yogurt to catch the honey.

- 3. Drizzle and garnish heavily.**

Pour the liquid honey generously over the yogurt, allowing it to pool in the swirls, then sprinkle the toasted walnuts over the top.

- 4. Serve immediately without stirring.**

Resist the urge to mix the bowl into a paste; let your spoon cut cleanly through the layers so every bite offers a distinct hit of tart dairy, floral sweetness, and earthy crunch.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **The weeknight Greek yogurt fallback.**

If you cannot find true Bulgarian yogurt, buy a high-quality, full-fat plain Greek yogurt. It is already strained, so you can skip the overnight step entirely. To mimic the missing homeland tang, stir a half teaspoon of fresh lemon juice into the yogurt before plating.

- **Warm crystallized honey.**

If your raw honey has crystallized, simply place the jar in a bowl of warm water for a few minutes until it flows freely again.





# The Meze Table & Summer Salads

*The ritual of the gathering: vibrant, no-cook salads and dips that start the meal and save the weeknight.*

The Bulgarian meal doesn't tiptoe in with a polite little starter. It arrives as a sudden, vibrant collision of raw garlic, sharp sirene cheese, and cold cucumbers—the meze table. In the old country, this spread is the ritualistic preamble to a long, loud evening fueled by treacherous amounts of rakia. But here, on a

punishing Tuesday night after a long commute, these dishes take on a different kind of nobility. They are the unapologetic, zero-heat saviors of the American weeknight.

You don't need a stove to pull off a minor miracle. A bowl of ice-cold tarator or a hastily assembled board of cured lukanka and bright, acidic Shopska salata buys you time and sanity. It's the food of hot, dusty Balkan summers transplanted into the frantic rhythm of the diaspora. Whether you're eating it standing up at the kitchen counter or crowded around a coffee table, it does the job. It tastes like survival, and it tastes like home.





# Shopska Salata

Шопска салата

*shop-ska sa-la-ta*

Everyone assumes this dish was forged in a rustic Balkan village centuries ago. It wasn't. It was invented in the 1950s by master chefs at the state-run Balkantourist agency to match the white, green, and red stripes of the Bulgarian flag. But it quickly became the absolute taste of a diaspora summer. Forget the watered-down Mediterranean versions you find in the States; making this right on a weeknight means following three non-negotiable Grandmother secrets. You must use sunflower oil instead of olive oil, grab a jar of roasted red peppers for

smoky depth, and grate a block of brined feta into a snowy mountain over the top. It melts instantly on the tongue, cuts through the crunch, and tastes exactly like home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>3 large</b>	summer tomatoes <i>cored and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil
<b>1 med</b>	English cucumber <i>unpeeled, cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar
<b>1/2 cup</b>	jarred roasted red peppers <i>rinsed, patted dry, and cut into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1/2 med</b>	red onion <i>cut into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	<b>5 oz</b>	feta cheese in brine
		<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
		<b>1 small</b>	Kalamata olive

## PREPARATION

- **Soak sharp onions in ice water.**

If your raw red onion smells overly sharp or pungent, soak the chopped pieces in a bowl of ice water for 5 minutes, then drain well before adding them to the salad.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine and dress the chopped vegetables.**

Toss the tomatoes, cucumber, roasted red peppers, and onion in a large bowl with the kosher salt, sunflower oil, and red wine vinegar until well coated, then mix in half the chopped parsley.

- 2. Form the salad into a mountain.**

Transfer the dressed vegetables and all their juices from the bottom of the bowl to a shallow serving platter, gently shaping them into a small mound.

**1. Grate the cheese into a snowy blanket.**

Using the large holes of a box grater, grate the block of feta directly over the vegetables until they are completely covered in a thick, fluffy layer of cheese. Do not mix it in.

**2. Garnish and serve immediately without tossing.**

Sprinkle the remaining parsley over the top. For a classic, old-school homeland restaurant touch, place a single black Kalamata olive right at the peak of the mountain.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Respect the sunflower oil.**

Extra virgin olive oil is a Mediterranean habit that masks the true Bulgarian taste. Sunflower oil provides the historically accurate, neutral, and slightly nutty background this salad requires.

● **Never mix the cheese.**

Stirring the cheese into the dressed vegetables turns the salad into a cloudy, muddy mess. The cheese must remain a pristine, grated blanket on top so it melts on the tongue with each bite.



# Snezhanka

Снежанка

*sneh-ZHAHN-kah*

For first-generation Bulgarian-Americans, the smell of fresh dill and garlic hitting a sharp, fatty yogurt is the ultimate trigger of childhood nostalgia. Invented by the state-run Balkantourist enterprise in the late seventies, Snezhanka quickly evolved from a restaurant staple to an unquestioned cornerstone of the home meze table. It looks like Greek tzatziki, but don't be fooled—authentic Snezhanka is thicker, richer, and relies on a hit of sunflower oil. The real grandmother's secret here is moisture control. Drain your pickles ruthlessly and use the thickest full-fat Greek yogurt you can find. It is a fuss-free, straight-to-the-point masterpiece built for a busy weeknight and a cold glass of rakia.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 cup</b>	full-fat plain Greek yogurt	<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil
<b>1 cup</b>	dill pickles <i>finely diced</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>2 clove</b>	garlic <i>peeled</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	walnuts <i>very finely chopped</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	coarse kosher salt	<b>1 med</b>	black olive

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Drain the pickles.

Place the diced pickles between double layers of paper towels and gently squeeze out the excess brine, letting them sit for ten minutes so they don't water down the yogurt.

### 2. Make the garlic paste.

In a mortar and pestle, grind the garlic cloves and coarse salt together until a smooth paste forms, which breaks down the harsh, raw bite of the allium.

### 3. Whip the base.

In a mixing bowl, vigorously whisk the Greek yogurt, garlic paste, and sunflower oil together until the mixture is completely smooth and glossy.

### 4. Fold and chill.

Gently fold in the drained pickles, fresh dill, and most of the walnuts, then cover tightly and refrigerate for at least one hour to let the flavors marry.

### 5. Serve cold.

Transfer to a serving bowl and garnish with the reserved walnuts, the black olive pressed into the center, and a tiny drizzle of sunflower oil.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Summer Fresh Variation**

To use fresh cucumbers instead of pickles, halve a large English cucumber and scoop out the watery seed cavity. Dice the firm flesh finely and fold it in, but do not salt the salad until the very last minute before serving to preserve the thick texture.

- **The Garlic Trick**

If you lack a mortar and pestle, mince the garlic on a cutting board, sprinkle with the coarse salt, and use the flat side of your chef's knife to mash and scrape it into a paste.



# Tarator

Таратор

*tah-rah-TOR*

Tarator is the undisputed king of the Bulgarian summer—a wildly refreshing, no-cook soup built for sweltering heat and deep comfort. It is a masterpiece of culinary pragmatism that relies not on heat, but on crisp textures and a very specific sequence of assembly. Resist the urge to grate the cucumbers into mush or dump everything into a bowl at once. Treat the humble ingredients with respect, practice your knife skills, and pre-emulsify the aromatics. The result is an ice-cold, garlicky, dill-flecked cure-all that tastes exactly like a village grandmother’s kitchen.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 large</b>	Persian cucumbers <i>finely diced into 1/4-inch cubes</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil or extra virgin olive oil
<b>3 clove</b>	garlic <i>peeled and finely minced or crushed to a paste</i>	<b>1/3 cup</b>	walnuts <i>finely chopped or crushed</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>2 cup</b>	plain whole milk yogurt
<b>1/3 cup</b>	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	cold filtered water

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Dice the cucumbers finely, resisting any urge to grate them.**  
Grating turns the soup into mush; proper dicing preserves the crisp, crunchy texture that contrasts beautifully with the creamy base. Place the diced cucumbers into a large mixing bowl.
- 2. Macerate the cucumbers with the aromatics and oil.**  
Add the garlic paste, chopped dill, walnuts, salt, and oil to the bowl with the cucumbers. Toss everything vigorously to coat. Mixing the oil with the solids first helps emulsify the fat, preventing an unappetizing oil slick from floating on top of your final soup.
- 3. Vigorously whisk the yogurt until completely smooth.**  
In a separate medium bowl, beat the plain yogurt with a whisk or fork until it is creamy and entirely free of lumps. If you pour water over thick, unwhisked yogurt, it will break into an unsightly, chalky mess.
- 4. Combine and thin the soup.**  
Pour the smoothed yogurt over the cucumber mixture and stir to combine. Gradually pour in the cold water, whisking continuously, until you reach a thin, drinkable consistency.

## 1. **Chill thoroughly and adjust seasoning.**

Taste for salt, remembering that cold temperatures mute flavors. Transfer the bowl to the refrigerator for at least an hour to allow the garlic and dill to infuse into the dairy, then serve ice cold.

### CHEF'S NOTES

- **A note on the yogurt.**

True Bulgarian yogurt possesses a distinct tang from the *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* strain. To mimic this tartness in American supermarket yogurt, you can add a small squeeze of fresh lemon juice or a half-teaspoon of white vinegar.

- **Beware the blooming garlic.**

Raw garlic intensifies as it sits in liquid. If you are making this soup ahead of time for a weeknight dinner, limit the garlic to two cloves to avoid it becoming overpowering by the time it reaches the table.

- **Seek out sunflower oil.**

While extra-virgin olive oil is a perfectly fine modern substitute, a high-quality, cold-pressed sunflower oil will impart the warm, slightly nutty flavor that is highly authentic to an Eastern European village kitchen.



# Katak

Катък с печени чушки

*kah-TUHK s PEH-cheh-nee CHOO-shkee*

True, ancient katak is a shepherd's alchemy of boiled late-summer sheep's milk left to ferment in a dark well. But on a Tuesday night in Ohio, no one is doing that. Modern Bulgaria figured out a brilliant workaround: thick strained yogurt mashed with good sheep's milk feta and heavily drained roasted peppers. It's an honest, pungent, garlic-laced masterpiece designed to be dragged through with crusty bread and washed down with a cold glass of rakia. No pretense, just the undeniable taste of home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	whole-milk Greek yogurt or labneh	<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil or extra-virgin olive oil
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled from a block in brine</i>	<b>1/3 cup</b>	walnuts <i>finely chopped and lightly toasted</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	roasted red bell peppers <i>drained aggressively and finely diced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>2 med cloves</b>	garlic <i>pressed or finely minced</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
		<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Aggressively drain the peppers.**

Moisture is the absolute enemy of katak. If using jarred roasted peppers, rinse them and wring them out with paper towels until they are bone dry before chopping.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mash the feta by hand.**

In a medium mixing bowl, use a fork to thoroughly crush the feta until no large lumps remain. Resist the urge to use a food processor, which will destroy the rustic texture and turn this spread into a runny smoothie.

- 2. Bind the dairy.**

Fold the thick yogurt or labneh into the crushed feta, stirring vigorously until it forms a creamy, cohesive base.

- 3. Fold in the flavor.**

Add the diced peppers, minced garlic, oil, and black pepper, stirring gently to combine, then fold in half of the toasted walnuts.

**1. Rest the mixture.**

Smooth the top of the dip, cover tightly, and refrigerate for at least two hours or overnight; this mandatory pause allows the garlic to mellow and the dry cheese to absorb any residual moisture.

**2. Garnish and serve.**

Transfer to a shallow dish, drizzle with a little extra oil, and scatter the remaining walnuts, sweet paprika, and chopped parsley over the top.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The moisture control secret.**

If your katak turns into a pink, runny soup, your peppers were too wet or your yogurt too thin. Buy pre-strained labneh or an ultra-thick Greek yogurt to guarantee the right dense, buttery texture.

● **Respect the cheese.**

Avoid pre-crumbled American cow's milk feta; the anti-caking agents prevent it from melting into the spread. Seek out a block of sheep's milk feta sitting in its brine for that sharp, earthy tang.



# Kyopolou

кьопоолу

*kyo-po-oh-loo*

There is an intoxicating smell that defines late summer in Bulgaria: the scent of eggplants and sweet peppers blistering over open fires. Kyopolou is the ultimate expression of that harvest, a humble, rustic dip the old folks affectionately call 'green caviar.' Growing up in the States, you might have seen this approximated with a food processor and olive oil, making it look a bit like a confused baba ganoush. But to unlock the true secret of a Bulgarian grandmother's kitchen on a busy weeknight, you need only two things: a heavy hand with a fork and the nutty, unapologetic richness of unrefined sunflower oil.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 med</b>	Italian eggplants <i>pricked a few times with a fork</i>	<b>3 large cloves</b>	garlic <i>peeled</i>
<b>2 med</b>	red bell peppers	<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1 med</b>	green bell pepper	<b>3 tbsp</b>	unrefined sunflower oil
<b>1 med</b>	Roma tomato <i>peeled, seeded, and finely chopped</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	apple cider vinegar
		<b>1/4 cup</b>	flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Prepare the tomato carefully to prevent a watery dip.**

It is crucial to peel the Roma tomato, halve it, and thoroughly squeeze out the watery seeds before finely chopping the flesh.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Blister the vegetables under the broiler.**

Preheat your oven broiler to high and line a sturdy baking sheet with foil. Place the eggplants and whole peppers on the sheet, broiling and turning with tongs every few minutes until the pepper skins are entirely blackened and the eggplants have collapsed completely.

- 2. Steam the charred vegetables to loosen their skins.**

As soon as they come out of the oven, transfer the hot peppers and eggplants to separate bowls and cover tightly with a plate or plastic wrap, letting them steam in their own heat for 15 minutes.

- 3. Peel and drain the eggplant.**

Once cool enough to handle, peel the skins off all the vegetables and discard the stems and seeds. Place the eggplant flesh in a mesh strainer over a bowl for 10 minutes, pressing lightly to release and discard the bitter, dark liquid.

**1. Chop the vegetables aggressively by hand.**

Leave the food processor in the cupboard. Transfer the drained eggplant and peeled peppers to a cutting board and aggressively mince them with a heavy chef's knife, then move them to a large mixing bowl along with the chopped Roma tomato.

**2. Crush the garlic into a paste.**

Place the garlic cloves on your cutting board, sprinkle the kosher salt directly over them, and use the flat side of your knife to repeatedly mash the garlic and salt together until it forms a smooth paste.

**3. Emulsify the dip with a heavy fork.**

Add the garlic paste to the vegetables and vigorously mash everything together with a sturdy fork or potato masher, pouring in the sunflower oil and vinegar until the liquid is fully absorbed and the mixture looks cohesive but pleasantly textured.

**4. Fold in the parsley and let the dip rest.**

Stir in the chopped parsley, then cover the bowl and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to allow the sharp, raw garlic to mellow and the smoky flavors to marry before serving.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The secret is entirely in the fat.**

Unrefined, cold-pressed sunflower oil (sharlan) provides a nutty, toasted profile that olive oil simply cannot replicate. If you cannot find it at a European market, substitute 2 tablespoons of neutral sunflower oil mixed with 1 tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil.

● **Texture dictates quality.**

Authentic Kyopolou was traditionally mashed in a wooden mortar. Using a food processor turns the dip into a watery puree, completely ruining the mouthfeel. Take the extra few minutes to chop and mash by hand.



# Ovcharska Salata

Овчарска салата

*ov-CHAR-ska sah-LAH-tah*

If Shopska Salata is the undisputed king of the Bulgarian summer table, Ovcharska Salata is the indulgent uncle who shows up ready to feast. Despite the rustic shepherd's salad moniker, this isn't ancient pastoral grub. It was engineered in the 1960s by the state-run hospitality agency, Balkantourist, to showcase the nation's best produce. It worked so well it immediately became the authentic standard in every Bulgarian home. To make it taste exactly like a summer night in Sofia, skip the olive oil for sunflower oil, and never use raw mushrooms—only jarred, marinated ones possess the sharp acidity needed to cut through the rich meat and cheese.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>3 large</b>	Beefsteak or Heirloom tomatoes <i>cored and cut into large wedges</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	thick-cut deli ham <i>diced into cubes</i>
<b>1 large</b>	English cucumber <i>sliced into thick half-moons</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	Provolone cheese <i>cut into small cubes or matchsticks</i>
<b>1/2 med</b>	red onion <i>sliced into very thin half-moons</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	Bulgarian feta or Greek feta in brine <i>left whole until grating</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	jarred roasted red peppers <i>rinsed, patted dry, and roughly chopped</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil
<b>1 cup</b>	jarred marinated button mushrooms <i>drained well and halved if large</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar
<b>1/4 cup</b>	Kalamata-style olives <i>pitted</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	sea salt
		<b>2 large</b>	large eggs <i>hard-boiled, peeled, and quartered</i>
		<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Hard-boil the eggs in advance.**

Boil the eggs for 8 to 10 minutes to achieve a firm yolk, then chill in an ice bath before peeling.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Toss the chunky vegetables.**

In Bulgarian cooking, we cut salads 'edra'—large, rustic, and juicy. In a large, wide serving bowl, gently mix the tomatoes, cucumber, red onion, roasted peppers, and marinated mushrooms.

- 2. Dress the canvas.**

Drizzle the sunflower oil and vinegar over the vegetables with a pinch of sea salt. Let it sit for five minutes so the tomato juices mingle with the oil to create a vibrant dressing at the bottom of the bowl.

**1. Layer the rich ingredients.**

Scatter the diced ham, provolone cubes, and olives evenly over the top of the marinated vegetables. Do not aggressively stir at this point, or the salad will turn mushy.

**2. Grate the cheese like snowfall.**

Using the coarse side of a box grater, shred the block of feta in a thick, snowy layer directly over the entire salad, covering the ingredients beneath.

**3. Crown the salad and serve.**

Arrange the quartered eggs elegantly on top of the cheese layer and scatter the fresh parsley. Bring the bowl to the table as is, allowing guests to dig through the snowy cheese down to the juicy vegetables below.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Stick to sunflower oil.**

Westerners reflexively reach for extra-virgin olive oil, but unrefined sunflower oil is the true olfactory secret to capturing that authentic Eastern European terroir.

● **Do not use pre-crumbled feta.**

It is coated in anti-caking agents. Buy a block of Bulgarian Sirene or Greek feta preserved in brine for the proper creamy, acidic bite.

● **The Kashkaval stand-in.**

Traditional Kashkaval is a semi-hard, mild yellow cheese. Provolone is the premier, easy-to-find weeknight substitute that mimics its buttery elasticity perfectly.



# Zelena Salata

Зелена салата

*ze-LE-na sa-LA-ta*

If there is a single dish that signals the death of the long Balkan winter, it is Zelena Salata. This isn't the bastardized internet version cluttered with feta and yogurt; this is the mandatory, unadulterated spring crunch served alongside Easter lamb or chased with a glass of cold rakia. The secret isn't a rare spice, it's a grandmother's rigid adherence to technique: tear the lettuce by hand so it doesn't oxidize, dry the leaves obsessively so the dressing clings, and, crucially, abandon your fancy extra-virgin olive oil for the golden, glorious sunflower oil of the homeland. It is straightforward, deeply comforting, and tastes exactly like home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 large head</b>	Romaine lettuce <i>leaves separated</i>	<b>3 large</b>	eggs
<b>1 med</b>	English hothouse cucumber <i>peeled in stripes and sliced into thin half-moons</i>	<b>1/3 cup</b>	Kalamata olives <i>pitted</i>
<b>1 small bunch</b>	red radishes <i>trimmed and sliced into paper-thin rounds</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil
<b>4 med</b>	scallions <i>roots trimmed and finely chopped</i>	<b>1 1/2 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar
		<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt <i>to taste</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Hard-boil and quarter the eggs.**

Place the eggs in a small saucepan, cover with cold water, and bring to a rolling boil. Remove from heat, cover for 10 minutes, then plunge into an ice bath before peeling and quartering.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Wash and exhaustively dry the greens.**

Water is the enemy of a good dressing. Wash the lettuce leaves thoroughly under cold water and use a salad spinner or paper towels to dry them completely so the dressing doesn't water down into a sad, tasteless puddle.

- 2. Tear the lettuce by hand into a large serving bowl.**

Discard the tough bottom stems and tear the leaves into bite-sized pieces. Never use a knife; metal oxidizes the edges and kills the crispness of the green.

- 3. Add the cucumber, radishes, and scallions to the bowl.**

Toss the prepared vegetables in with the dry, torn lettuce leaves.

- 4. Dress the salad only seconds before it hits the table.**

Drizzle the sunflower oil and vinegar over the vegetables, sprinkle generously with salt, and toss thoroughly with your hands until every leaf is slick.

## 1. **Garnish with the eggs and olives.**

Arrange the quartered eggs and olives over the top of the tossed greens and serve immediately, ideally with crusty bread to mop up the yolk-enriched dressing at the bottom.

### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Respect the oil.**

If you cannot find high-quality sunflower oil in your supermarket, use a neutral vegetable or canola oil. Extra-virgin olive oil will overpower the delicate spring vegetables and fundamentally ruin the authentic flavor profile.

- **Prep ahead for busy weeknights.**

Wash, dry, and tear the lettuce, boil the eggs, and slice all the vegetables up to a day in advance. Store the greens in a sealed bag with a paper towel, keep the veggies in separate containers, and assemble everything in under sixty seconds on a Tuesday night.



## Fasul Salata

Бобена салата

*bo-be-na sa-la-ta*

In Bulgaria, a salad isn't a side dish—it's a meze. It's the start of the night, meant to sit in the center of the table next to a dangerously chilled glass of Rakia. While Shopska gets all the glory, this bean salad is the true, deeply comforting workhorse of the home kitchen. To make it work on a Tuesday in America, we're using good canned beans, but we're absolutely honoring the grandmother's secrets: massaging the onions with salt to kill their harsh bite, and faking the hard-to-find, unrefined sunflower oil (Sharlan) with a few drops of toasted sesame oil. Tossed with a mandatory pinch of spearmint, it tastes exactly like a summer evening in Sofia.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>30 oz</b>	canned large white beans <i>rinsed thoroughly and patted completely dry</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	mild olive oil
<b>1/2 med</b>	red onion <i>thinly sliced into half-moons</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	toasted sesame oil
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1/3 cup</b>	flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	jarred roasted red peppers <i>drained and chopped</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried spearmint
<b>2 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar	<b>1/4 cup</b>	black olives <i>pitted and halved</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Dry the beans completely.**

Drain the beans in a colander and rinse extensively under cold water to strip away the starchy canning liquid. Pat them completely dry with paper towels; if they are wet, the dressing won't cling and the beans will turn to mush.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Massage the onions.**

Place the sliced red onions in a small bowl, sprinkle with the kosher salt, and use your fingers to aggressively massage and squeeze them for about a minute until they soften and release their liquid. This draws out the harsh sulfurous bite and makes them sweet and pliant.

- 2. Build the salad.**

In a large mixing bowl, combine the dried beans, the softened onions and their juices, the roasted red peppers, parsley, spearmint, and olives.

- 3. Dress and toss.**

In a small jar, shake together the olive oil, sesame oil, and red wine vinegar. Pour this over the salad and gently fold with a wooden spoon—be very careful not to mash the beans.

**1. Let it rest.**

Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to let the starches absorb the oil and vinegar. Pull it out 15 minutes before serving to take off the chill, and serve with crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The 5-Minute Lutenitsa Hack.**

If you want a salad that takes exactly five minutes but tastes like it took hours, keep a jar of Lutenitsa (a roasted pepper and tomato spread found in the international aisle, sometimes labeled Ajvar) in your pantry. Skip the oil and vinegar entirely. Toss a can of rinsed, dried beans with your salt-mashed onions, 1/4 cup of chopped dill pickles, and 3 to 4 heaping tablespoons of Lutenitsa. It's a beloved Bulgarian winter comfort food.



# Lyutenitsa & Lukanka Board

Дъска с лютеница и луканка

*daska s lyutenitsa i lukanka*

To understand the Bulgarian soul, you have to understand the meze table—a generous spread built for long nights and strong rakia. Traditionally, grandmothers spent days over bubbling outdoor cauldrons to make lyutenitsa, the sweet, smoky red pepper relish that anchors this board. But for those chasing the flavors of the homeland in an American kitchen, this lazy oven method is a revelation, roasting the vegetables down to a dense, caramelized essence with zero active stirring. Flanked by sharp brine cheese, nutty gouda, and the dense, cumin-laced bite of authentic lukanka salami, this is how you eat like a local on a Wednesday night.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>3 lb</b>	red bell peppers <i>cored, seeded, and chopped into large chunks</i>	<b>1 1/2 tbsp</b>	apple cider vinegar
<b>2 lb</b>	Roma tomatoes <i>cored and quartered</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	ground black pepper
<b>1 large</b>	globe eggplant <i>peeled and chopped into 1-inch cubes</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	ground cumin
<b>3 med</b>	carrots <i>peeled and sliced into thick rounds</i>	<b>8 oz</b>	authentic Bulgarian lukanka <i>sliced into very thin rounds</i>
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>roughly chopped</i>	<b>8 oz</b>	Bulgarian sirene <i>cut into thick rustic blocks</i>
<b>6 med</b>	garlic cloves <i>left whole</i>	<b>8 oz</b>	kashkaval <i>sliced into triangles</i>
<b>1/2 cup</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1 cup</b>	raw walnuts
<b>1 1/2 tbsp</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1 cup</b>	cherry tomatoes
<b>1 tbsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 med</b>	English cucumber <i>cut into sticks</i>
		<b>1 med</b>	rustic sourdough bread <i>sliced thick</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Purge the eggplant of its bitter juices.**

Place the cubed eggplant in a colander in the sink, toss with a heavy pinch of salt, and let it sit for 20 minutes before briefly rinsing and patting dry.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven and combine the vegetables.**

Set the oven to 425°F (220°C). In the largest, deepest roasting pan you own, combine the red peppers, tomatoes, drained eggplant, carrots, onion, and garlic.

- 2. Dress the vegetables.**

Whisk together the sunflower oil, sugar, kosher salt, and vinegar in a small bowl, then pour it over the vegetables and toss with your hands until everything is thoroughly coated.

**1. Bake covered to release the juices.**

Cover the pan tightly with aluminum foil and bake for 1 hour. The vegetables will release a massive amount of liquid during this stage.

**2. Uncover and evaporate the liquid.**

Remove the foil completely and continue baking for another 1 1/2 to 2 hours, stirring the mixture every 30 minutes. You want the water to completely evaporate so the vegetables break down, slightly char on the edges, and swim only in the seasoned oil.

**3. Blend the roasted vegetables into a relish.**

Let the pan cool for 15 minutes, then transfer the contents, including all the rich oil, to a large pot or food processor. Add the black pepper and cumin, then pulse or use an immersion blender until thick and spreadable, being careful to leave a little rustic texture intact.

**4. Assemble the meze board.**

Transfer a generous amount of cooled lyutenitsa to a central serving bowl, then arrange the thinly sliced lukanka in an overlapping shingled pattern. Keep the sirene and kashkaval in separate corners of the board so their flavors do not mingle, filling the empty spaces with walnuts, cucumber sticks, and tomatoes, and serve alongside thick slices of bread.

## CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing true charcuterie elevates the entire board.**

Look for Karlovska or Smyadovska varieties of lukanka online, which have a distinct white mold casing that you should absolutely not peel off. If unavailable, substitute a very high-quality Italian soppressata or French saucisson sec.

● **Never use pre-crumbled feta.**

You want a solid block of feta soaking in brine, such as a high-quality French sheep's milk or creamy goat feta, to mimic the sliceable, creamy texture of Balkan sirene.

- **Lyutenitsa is infinitely better the next day.**

The flavors deepen significantly after a night in the fridge, making this an ideal make-ahead component that lets you assemble an incredible weeknight spread in minutes.



# Palneni Chushki sas Sirene

Пълнени чушки със сирене

*puhl-neh-nee choosh-kee suhs see-reh-neh*

Growing up in an Ohio suburb, the smell of roasting peppers and salty sheep's milk cheese meant one thing: it was finally summer. While restaurants try to sell you a fussy, deep-fried version of this dish, real Bulgarian home cooking is vastly smarter. This canonical weeknight recipe relies on a brilliant grandmother's secret, cutting the salty, melty feta with a drier ricotta to keep the filling safely inside the pepper as it bakes in a bubbling bath of rustic tomato sauce. It is unpretentious, straightforward, and exactly what home tastes like. Serve it straight from the baking dish with thick slices of crusty bread to mop up the damage.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>6 med</b>	sweet red bell peppers <i>stemmed and cored</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>8 oz</b>	feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>cut into 6 pieces</i>
<b>8 oz</b>	whole milk ricotta cheese	<b>28 oz</b>	canned crushed tomatoes
<b>2 large</b>	eggs	<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil
<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>2 med clove</b>	garlic <i>thinly sliced</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	sugar
<b>1 small clove</b>	garlic <i>minced to a paste</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	salt
		<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried summer savory or oregano

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Prepare the baking dish and rustic tomato sauce.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. In a 9x13-inch baking dish, whisk together the crushed tomatoes, olive oil, sliced garlic, sugar, salt, and dried savory, spreading the sauce evenly across the bottom.

### 2. Prep and puncture the peppers.

Wash the peppers and tap out any stray seeds. Using the tip of a paring knife, poke three or four tiny holes around the sides of each pepper to allow steam to escape so they do not burst while roasting, then drop a tiny piece of butter into the bottom of each hollowed cavity.

### 3. Mix the cheese filling.

In a medium bowl, stir the crumbled feta vigorously with the ricotta, eggs, chopped parsley, dill, grated garlic paste, and black pepper until cohesive and thick. Do not add salt, as the feta provides plenty of its own.

**1. Stuff the peppers.**

Spoon the cheese mixture into the cavity of each pepper, pushing down gently to remove any air pockets. Leave about a half-inch of space at the opening so the filling has room to puff without spilling entirely out of the pepper.

**2. Bake the peppers in the sauce.**

Nestle the stuffed peppers into the tomato sauce so they sit snugly against one another, and drizzle the tops with a touch of olive oil. Bake uncovered for 35 to 40 minutes until the peppers are soft and blistered, and the cheese is puffed and golden.

**3. Rest and serve.**

Let the dish sit for 5 to 10 minutes before serving so the filling can settle and firm up slightly. Serve directly from the baking dish with generous spoonfuls of the sauce and plenty of crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The ricotta substitution is non-negotiable for the perfect texture.**

Authentic Bulgarian recipes use a dry curd called izvara to stabilize the melting feta; whole milk ricotta perfectly replicates this chemistry so your peppers hold their shape and keep the cheese inside instead of bleeding into the sauce.



# After-School Krenvirshi & Princessi

*Hyper-fast, nostalgic snacks bridging the gap between work, school, and dinner.*

Four o'clock in the afternoon is a dangerous wasteland—that hollow, manic stretch between the final school bell and a late dinner. For a Bulgarian kid, survival didn't look like an artisanal snack plate. It looked like a princessa blistering under the broiler, or the salty, fatty salvation of a krenvirsh split and

stuffed with melting kashkaval. It was unapologetic, everyday magic: cold cuts, bread, and yellow cheese deployed with ruthless efficiency by tired parents and hungry latchkey kids.

You don't need a smuggler's connection to a Sofia butcher to recreate these rituals in a standard American kitchen; you just need to know how to work the local deli counter. What follows are the fast, profoundly satisfying hacks that keep the afternoon fires burning. No pretense. Just the melted, savory memory of home.





# Krenvirshki s Buter Testo

Кренвиршки с бутер тесто

*kren-virsh-ki s boo-ter tes-to*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know the smell of krenvirshki baking in the oven. It is the universal, intoxicating scent of the after-school snack. Great-grandmothers used to spend hours proofing enriched yeast doughs to wrap their sausages. But the modern, busy Bulgarian mother is brilliantly practical; she adopted ready-made puff pastry to deliver that same hot, comforting joy in under thirty minutes. The secret to making it taste exactly like the homeland isn't just in the pastry—it's what you hide inside. A smear of sweet-savory lutenitsa, a sliver of melting kashkaval, and an earthy

pinch of chubritsa before you fold the dough will transport you straight back to a bakery window in Sofia. It's ingenious, fuss-free mom magic, and pure, unadulterated comfort.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>17 oz</b>	puff pastry <i>thawed in the refrigerator and kept very cold</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	kashkaval cheese <i>cut into four slices</i>
<b>4 med</b>	mild frankfurters <i>cut in half crosswise</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried chubritsa
<b>4 tbsp</b>	lutenitsa	<b>1 large</b>	egg <i>lightly beaten</i>
		<b>1 tbsp</b>	sesame seeds

## PREPARATION

- **Thaw the puff pastry in the refrigerator overnight.**

Do not leave it on the counter to thaw at room temperature; the butter must stay entirely cold to create proper lamination when it hits the heat of the oven.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat your oven to 400°F and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.**  
It is critical that the oven is fully hot before the pastry goes in, or you simply won't get that iconic, flaky lift.
- 2. Unfold the cold puff pastry onto a lightly floured surface and cut each sheet into four equal rectangles.**  
Work quickly so the pastry remains cold; if the butter melts before it hits the oven, you'll end up with a dense, greasy flatbread instead of an airy blanket.
- 3. Spread a half tablespoon of lutenitsa down the center of each pastry rectangle, layer with a slice of kashkaval, and finish with a pinch of chubritsa.**  
This is the homeland flavor layer—the trinity of Bulgarian savory snacking that elevates a simple pig-in-a-blanket into something deeply nostalgic.

1. **Place a piece of frankfurter on the cheese, tightly wrap one side of the pastry over the sausage, and fold the other side over to overlap.**
2. **Place the packet onto the parchment paper seam-side down to ensure the puff pastry doesn't violently unroll as it expands in the oven.**
3. **Cut three or four diagonal slashes across the top of each packet using a very sharp knife.**

This is exactly how the authentic Bulgarian bakeries do it. It allows the steam to escape so the interior doesn't get soggy, and gives the kashkaval room to bubble up.

4. **Brush the top and sides of each pastry generously with the lightly beaten egg and sprinkle with sesame seeds.**
5. **Bake for 18 to 22 minutes until the pastry is significantly puffed, deeply golden brown, and crisp.**

Pull them from the oven and let them cool for at least five minutes before biting in—the melted cheese inside will be molten, but the wait is worth it.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing the right sausage is everything.**

Standard American hot dogs often contain high amounts of corn syrup or artificial smoke. Seek out high-quality, fine-emulsion frankfurters—mild, savory beef and pork blends with natural casings—to capture the correct textural snap and Old World flavor of a true Bulgarian krenvirsh.

- **Temperature control is your only real hurdle.**

If your kitchen is hot, the butter in the puff pastry will begin to melt on the counter. Assemble four krenvirshki, stash them in the refrigerator, and then work on the remaining four.



# Kashkaval Pane

Кашкавал пане

*kash-kah-val pah-neh*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian-American household, the smell of hot oil and toasty breadcrumbs transports you straight back to a Tuesday afternoon, dropping your backpack to find a golden slab of perfectly melted cheese waiting on the table. Kashkaval pane is not a mozzarella stick; it is a substantial, savory, shatteringly crisp masterpiece. To recreate it without the cheese exploding into the frying pan, you have to follow the grandmother's laws: chill the cheese to delay the melt, and dunk it in ice water before breading to create an impenetrable thermal shock barrier. Since true Balkan kashkaval is tough to source

on a Tuesday night, a block of aged provolone brings that exact semi-hard, salty tang that makes you close your eyes and know you are home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	aged provolone block <i>cut into 1/2-inch thick slabs</i>	<b>3 large</b>	eggs <i>beaten vigorously</i>
<b>1 cup</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	fine unseasoned breadcrumbs
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 cup</b>	ice water
		<b>2 cup</b>	neutral frying oil

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Freeze the cheese to delay the melting process.**  
Arrange the half-inch cheese slabs on a plate so they do not touch, and place them uncovered in the freezer for 20 to 30 minutes until intensely cold and firm.
- 2. Set up a rigid assembly line.**  
Line up your stations from left to right: a bowl of the ice water, a shallow dish of the flour mixed with the salt, a dish of the beaten eggs, and a dish of the breadcrumbs.
- 3. Shock and bread the cheese.**  
Dip a chilled slab into the ice water, immediately toss it in the flour, submerge it completely in the egg, and press it firmly into the breadcrumbs to build an airtight seal.
- 4. Let the breaded cheese rest for five minutes.**  
This brief pause on a cutting board allows the flour and egg to hydrate, forming a structural glue that prevents blowouts in the pan.

**1. Fry hot and fast in shallow oil.**

Heat a half-inch of neutral oil in a heavy skillet to 350°F. Fry the cheese in uncrowded batches for roughly two minutes per side until deeply golden, then drain on paper towels and serve instantly.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Serve with a simple salad.**

In authentic Bulgarian fashion, serve the dangerously hot cheese alongside thick-cut, salted tomatoes and cucumbers to cut through the richness.



# Makaroni na Furna

Макарони на фурна

*mah-kah-ROH-nee nah FOOR-nah*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of vanilla, warm milk, and baking butter means it's either a lazy Sunday morning or a chaotic Tuesday after-school snack. To the uninitiated American palate, pouring a sweet vanilla custard over pasta and crumbling salty white cheese directly into the middle of it sounds like absolute madness. But trust the process. The sharp, briny bite of the feta cuts straight through that rich, yielding custard in a way that is utterly addictive. It's unpretentious, it's deeply comforting, and it requires only one grandmotherly mandate: don't overcook the damn pasta on the stove, and never, under any circumstances, buy pre-crumbled cheese.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	short tubular pasta	<b>1 cup</b>	granulated sugar
<b>1 tbsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>2 tsp</b>	pure vanilla extract
<b>4 tbsp</b>	unsalted European butter <i>divided</i>	<b>6 oz</b>	Greek feta in brine <i>drained</i>
<b>5 large</b>	eggs	<b>1 tbsp</b>	granulated sugar <i>reserved for topping</i>
<b>4 cup</b>	whole milk		

## PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 375°F and generously grease a deep 9x13-inch baking dish with one tablespoon of the butter.**

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Boil the pasta in salted water for exactly one to two minutes less than the package directs for al dente.**  
It should still have a firm bite, as it will finish cooking and softening in the custard.
- 2. Drain the pasta without rinsing, immediately return it to the hot pot, and toss with two tablespoons of the butter.**  
Transfer the glossy noodles to the prepared baking dish in an even layer.
- 3. Remove the feta from its brine and crumble it by hand directly over the warm pasta.**  
Gently toss a few pieces so the salty cheese weaves throughout the dish.
- 4. In a large bowl, vigorously whisk the eggs, milk, one cup of sugar, and vanilla extract until the sugar is completely dissolved.**  
This is crucial so the sweetness distributes evenly and doesn't sink to the bottom of the pan.
- 5. Pour the sweet custard slowly over the pasta and dot the surface with the remaining one tablespoon of butter.**

1. **Bake uncovered for 30 minutes, then sprinkle the remaining tablespoon of sugar evenly across the top and bake for another 10 to 15 minutes.**

The sugar will caramelize under the heat, creating a beautiful golden-brown crust while the custard sets.

2. **Let the dish rest for at least 15 minutes before slicing.**

Serve warm, or do as many Bulgarians do and eat the leftovers cold straight from the fridge the next day.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never use pre-crumbled feta.**

Pre-crumbled cheese is coated in anti-caking agents like cellulose that will prevent it from melting and integrating seamlessly into the sweet custard.



# Princesi sas Sirene i Yaitse

Принцеси със сирене и яйца

*prin-tseh-see sahs see-reh-neh ee yait-seh*

If you grew up Bulgarian, the smell of toasting summer savory means it's 3:30 PM and you're fresh out of school. Princesi are the ultimate latchkey snack, born of sheer utilitarian genius: bread, butter, egg, and the sharp, undeniable tang of white brine cheese. Traditionally, these are blasted under the glowing red elements of a specialized countertop "Party Grill," but your oven's broiler will do the job just fine. The real grandmother's trick here—the thing that separates a rubbery egg scramble from a light, perfectly puffed, savory soufflé—is a single spoonful of yogurt mixed into the batter. It is fast, dirt-cheap, and tastes exactly like home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 large</b>	slices dense sandwich bread	<b>1 tbsp</b>	plain whole-milk Greek yogurt
<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>softened to room temperature</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried summer savory (chubritsa)
<b>5 oz</b>	Bulgarian sirene or firm sheep's milk feta <i>crushed with a fork into a coarse paste</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	sharena sol <i>optional, for serving</i>
<b>1 large</b>	egg		

## PREPARATION

- **Position your oven rack in the upper third of the oven, about 5 inches from the top element.**

Turn the oven to broil on high to mimic the intense, top-down radiant heat of a traditional Bulgarian Party Grill.

- **Line a heavy baking sheet with aluminum foil.**

This ensures easy cleanup if any molten cheese decides to jump ship during the bake.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the moisture barrier.**

Lay the bread slices on the baking sheet and use a butter knife to spread a very thin, edge-to-edge layer of softened butter over each one. Do not skip this; the butter acts as a waterproof shield, stopping the wet egg from soaking in and turning the crumb into a soggy mess before it has a chance to cook.

- 2. Formulate the topping.**

In a medium bowl, vigorously beat the crushed cheese, egg, and yogurt with a fork until it forms a thick, cohesive, and creamy batter.

**1. Assemble and season.**

Spoon the batter evenly over the buttered bread, spreading it gently all the way to the crusts, then generously dust the top of each unbaked *princesa* with the dried summer savory.

**2. Broil with vigilance.**

Slide the baking sheet under the broiler and do not walk away. Depending on the aggression of your oven, it will take 4 to 8 minutes for the egg to puff up slightly and the cheese to develop deep, blistered golden-brown spots.

**3. Rest and serve.**

Pull the sheet from the oven and let the toasts rest for exactly one minute before eating—the topping will be molten hot. Serve immediately, perhaps dusted with a tiny pinch of *sharena sol*.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing Summer Savory (Chubritsa).**

This herb is the olfactory soul of Bulgarian home cooking. If you absolutely cannot find it, a pinch of dried oregano mixed with a pinch of dried thyme will simulate the herbaceousness, but do whatever you can to track down the real thing.

● **The Bread Trap.**

Avoid crusty, hole-filled artisanal sourdough. The liquid egg mixture will simply seep right through the crumb holes and glue your sandwich to the pan, failing to form the necessary custardy top layer. Stick to a dense, utilitarian sandwich loaf.



# Krenvirshi "Lodki" s Kashkaval

Кренвирши лодки с кашкавал

*Kren-veer-shee lod-kee s kash-kah-val*

If there is a single smell that instantly teleports a first-generation Bulgarian-American back to an Ohio kitchen at three-thirty on a Tuesday, it is the aroma of rendering sausage mingling with melting cheese and toasted herbs. Grandmothers didn't just boil hot dogs; they transformed them into edible vessels—lodki, or boats—stuffed with sharp cheese and baked until blistered. This isn't some romanticized, Hollywood version of the Old World. It is the glorious, unpretentious

reality of a Balkan after-school snack. Recreating it requires nothing more than a specific cut, supermarket staples, and the irreplaceable, earthy hit of summer savory.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 large</b>	high-quality natural casing frankfurters	<b>1 cup</b>	kashkaval cheese or equal parts low-moisture mozzarella and mild provolone <i>freshly grated</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>2 tbsp</b>	plain cream cheese <i>softened</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	Bulgarian sirene or French feta <i>crumbled</i>	<b>1/2 med</b>	tomato <i>cut into very thin half-moons</i>
<b>1 large</b>	egg <i>lightly beaten</i>		

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Prepare the baking sheet.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil and brush it lightly with the melted butter.

### 2. Carve the boats.

Slice each frankfurter lengthwise down the center, stopping just before you cut through the bottom or the ends. Carefully carve out a very thin V-shaped wedge of meat from the top to create a natural trench.

### 3. Mix the custard filling.

In a small bowl, use a fork to mash the cream cheese and feta together into a chunky paste, then beat in the egg and black pepper until combined.

**1. Stuff and assemble.**

Arrange the frankfurters on the baking sheet and spoon the cheese mixture evenly into each trench. Top generously with the grated kashkaval, letting it spill slightly over the edges, and garnish with the tomato slices.

**2. Bake under high heat.**

Roast for 15 to 20 minutes until the edges of the frankfurters curl and turn deep brown, and the cheese is fully melted and bubbling with golden spots.

**3. Finish with summer savory.**

Remove from the oven and immediately sprinkle the summer savory over the molten cheese so the residual heat blooms its essential oils.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The herb is non-negotiable.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) provides the distinct, aromatic hit that defines this dish. If you absolutely cannot find it, substitute a half teaspoon of dried oregano mixed with a pinch of dried thyme, but seek out the real thing for true authenticity.

● **Choose the right cheese.**

Authentic kashkaval has a salty, semi-hard melt. If it is unavailable at your local market, a fifty-fifty blend of low-moisture mozzarella and mild provolone mimics it perfectly.



# Parzheni Kartofi sas Sirene i Sharena Sol

Пържени картофи със сирене и шарена сол

*par-zhe-ni kar-to-fi sas si-re-ne i sha-re-na sol*

If there is one dish that unites every Bulgarian, from the Black Sea coast to the Midwestern American suburbs, it is PKS: Parzheni Kartofi sas Sirene. This isn't the sad, frozen fast food of the West. It is pure, rustic comfort—perfectly golden pan-fried potatoes aggressively seasoned with an earthy, herby blend called sharena sol, then buried under a mountain of tangy, creamy white cheese that just barely melts from the residual heat. The secret isn't a deep fryer; it's a wide pan,

absolute moisture control, a pinch of salt in the hot oil to stop splatters, and knowing never to trap the steam. It is the ultimate after-school or late-night reward.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	Russet or Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into medium-thick sticks</i>	<b>2 tbsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	sunflower or canola oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 pinch</b>	fine sea salt	<b>1/2 tbsp</b>	dried fenugreek leaves
<b>4 oz</b>	French or Greek feta in brine <i>drained and kept in a solid block</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	fine yellow cornmeal <i>toasted in a dry pan until fragrant</i>
		<b>1 tsp</b>	fine sea salt

## PREPARATION

- **Make the sharena sol.**

In a spice grinder or small jar, combine the summer savory, sweet paprika, fenugreek leaves, toasted cornmeal, and 1 teaspoon of sea salt. Pulse or shake vigorously to combine, then set aside.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Dry the cut potatoes thoroughly.**

Do not soak them. Rinse them briefly if you must, but aggressively dry them with paper towels until absolutely bone-dry. Moisture is the enemy of a golden crust.

- 2. Heat the oil and add a pinch of salt.**

Pour the oil into a wide, heavy-bottomed frying pan to a depth of about half an inch and place over medium-high heat. Once shimmering, sprinkle a generous pinch of salt directly into the bare oil—a grandmother's trick to stop residual potato water from violently splattering.

**1. Fry the potatoes in an even, uncrowded layer.**

Carefully add the potatoes, ensuring they have room to breathe so steam can escape. Leave them completely undisturbed for a few minutes until the bottoms develop a deep golden-brown crust, then give them a moderate stir with a slotted spoon.

**2. Drain the fries briefly without covering them.**

Once golden and crisp on all sides, use a slotted spoon to transfer them to a paper towel-lined plate for exactly thirty seconds. Never place a lid or foil over hot fries, or the trapped steam will make them instantly soggy.

**3. Smother with cheese and sharena sol.**

Transfer the hot fries to a platter and immediately use a box grater to shower them generously with the block of feta. The residual heat will coax the creamy cheese into a slight, irresistible melt. Dust heavily with your sharena sol and serve at once.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Sourcing the right cheese is critical.**

Do not buy pre-crumbled, dry feta. Look for French feta in brine, or a high-quality block of Greek feta. You need that high moisture content and creamy elasticity to mimic authentic Bulgarian sirene.

● **Chubritsa is non-negotiable.**

Dried summer savory, or chubritsa, is the undisputed heart of sharena sol. You can find it in the spice aisle or online. Winter savory or a mix of thyme and mild oregano can work in an absolute emergency, but it won't taste like Bulgaria.



# Pileshki Hapki s Kornfleyks

Пилешки хапки с корнфлейкс

*pi-lesh-ki hap-ki s korn-fleyks*

These crispy, golden chicken bites are the undisputed taste of a post-communist Bulgarian childhood. While traditional village cooking leans heavily on slow-simmered stews, this dish is what a whole generation of kids ate at the neighborhood tavern while their parents drank cheap lager and talked late into the night. The secret to reproducing that exact memory without the absolute mess of deep-frying on a Tuesday lies in two things: a yogurt-based marinade that tenderizes the lean meat to an impossible juiciness, and a high-heat

oven bake with a quick mist of oil to mimic the tavern fryer. Whatever you do, do not skip the garlic-yogurt sauce—it is the liquid gold of Balkan casual dining.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	chicken breasts <i>cut into 2-inch by 1-inch strips</i>	<b>4 cup</b>	unsweetened cornflakes <i>crushed into coarse gravel</i>
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	plain whole-milk Greek yogurt <i>divided</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>1 tbsp</b>	soy sauce	<b>2 large</b>	eggs <i>lightly beaten</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral cooking spray
<b>1 tsp</b>	garlic powder	<b>1/3 cup</b>	mayonnaise
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>3 small</b>	garlic cloves <i>minced into a fine paste</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper	<b>2 tbsp</b>	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried summer savory	<b>1 1/4 tsp</b>	kosher salt <i>divided</i>
		<b>1 tsp</b>	fresh lemon juice

## PREPARATION

- **Whisk the marinade and soak the chicken.**

In a medium bowl, whisk together a half cup of the yogurt, soy sauce, sunflower oil, garlic powder, paprika, black pepper, and summer savory. Toss the chicken pieces in the dairy mixture until fully coated, then cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to tenderize.

- **Mix the garlic-yogurt sauce.**

In a jar or small bowl, combine the remaining one cup of yogurt, mayonnaise, minced garlic, fresh dill, the remaining quarter teaspoon of salt, and lemon juice. Stir vigorously until smooth, then refrigerate so the raw garlic can permeate the fats.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees Fahrenheit and line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.**
- 2. Set up a breading station with three shallow dishes.**

In the first dish, mix the flour with one teaspoon of the salt. In the second, place the beaten eggs. In the third, spread out the crushed cornflakes.
- 3. Dredge and bread the marinated chicken.**

Remove the chicken from the fridge. Take a piece, let the heavy excess yogurt drip off, then dredge it in the flour. Dip it into the egg, and finally press it firmly into the crushed cornflakes so there are no bald spots.
- 4. Arrange the breaded bites and spray with oil.**

Place the breaded chicken on the parchment paper, leaving a small gap between each piece. Generously mist the top of the chicken with cooking spray—this microscopic layer of lipid is the absolute key to achieving a deep-fried golden color in a dry oven.
- 5. Bake until golden and crisp.**

Bake for 15 to 20 minutes. Serve immediately with a generous bowl of the cold garlic-yogurt sauce for plunging.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not use sweetened cornflakes.**

American supermarkets are saturated with heavily sweetened cereals. Use strictly unsweetened cornflakes, or the savory profile of the dish will be ruined and the crust will burn.
- **Summer savory is the scent of the Balkans.**

Also known as chubritsa, this herb instantly transports the flavor profile to Bulgaria. If you absolutely cannot find it, a pinch of dried oregano and thyme will suffice.



# Mish-Mash & The 15-Minute Skillet

*The workhorse weeknight dinners: fast, cheap, and rooted in agrarian resourcefulness.*

There is a beautiful, unapologetic necessity to the weeknight skillet. When the shift is over and the bones ache, nobody has time for a slow-braised masterpiece. You need food, and you need it fast. This is the true working-class soul of Bulgarian cooking, born of agrarian resourcefulness and whatever the garden

could spare. A hot cast-iron pan, a heavy hand with the fat, and the loud hiss of peppers, eggs, and sirene cheese collapsing into the messy, immediate salvation of a proper mish-mash.

It's cheap, it's loud, and it demands zero apologies. These are the workhorse suppers that sustained generations and now feed the diaspora on a Tuesday night. From fiercely charred ground meats to quick-wilted stovetop cabbage, this is how you feed the people you love in fifteen minutes flat.





# Cast-Iron Kyufte & Kebapche

Кюфте & Кебапче

*kyuf-TEH & keh-BAP-cheh*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of a hot skara wafting with roasted pork and cumin is embedded in your DNA. Too many people think these two iconic dishes are just the same meat shaped differently, but a true grandmother would scoff at the idea. Kebapcheta are minimalist, juicy meat logs relying purely on technique, while Kyufteta are robust, herbaceous patties that demand a panade and the quintessential aroma of Summer Savory. We are taking the uncompromising standards of the homeland, utilizing an old-school baking soda trick for maximum juiciness, and adapting them for a blazing-hot American cast-iron skillet on a busy weeknight.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	ground pork (80/20)	<b>1 slice</b>	white bread <i>crusts removed, soaked in water and squeezed completely dry, if making Kyufte</i>
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground beef chuck (80/20)	<b>1 large</b>	large egg <i>if making Kyufte</i>
<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tsp</b>	Summer Savory <i>dried, if making Kyufte</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	baking soda <i>if making Kyufte</i>
<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	ground cumin	<b>1 tbsp</b>	plain yogurt <i>if making Kyufte</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	pale beer or cold water <i>if making Kebapche</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral oil <i>for brushing the skillet</i>
<b>1 small</b>	yellow onion <i>finely grated on a box grater, keeping the juices, if making Kyufte</i>		

## PREPARATION

- **Build your master meat base.**

Combine the ground pork, beef chuck, kosher salt, black pepper, and cumin in a large mixing bowl.

- **Choose your path for the additions.**

If making Kebapche, add the beer or water to the bowl. If making Kyufte, add the grated onion, soaked bread, egg, Summer Savory, and your baking soda mixed with yogurt (let the soda and yogurt foam for 30 seconds before adding).

- **Knead like you mean it.**

Wet your hands and aggressively squeeze and fold the meat for 5 to 7 minutes. Do not be gentle. Stop only when it becomes a sticky, cohesive mass that pulls away from the bowl.

- **Let it rest in the refrigerator.**

Cover the bowl tightly and chill for at least 2 hours, or ideally overnight. This step is non-negotiable for the proteins to cross-link so the meat holds its shape in the pan.

## INSTRUCTIONS

**1. Shape the meat with wet hands to prevent sticking.**

For Kebapche, roll portions into thick, sausage-like logs about 1 1/2 inches wide and 5 inches long. For Kyufte, roll into golf balls, flatten into patties, and press a small thumb indent in the center so they do not dome while cooking.

**2. Fire up the cast-iron skillet.**

Place a heavy skillet over medium-high heat until it is smoking hot. Brush the surface lightly with neutral oil.

**3. Sear the meat without overcrowding the pan.**

Cook for 6 to 7 minutes total, turning gently to build a dark, crusty exterior. Never press them with a spatula, or you will squeeze out all the hard-earned juices.

**4. Rest and serve immediately.**

Transfer the meat to a paper-towel-lined plate and let sit for exactly two minutes. Serve with a cold beer, thick-cut fries, and a side of lutenitsa.

## CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Chubritsa mandate.**

You cannot make a true Kyufte without Chubritsa (Summer Savory). Do not substitute Winter Savory, which is far too bitter. If you cannot find it, a blend of dried thyme and a pinch of oregano is a passable backup, but order the real thing online for the true homeland flavor.

● **The baking soda trick.**

Mixing baking soda and yogurt alters the meat's pH. This old grandmother's trick keeps the proteins from tightening up in the hot cast-iron skillet, ensuring a juicy, airy interior rather than a dense puck.



# Pileshka Kavarma

Пилешка кавърма

*pee-lesh-kah kah-var-mah*

If you want to know what a cold night in a Bulgarian village actually smells like, this is it. Kavarma is historically a slow-braised clay pot affair, but local grandmothers have long turned to the skillet to get this deeply comforting, peasant-style chicken stew on the table before the sun goes down. The magic isn't in some complex chef's trick; it's in a mountain of sweet onions, the quick bloom of sweet paprika, and the absolute necessity of summer savory. You cook it fast and fierce until the watery juices vanish, leaving the meat and vegetables coated in a thick, brick-red glaze of pure fat and flavor.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	boneless skinless chicken thighs <i>cut into 1-inch pieces</i>	<b>1 med</b>	red bell pepper <i>cored and cut into short strips</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 med</b>	green bell pepper <i>cored and cut into short strips</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>3 tbsp</b>	neutral oil	<b>1/2 cup</b>	dry white wine
<b>2 large</b>	yellow onions <i>halved and thinly sliced into half-moons</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	crushed tomatoes
<b>1 small</b>	leek <i>white and light green parts only, halved and thinly sliced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>8 oz</b>	cremini mushrooms <i>wiped clean and thickly sliced</i>	<b>1 large</b>	bay leaf <i>dried</i>
		<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sugar
		<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Prepare your mise en place before cooking.**

The blooming of the paprika happens in a matter of seconds; having your wine and tomatoes measured and immediately within reach is critical to stop the frying process and prevent the spices from burning.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the chicken to build the foundation of the dish.**

Pat the chicken pieces completely dry, season with the salt and black pepper, and sear in two tablespoons of shimmering oil over medium-high heat until golden brown on all sides, then remove to a plate.

- 2. Sauté the alliums in the residual chicken fat.**

Lower the heat to medium, add the remaining oil if the pan looks dry, and toss the onions and leeks until they shrink significantly and turn translucent, about five to seven minutes.

**1. Cook down the mushrooms and peppers.**

Add the sliced mushrooms and bell peppers, using the moisture released from the mushrooms to scrape up any browned bits from the bottom of the skillet, and cook until the vegetables are very soft.

**2. Bloom the paprika completely off the heat.**

Pull the skillet off the burner, sprinkle in the sweet paprika, and stir vigorously for exactly thirty seconds to unlock its brick-red color without scorching it into bitterness.

**3. Deglaze the pan with white wine.**

Immediately return the skillet to medium heat, pour in the wine, and let it bubble fiercely for two minutes until the sharp smell of alcohol dissipates.

**4. Simmer the stew until it reduces to a tight glaze.**

Stir in the crushed tomatoes, summer savory, sugar, bay leaf, and the resting chicken, then simmer uncovered for fifteen to twenty minutes until the water evaporates and the sauce clings thickly to the meat.

**5. Garnish and serve immediately.**

Remove the skillet from the heat, discard the bay leaf, adjust the seasoning to taste, and shower the entire dish with fresh chopped parsley before serving with rustic bread or over white rice.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Sourcing Chubritsa.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is the absolute non-negotiable backbone of this dish, providing a peppery, piney warmth you cannot fake with oregano; seek it out in the spice aisle of a good American supermarket.

● **Left on Fat.**

Authentic kavarma is never a watery soup; it must be cooked down until the watery tomato juices evaporate completely and the remaining rich, paprika-stained fat leaves a clear trail when you drag a spoon across the bottom of the skillet.



# Selska Parzhenitsa with Pancetta

Селска пърженица

*sel-skah par-zheh-nee-tsay*

In the villages of Bulgaria, grandmothers rely on *slanina*—cured, unsmoked pork backfat—to render the liquid gold that anchors this rustic skillet. American bacon is a heavily smoked imposter that kills the dish, making unsmoked pancetta the perfect weeknight substitute to nail that authentic, unapologetic pork flavor you remember from childhood. Let the tomatoes reduce until the pan violently sizzles, concentrating their umami before folding in the eggs and sheep's milk feta for a fast, deeply savory taste of the old country.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>4 oz</b>	pancetta <i>diced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 large</b>	leek <i>white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise and thinly sliced</i>	<b>3 large</b>	eggs
<b>3 med</b>	Cubanelle or Anaheim peppers <i>cored, seeded, and chopped into bite- sized pieces</i>	<b>3 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta <i>crumbled</i>
<b>2 large</b>	vine-ripe tomatoes <i>finely diced, juices reserved</i>	<b>1 pinch</b>	sea salt
		<b>1 loaf</b>	crusty bread <i>sliced, for serving</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Mise en place is non-negotiable for a fifteen-minute skillet.**

Chop the leeks, peppers, and tomatoes before the pork hits the heat, because once the fat renders, the cooking moves aggressively fast.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Place a heavy skillet over medium heat, add the diced pancetta, and cook until the fat renders out and the meat turns golden and slightly crispy.**  
Do not drain the fat; this pure, salty pork rendering is the undeniable soul of the dish.
- 2. Toss the sliced leeks and chopped peppers directly into the sizzling pork fat.**  
Sauté for 4 to 5 minutes, stirring frequently, until the leeks soften and the peppers begin to blister and sweeten.
- 3. Pour in the diced tomatoes with their juices, sprinkle in the summer savory, and increase the heat to medium-high.**  
Cook aggressively, stirring frequently, until the water evaporates and the mixture reduces into a thick, jammy ragout where the pork fat begins to separate from the sauce.

1. **Lightly beat the eggs in a small bowl, pour them over the vegetables, and scatter the crumbled feta evenly across the top.**

Reduce the heat to medium-low and gently fold the mixture for a minute or two until the eggs are just set but still soft and glistening, then remove from the heat immediately.

2. **Serve immediately straight from the skillet.**

Thick slices of toasted crusty bread are absolutely mandatory to mop up the savory, fat-rich juices.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Salt sparingly at first.**

Both the pancetta and brined feta bring a heavy hit of sodium to the party; wait to taste the nearly finished dish before you add any extra sea salt.

- **Substitute for summer savory.**

If you cannot find dried summer savory (chubritsa), a blend of 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano and 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme provides a functionally similar aromatic profile.



# Pryasno Zele s Kaima

Прясно зеле с кайма

*pryas-no ze-le s kay-ma*

The smell of sweet paprika hitting hot pork fat means one thing: you are home, and dinner is going to be good. In Bulgaria, this foundational dish marks the shift from heavy winter ferments to fresh summer cabbage. While a grandmother in Plovdiv might let this bake in the oven for an hour on a Sunday, we don't have that kind of time on a Tuesday night. The secret to this quick skillet version isn't a shortcut in ingredients, it's brute force. Vigorously massaging the shredded cabbage with salt breaks down its tough cell walls instantly, turning a

forty-five-minute braise into a blazing fast, deeply savory fifteen-minute salvation. It is straightforward, incredibly comforting, and unmistakably authentic.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 small head</b>	green cabbage <i>cored and shredded into thin ribbons</i>	<b>3 cloves</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	granulated sugar	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	ground cumin
<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>2 tbsp</b>	tomato paste
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground pork	<b>1/2 cup</b>	hot water
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground beef	<b>1/2 bunch</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	Monterey Jack cheese <i>shredded (optional)</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Break down the cabbage with a vigorous salt massage.

Place the shredded cabbage in a large bowl with the kosher salt and sugar, then aggressively massage and squeeze it with your bare hands for a solid 60 seconds until it wilts, shrinks by half, and releases its water.

### 2. Brown the meat and toast the spices.

Heat the sunflower oil in a very large skillet or wok over medium-high heat. Drop in the pork and beef, smashing it with a wooden spoon into crumbly bits until deeply browned, about 4 to 5 minutes. Stir in the cumin and sweet paprika, letting the spices toast in the hot fat for 30 seconds.

**1. Build the aromatic base.**

Toss the diced onion in with the meat and cook until translucent, roughly 2 minutes. Stir in the minced garlic and tomato paste, cooking constantly for another minute until the paste darkens to the color of rust.

**2. Merge the cabbage and deglaze the pan.**

Grab handfuls of the massaged cabbage, shaking off the excess water, and throw them directly into the hot skillet. Discard the leftover cabbage water. Toss everything to combine, then pour in the hot water to deglaze the pan and generate a rapid burst of steam.

**3. Cover and simmer aggressively.**

Drop the heat to medium, cover the pan, and let it bubble for 4 to 5 minutes. Remove the lid; the cabbage should be entirely tender and coated in savory, paprika-stained pan juices. If it looks too wet, crank the heat to high for a minute to burn off the excess moisture.

**4. Garnish and serve.**

Pull the skillet off the heat and fold in the chopped parsley. Taste for black pepper. If you want to lean into modern comfort, scatter the shredded cheese over the top and let it melt in the residual heat before serving.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Respect the paprika.**

You must use sweet Hungarian or standard sweet paprika. Do not reach for trendy smoked paprika (pimentón) here—the heavy smoke will completely hijack the authentic Balkan flavor profile of the dish.

● **The Kaima mix.**

Authentic 'kaima' relies on the rich fat from pork and the robust structure of beef. A 50/50 or 60/40 mix of ground pork to ground beef is mandatory. Pure beef will dry out; pure pork is overwhelmingly rich.



# Skillet Sirene po Shopski

Сирене по шопски на тиган

*si-re-ne po shop-ski na ti-gan*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian-American household, the smell of melting butter, hot tomatoes, and the piney, earthy scent of chubritsa means only one thing: someone is making dinner the right way, with zero fuss. Back in the homeland, Sirene po Shopski is painstakingly baked in individual earthenware pots called *gyuvecheta*. But for a busy weeknight in the States, a cast-iron skillet does the exact same magic in a fraction of the time. The secret isn't some complex culinary technique. It's buying a block of real sheep's milk feta in brine, tracking

down a jar of summer savory, and knowing when to leave the pan alone. Just build the layers, crack the eggs, drop the lid, and let the steam do the work.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter	<b>1 med</b>	jalapeno <i>left whole or split</i>
<b>1/2 med</b>	yellow onion <i>sliced into half-moons</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 large</b>	beefsteak tomato <i>peeled and sliced into thick 1/2-inch rounds</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>10 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta in brine <i>cut into 1/2-inch thick slabs</i>	<b>2 large</b>	eggs
<b>1 med</b>	sweet bell pepper <i>sliced into rings</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Desalt the cheese if necessary.**

If your feta tastes aggressively sharp and salty rather than creamy, submerge the slabs in a bowl of cold water for 30 minutes prior to cooking, then pat them thoroughly dry. This perfectly replicates the milder, higher-fat profile of authentic Bulgarian sirene.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sauté the aromatics.**

Place a medium cast-iron skillet over medium heat and melt the butter until foaming. Add the onions and cook for 2 to 3 minutes until they begin to soften.

**1. Build the tomato foundation.**

Lay the thick tomato slices over the onions in a single layer to form a bed. Let them fry gently for 2 minutes on one side, then flip. Season the tomatoes with half of the savory and all of the paprika. Do not add salt; the cheese brings enough to the party.

**2. Layer the cheese and peppers.**

Arrange the thick slabs of feta directly on top of the tomatoes. Scatter the sweet pepper rings over and around the cheese, nestle the hot pepper into the center, and sprinkle the remaining savory over the top.

**3. Poach the eggs.**

Use a spoon to create slight depressions in the mixture. Crack the eggs directly into these spaces.

**4. Steam to finish.**

Immediately place a tight-fitting lid on the skillet and reduce the heat to medium-low. Let it steam undisturbed for 5 to 7 minutes. The ambient steam trapped by the lid will melt the cheese into the tomato base and cook the egg whites while leaving the yolks gloriously runny.

**5. Garnish and serve.**

Remove the lid. The butter, tomato juices, and whey should be bubbling at the edges. Remove from the heat, garnish generously with fresh parsley and a crack of black pepper, and serve immediately straight from the hot skillet with crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Resist the urge to stir.**

The architectural integrity of the layers is critical. The tomatoes sit on the bottom to protect the cheese from burning, the cheese melts in the middle into a custard, and the egg steams on top. Stirring turns this into scrambled eggs.

- **The chubritsa mandate.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is the olfactory signature of the Shopluk region. If you absolutely cannot find it, substitute a blend of dried oregano and a pinch of thyme, but the real thing is a secret weapon worth keeping in your pantry.

- **Mountain style variation.**

In the Pirin mountain town of Bansko, it is traditional to add cured pork to the pot. Replicate this by layering a few slices of dry-cured salami or smoked sausage over the tomatoes before adding the cheese.



# Rhodope Patatnik

Родопски пататник

*ro-DOP-ski pah-TAHT-nik*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know this smell. It is the scent of mountain winters, of sustenance, and of home. Patatnik hails from the rugged Rhodope Mountains, where locals survived on what they could grow in the harsh soil: potatoes, onions, and mint. Yes, mint. The secret to this dish—the thing that separates it from a diner hash brown or a latke—is a generous pinch of dried spearmint. It cuts right through the rich, buttery potatoes and salty feta, delivering that unmistakable hit of the old country. No phyllo dough, no restaurant embellishments, just grandmother's skillet method adapted for a Tuesday night.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	Russet potatoes <i>peeled</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled by hand</i>
<b>1 small</b>	yellow onion <i>grated or finely minced</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried spearmint
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	freshly ground black pepper
<b>2 large</b>	large eggs <i>lightly beaten</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>divided</i>
		<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral oil

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Grate and squeeze the potatoes.

Using the large holes of a box grater, grate the potatoes into a large bowl, add the onion and salt, and let sit for 3 minutes before wringing out as much liquid as humanly possible. You want to discard the juice so the pie fries instead of boils.

### 2. Mix the filling.

Add the beaten eggs, hand-crumbled feta, dried mint, and black pepper to the squeezed potatoes, mixing thoroughly with your hands until the egg coats every shred. Keep it simple and resist the urge to add garlic or paprika.

### 3. Form the crust and steam.

Melt half the butter and all the oil in a 10-inch skillet over medium-low heat, press the potato mixture into an even 1-inch thick pancake, and cover with a lid. Let it cook undisturbed for 10 to 12 minutes to trap the steam and cook the raw potatoes while the bottom browns.

### 4. Execute the flip.

Remove the lid and give the pan a shake to ensure the pie slides freely. Place a flat plate upside down over the skillet, and confidently invert them together so the pie lands crust-side up on the plate.

**1. Finish the second side.**

Melt the remaining butter in the skillet, gently slide the pie off the plate back into the pan, and cook uncovered for 8 to 10 minutes until deeply golden and cooked through.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

- **Nail the cheese.**

Buy a block of feta in brine, not the pre-crumbled dust coated in anti-caking agents. It perfectly mimics authentic Bulgarian sirene and melts into soft, comforting pockets.

- **Don't skip the mint.**

Dried spearmint (djodjen) is the non-negotiable soul of this dish; without it, you are just eating potato pancakes.



# Yaytsa s Patladzhan

Яйца с патладжан

*yay-tsah s paht-lah-dzhahn*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know the most profound comfort foods emerge from a battered skillet and whatever the garden offered that day. First-generation kids are always shocked to learn the secret to this rustic magic isn't some complex Mediterranean technique—it's just earthy eggplant caramelized in rich European butter, hit with an unapologetic handful of fresh dill and the unexpected warmth of ground nutmeg. Forget the trendy shakshuka variations; this is the canonical, unadulterated scramble your grandmother made when she needed to get a fiercely good meal on the table in fifteen minutes.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 med</b>	Globe eggplant <i>trimmed and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>3 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter	<b>6 large</b>	eggs <i>well beaten</i>
<b>3 med clove</b>	garlic <i>minced into a paste</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	Bulgarian sirene or Greek feta <i>crumbled</i>
<b>1/4 tsp</b>	ground nutmeg		

## PREPARATION

- **Purge the eggplant of its bitter juices.**

Toss the diced eggplant with the kosher salt in a colander over the sink. Let it sit for at least 10 minutes to break down the spongy texture so it fries beautifully instead of soaking up the butter.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Rinse and aggressively dry the eggplant.**

Quickly rinse the eggplant under cold water to remove excess salt, then rigorously pat the cubes completely dry with paper towels.

- 2. Caramelize the eggplant in butter.**

Melt the butter in a large non-stick or cast-iron skillet over medium heat. Add the eggplant and sauté for 8 to 10 minutes until deeply golden, caramelized, and tender.

- 3. Bloom the aromatics off the heat.**

Reduce the heat to medium-low and stir in the garlic for 1 to 2 minutes until fragrant. Pull the skillet from the heat entirely to toss in the nutmeg, black pepper, and half of the fresh dill.

**1. Scramble the eggs to a soft, glossy curd.**

Return the skillet to the heat, pour the beaten eggs directly over the seasoned eggplant, and gently fold continuously with a spatula for 2 to 3 minutes until just set but still tender.

**2. Garnish and serve.**

Remove from the heat immediately, top with the remaining fresh dill, and serve straight from the skillet alongside crusty bread and a slab of sirene.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The secret is in the nutmeg.**

It might seem unusual for a savory egg dish, but a pinch of ground nutmeg is the traditional hallmark here, seamlessly bridging the rich butter, eggs, and earthy eggplant.

● **Stick to butter, not olive oil.**

To replicate the strictly authentic homeland flavor profile, skip the olive oil. Use a high-quality, European-style unsalted butter to get the rich, nutty Maillard reaction that makes this dish sing.



# The Tuesday Pot: Bob Chorba & Stews

*Translating the slow-cooked clay pots of the homeland into manageable weeknight Dutch oven meals without losing the deep, savory flavor profiles.*

In the old country, a clay gyuvech might sit in the hearth all afternoon, slowly coaxing the soul out of pork, paprika, and white beans while the world turned outside. It's a beautiful thought, but who has the time? In the realities of the modern American kitchen, the heavy Dutch oven is the unsung hero. This

chapter is about taking the deep, unapologetic flavors of a long-simmered Bob Chorba or a fiercely savory Kavarma and hammering them into something you can actually pull off on a dreary Tuesday night after work.

The meals that follow don't ask you to tend a fire. They ask for thirty minutes and a little respect for the ingredients. From a rapid-fire spinach and sirene soup to a steaming bowl of Supa Topcheta that still tastes like your grandmother made it, this is how you feed the people you love the real thing—without losing your mind in the process.





## 30-Minute Bob Chorba

Боб чорба

*bob chor-ba*

This is the real deal, the Tuesday night anchor of the Bulgarian soul, adapted for a kitchen that doesn't have an overnight soak in its schedule. The secret to that unmistakable, time-traveling homeland aroma isn't a slow-simmered bone broth—it's the collision of dried spearmint and summer savory blooming in sweet paprika. We're using high-quality canned beans, stripped of their starchy canning sludge, and a one-pot weeknight *zaprushka* to build a velvety, peasant-style masterpiece in thirty minutes flat. No frills, no apologies.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>30 oz</b>	canned Cannellini or Great Northern beans <i>drained and rinsed under cold water</i>	<b>2 small</b>	garlic cloves <i>minced</i>
<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried spearmint
<b>1 large</b>	carrot <i>peeled and finely diced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 med</b>	red bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	plain tomato sauce
		<b>4 cup</b>	vegetable broth
		<b>to taste</b>	salt and freshly ground black pepper

## PREPARATION

- **Rinse the beans.**

Thoroughly drain and rinse the canned beans under cold running water to remove the metallic canning starch and mimic the clean taste of home-boiled beans.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sauté the aromatic base.**

Place a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat, add the sunflower oil, and sauté the diced onion, carrot, and bell pepper for 5 to 7 minutes until softened, stirring in the garlic for the last minute.

- 2. Bloom the spices for the soft zaprushka.**

Lower the heat slightly, add the sweet paprika, spearmint, and summer savory, and stir constantly for 30 seconds until the oil turns a deep red and fills the kitchen with aroma.

- 3. Build the broth and arrest the paprika.**

Immediately pour in the tomato sauce to prevent the paprika from turning bitter, then stir in the drained beans and the vegetable broth.

**1. Simmer and thicken the soup.**

Bring to a gentle boil, reduce the heat to low, partially cover, and simmer for 15 minutes; use a potato masher or the back of a wooden spoon to crush some of the beans against the pot wall to create a velvety texture without frying flour.

**2. Season and serve.**

Remove from heat, season generously with salt and pepper—never salt beans early or their skins will toughen—and serve steaming hot with crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The meat option.**

For a richer, smokier dish reminiscent of village festivals, sauté a handful of diced pancetta, bacon, or sliced smoked sausage in the oil before adding the vegetables.

● **Mind your mint.**

Never substitute peppermint for dzhodzhen (spearmint), or your soup will taste like toothpaste. Standard supermarket dried spearmint is exactly what you need if you can't source Bulgarian imports.

● **Savory substitutions.**

If you cannot find summer savory (chubritsa), do not skip it entirely. Substitute an equal 50/50 mix of dried thyme and dried oregano to recreate its earthy depth.



# Supa Topcheta

Супа топчета

*SOO-pah tohp-CHEH-tah*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of summer savory steeping in a rich broth alongside tiny, tender meatballs is the definitive scent of home. Supa topcheta is an unpretentious, deeply comforting staple that finishes with a luxurious trick known as the *zastroika*. This simple emulsion of yogurt and egg yolks turns the broth velvety and rich without a drop of heavy cream. The grandmothers back home rely on a few strict rules: roll the meatballs small enough to fit on a soup spoon, lightly sauté the carrots to release their golden color, and use a splash of cold water to foolproof the temper. No restaurant flourishes—just the real thing, exactly as it should be.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground pork	<b>2 large</b>	carrots <i>finely diced</i>
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground beef	<b>2 med</b>	celery stalks <i>finely diced</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	white rice <i>rinsed</i>	<b>2 med</b>	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>
<b>1 large</b>	egg white	<b>6 cup</b>	water
<b>1 small</b>	yellow onion <i>grated</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 tsp</b>	salt	<b>1 1/2 oz</b>	angel hair pasta <i>broken into small pieces</i>
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper	<b>2 large</b>	egg yolks
<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>3/4 cup</b>	plain whole milk Greek yogurt
<b>1/2 tsp</b>	dried summer savory	<b>1 tbsp</b>	fresh lemon juice
<b>1/4 cup</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>2 tbsp</b>	cold water
<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>		

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Form the meatballs.

Combine the pork, beef, rice, egg white, grated onion, salt, pepper, paprika, and a half teaspoon of summer savory in a bowl. Form the mixture into hazelnut-sized meatballs, dredge them lightly in the flour, and set aside.

### 2. Build the broth.

Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat, adding the diced onion, carrots, and celery. Sauté until the onions turn translucent and the carrots bleed a golden-orange hue into the oil, then toss in the potatoes for one minute more.

**1. Simmer the soup.**

Pour in the water and the remaining tablespoon of summer savory, bringing the liquid to a gentle, rolling boil. Drop the floured meatballs in one by one, drop the heat to medium-low, cover partially, and let it simmer for twenty minutes.

**2. Cook the pasta and rest.**

Stir in the broken angel hair pasta and simmer for another eight to ten minutes until both the potatoes and the noodles are tender. Pull the pot entirely off the heat and let it sit for ten minutes so the violent boiling stops.

**3. Prepare the zastroika.**

Vigorously whisk the egg yolks, Greek yogurt, lemon juice, and cold water in a medium heat-proof bowl. That single splash of cold water is the grandmothers' secret to stabilizing the proteins, ensuring the yogurt won't scramble when it meets the hot broth.

**4. Finish the soup.**

Ladle a half cup of the hot broth into the yogurt mixture while whisking constantly, and repeat this twice more until the temper is warm and highly fluid. Slowly pour this mixture back into the main pot, stirring gently in a lazy circle, then adjust the seasoning and finish with a handful of fresh parsley.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **The chubritsa is non-negotiable.**

Bulgarian summer savory has a distinct, peppery aroma that makes this dish what it is. Find it online or at a local Eastern European market.

● **Sauté the carrots properly.**

Taking the time to sauté the carrots extracts their fat-soluble beta-carotene, giving the soup its authentic and appetizing golden drops of oil.



# Svinsko s Praz

СВИНСКО С ПРАЗ

*sveen-sko s praz*

When the air gets sharp and the Midwestern winter starts mirroring the cold of the Balkan mountains, this is the pot you want on your stove. Svinsko s Praz is an unapologetic, rustic celebration of exactly two ingredients: rich pork and sweet leeks. It doesn't rely on fussy techniques or hours of active cooking. The secret here isn't a magical spice, it's simply letting the leeks melt down in the pork fat until they create a velvety, naturally sweet gravy that practically begs for a heel of crusty bread. It doesn't seek attention; it just is—and that is more than enough.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	boneless pork shoulder <i>cut into 1-inch cubes</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	ground cumin
<b>2 tbsp</b>	neutral vegetable oil	<b>1/2 cup</b>	dry wine
<b>1 tbsp</b>	bacon fat	<b>1 cup</b>	water
<b>5 large</b>	leeks <i>white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, washed thoroughly, and sliced into 1/2-inch half-moons</i>	<b>1 med</b>	bay leaf
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
		<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper

## PREPARATION

- **Clean the leeks thoroughly.**

American supermarket leeks are notoriously sandy. Slice them first, then submerge them in a bowl of cold water, agitating them slightly so the grit falls to the bottom before lifting them out.

- **Prep ahead.**

You can wash and chop the leeks up to two days in advance and keep them in a sealed bag in the fridge with a damp paper towel.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sear the meat to build the flavor foundation.**

Place a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium-high heat and add the oil and bacon fat. Pat the pork cubes dry, season them generously with salt and pepper, and add them to the pot in a single layer. Let them sit undisturbed for 3 to 4 minutes to develop a deep brown crust, then toss and brown the other sides. Remove the pork with a slotted spoon and set aside on a plate, leaving the fat in the pot.

**1. Sweat the leeks with grandmotherly patience.**

Lower the heat to medium and add the cleaned, sliced leeks to the pot. Stir them around, scraping up the browned bits of pork from the bottom. Cook slowly for about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until they are completely softened and have significantly reduced in volume to unlock their natural sweetness.

**2. Bloom the spices carefully.**

Return the pork and any accumulated juices to the pot. Sprinkle the sweet paprika and cumin over the meat and leeks. Stir constantly for exactly 60 seconds to release the oils without burning the paprika.

**3. Deglaze and build the braise.**

Pour in the wine, stirring vigorously to deglaze the pot, and let it bubble and reduce by half. Pour in the water and tuck the bay leaf into the liquid, bringing it to a gentle simmer.

**4. Simmer to perfection.**

Cover the Dutch oven with a tight-fitting lid. Turn the heat down to the lowest setting and let it simmer gently for 45 to 60 minutes, or until the pork is fork-tender and the leeks have melted into a rich, luscious sauce. You can also pop the covered pot into a 350°F oven for an hour to mimic the traditional clay pot method.

**5. Thicken and serve.**

Remove the lid and discard the bay leaf. If the sauce looks too watery, let it bubble uncovered for 5 minutes to thicken. Taste for seasoning, then serve hot with copious amounts of crusty bread.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Buy the right cut of pork.**

Do not buy lean pork chops or tenderloin for this. The fat and connective tissue in the shoulder are what make the stew melt-in-your-mouth tender.

- **Do not burn the paprika.**

Blooming the paprika in the hot fat releases its oils and creates the dish's signature color and flavor, but it turns bitter instantly if burned. Do not walk away during this step.

- **Use the right paprika.**

Ensure you are using standard sweet paprika, not Spanish smoked paprika, which will mask the delicate sweetness of the leeks.



# Leshta Chorba

Леша чорба

*lesh-ta chor-ba*

If you want a kitchen in Ohio to smell exactly like a Bulgarian grandmother's house on a chilly afternoon, this is the pot you put on the stove. Leshta Chorba is the ultimate expression of peasant cooking—humble ingredients transformed by technique into something deeply comforting. The secret isn't a fancy meat broth or hours of simmering; it's a quick weeknight zaprazhka—a toasted flour and paprika roux—and an uncompromising reliance on summer savory. Keep it simple, leave the bacon in the fridge, and let the lentils do the talking.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 cup</b>	brown or green lentils <i>rinsed well and picked over</i>	<b>6 cup</b>	water
<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil or neutral oil	<b>1 cup</b>	crushed tomatoes
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 large</b>	carrot <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1/2 med</b>	red or green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>2 med</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>3 med</b>	garlic <i>pressed or finely minced</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>chopped</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>2 tbsp</b>	red wine vinegar
		<b>1 med</b>	garlic <i>pressed</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Perform the grandmother's cleanse.**

Place the rinsed lentils in a small pot, cover with cold water, and bring to a rapid boil for 2 minutes. Drain and discard the water before using the lentils to remove bitterness and improve digestibility.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the aromatic base.**

In a large heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium heat. Add the diced onion, carrot, and bell pepper, sautéing for 5 to 7 minutes until softened and translucent, then add the 2 minced garlic cloves and cook for 1 more minute.

**1. Execute the weeknight zaprazhka.**

Sprinkle the flour over the softened vegetables and stir vigorously for 1 minute to cook off the raw flavor. Pull the pot completely off the heat and stir in the sweet paprika—doing this off the heat prevents the paprika's sugars from burning and turning bitterly disastrous.

**2. Simmer the lentils.**

Immediately return the pot to the heat and pour in the water, stirring well to dissolve the flour and paprika into a rich, reddish liquid. Add the par-boiled lentils, bring to a gentle boil, then lower the heat to a simmer and cook partially covered for 25 to 30 minutes until the lentils are completely tender.

**3. Introduce the acid and herbs late in the process.**

Crucially, do not add the tomatoes until the lentils are soft, as acid will permanently harden their skins. Stir in the crushed tomatoes, summer savory, salt, and black pepper, simmering gently for another 10 to 15 minutes to marry the flavors and thicken the chorba.

**4. Finish with raw aromatics.**

Turn off the heat. Stir the remaining 3 cloves of pressed garlic and the fresh parsley directly into the hot soup, preserving the sharp, medicinal bite of the garlic.

**5. Serve in the monastery style.**

Ladle into bowls alongside crusty bread. Keep a small bowl of the red wine vinegar mixed with the single pressed garlic clove on the table, letting everyone add a sharp, acidic splash to their bowl exactly as they do in the villages.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Sourcing the soul of the dish.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is non-negotiable here. Without it, you are just eating a generic lentil stew. Do not substitute spearmint, which Bulgarian grandmothers strictly reserve for bean soup.



## The "Fake" Shkembe Chorba

Фалшива шкембе чорба

*fal-SHEE-vah shkem-BEH chor-BAH*

There is a universally understood weekend smell in a Bulgarian household: the sharp, unapologetic tang of raw garlic and vinegar cutting through a rich cloud of paprika butter. It's the smell of tripe simmering on the stove for four hours, a sacred, gelatinous restorative meant to cure whatever sins your uncle committed the night before. But nobody has four hours to boil stomach lining on a Tuesday night in Ohio. Enter the "fake" shkembe. This modern home-kitchen hack swaps the organ meat for torn oyster mushrooms, nailing the exact bouncy texture of the original. The secret? The soul of this dish was

never really the meat. It's the velvety milk broth and the aggressive, non-negotiable slap of that garlic-vinegar dressing mixed in right at the table. Pure, unadulterated comfort in under thirty minutes.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	oyster mushrooms <i>wiped clean and torn by hand into long strips along the gills</i>	<b>2 cup</b>	whole milk <i>slightly warmed</i>
<b>4 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1 tbsp</b>	neutral oil	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>4 large</b>	garlic <i>smashed into a paste</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>1/3 cup</b>	apple cider vinegar
<b>2 cup</b>	warm water	<b>1 tbsp</b>	crushed red pepper flakes

## PREPARATION

- **Tear, don't chop.**

Tearing the oyster mushrooms by hand along their natural gills creates an irregular shape that perfectly tricks the brain and mimics the bouncy texture of authentic tripe.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Brown the mushrooms in butter and oil.**

In a heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat, melt the butter with the oil, add the torn mushrooms, and toss with a generous pinch of salt. Let their natural water release and evaporate entirely, continuing to cook for 10 to 12 minutes until they sizzle and fry in the fat.

**1. Build the zaprushka.**

Sprinkle the flour directly over the sizzling mushrooms and stir continuously for 1 to 2 minutes to cook out the raw flour taste.

**2. Bloom the paprika for exactly ten seconds.**

This is the critical moment. Sprinkle in the sweet paprika, stir rapidly for no more than 10 to 15 seconds to toast it, and do not let it sit. If it burns, it turns irreversibly bitter and takes the whole pot down with it.

**3. Emulsify the broth.**

Immediately pour in the warm water, whisking vigorously to halt the cooking and dissolve the flour and paprika into a smooth base, then slowly stir in the warmed whole milk.

**4. Simmer the soup.**

Bring the pot to a gentle bubble, being careful not to let it reach a furious boil that might curdle the milk. Lower the heat, add the black pepper, and simmer uncovered for 10 to 15 minutes, tasting and adjusting the salt until deeply savory.

**5. Prepare the table condiment.**

While the soup simmers, aggressively mix the smashed garlic paste and apple cider vinegar in a small serving bowl. Never add this directly to the simmering pot, as heat destroys the sharp, volatile oils essential to the dish.

**6. Serve with mandatory table-side participation.**

Ladle the creamy, hot soup into bowls and place the garlic-vinegar mixture and red pepper flakes in the center of the table. Instruct everyone to stir a spoonful or two of the pungent vinegar mix and a pinch of chili directly into their bowl before taking a bite.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Use sweet, not smoked, paprika.**

American cooks often reach for smoked paprika or Spanish pimentón, but this will completely ruin the authentic flavor profile. Use a high-quality standard sweet paprika, like Hungarian sweet paprika.



# Pileshka Supa

Пилешка супа

*pee-lesh-kah soo-pah*

If there is a scent that defines a Bulgarian childhood, it's the earthy aroma of lovage rising from a hot pot on a cold Tuesday night. Pileshka Supa isn't your standard, watery American chicken noodle. It's tangier, creamier, and infinitely more restorative thanks to *zastroika*—a magical finishing technique of tempering yogurt and eggs that turns the broth into liquid velvet. Your grandmother might have spent three hours boiling a whole bird to get here, but on a busy weeknight, you don't have three hours. By leaning on good bone broth and dark meat thighs, you cut the time in half without sacrificing an ounce of soul. Do not skip the tempering, and do whatever it takes to find the lovage.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1 tsp</b>	dried lovage
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>to taste</b>	salt
<b>2 med</b>	carrots <i>finely diced</i>	<b>to taste</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1 med</b>	red or green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	<b>3/4 cup</b>	plain whole milk yogurt <i>softened to room temp</i>
<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	chicken thighs <i>boneless and skinless</i>	<b>1 large</b>	egg <i>softened to room temp</i>
<b>6 cup</b>	chicken bone broth	<b>1 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>2 med</b>	Yukon gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	fresh lemon juice
<b>1/2 cup</b>	fideo noodles <i>broken into small pieces if long</i>	<b>1/2 bunch</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Bring your dairy to room temperature before you start cooking.**

Tempering is a game of thermodynamics; starting with ice-cold yogurt makes it infinitely harder to avoid scrambling the egg.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sweat the finely diced vegetables in the oil over medium heat until translucent.**  
Take the five to seven minutes required to do this right. The fine dice ensures they melt cohesively into the broth rather than bobbing around as clumsy chunks.
- 2. Simmer the chicken thighs in the bone broth until cooked through.**  
Skim any unsightly foam that rises to the surface. Once cooked, pull the thighs out, shred the dark meat with a couple of forks, and immediately throw it back into the pot.

**1. Add the potatoes, noodles, and lovage, simmering until tender.**

Season generously with salt and pepper. Boil for about fifteen minutes until the potatoes yield to a fork, then turn off the heat entirely and let the pot rest for a few minutes.

**2. Vigorously whisk the yogurt, egg, flour, and lemon juice in a separate bowl until completely smooth.**

The flour is a brilliant generational secret weapon that stabilizes the proteins so your soup won't break and curdle when you reheat it for lunch tomorrow.

**3. Slowly ladle hot broth into the yogurt mixture while whisking constantly to temper the eggs.**

Repeat this with two or three ladles. You are gently bringing the cold dairy up to temperature so it doesn't scramble upon contact with the mother pot.

**4. Pour the tempered liaison back into the resting soup pot in a thin stream while stirring gently in one direction.**

The broth will instantly transform into a creamy, golden-yellow masterpiece.

Garnish with the fresh parsley and serve immediately.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing true lovage is non-negotiable for the authentic flavor.**

You can find dried lovage online easily. If you are in an absolute pinch, use minced inner celery leaves, but know that you're missing the true soul of the dish.

- **Respect the thermal shock of the zastroika.**

Never add the tempered yogurt mixture to a pot that is still boiling. Pulling the soup off the heat for a few minutes before the final merge is what saves you from a curdled disaster.



# Spanachena Supa sas Sirene

Спаначена супа със сирене

*spah-NAH-cheh-nah SOO-pah sahs SEE-reh-neh*

Forget the heavy cream and pureed cauliflower nonsense. This is the authentic, rustic Bulgarian chorba a grandmother makes with whatever is pulling from the spring garden, stretched with pantry staples to feed a busy household. It is a humble, deeply comforting masterclass in making simple things extraordinary: an earthy, spearmint-laced broth given body by short-grain rice, transformed into velvet through a careful yogurt tempering, and finished with the sharp, salty punch of brined sheep's milk cheese. It is exactly what home tastes like, and it comes together in under forty minutes on a Tuesday night.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>3 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>10 oz</b>	baby spinach
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried spearmint
<b>1 med</b>	carrot <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>2 large</b>	egg yolks
<b>6 cup</b>	water	<b>1/2 cup</b>	plain whole milk Greek yogurt
<b>1/3 cup</b>	short-grain rice <i>rinsed</i>	<b>4 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta <i>crumbled by hand</i>

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Build the foundation.

Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven over medium heat, then sauté the onion and carrot until soft and translucent, about 5 to 7 minutes.

### 2. Bloom the paprika.

Stir in the flour and cook for one minute. Pull the pot briefly off the heat, stir in the sweet paprika, and let it bloom in the residual heat for exactly ten seconds so it releases its oils without turning bitter.

### 3. Simmer the rice.

Return the pot to the heat and immediately pour in the water. Add the rinsed rice, salt, and black pepper. Bring to a gentle boil, reduce to a simmer, cover, and cook for 12 to 15 minutes until the rice is tender.

### 4. Wilt the spinach.

Stir in the spinach and the spearmint. Simmer for 3 to 5 minutes until the greens are vibrant and tender, then remove the pot entirely from the heat.

**1. Temper the zastroika.**

In a medium bowl, vigorously whisk the egg yolks and yogurt until smooth.

While whisking constantly, slowly drizzle in three ladles of the hot soup broth one at a time to slowly bring the yogurt up to temperature without curdling the eggs.

**2. Unite and serve.**

Slowly pour the warmed yogurt mixture back into the main pot, stirring gently to create a silky, cloudy broth. Ladle into bowls and generously crumble the brined feta over the top just before eating, letting the hot soup soften the cheese.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Respect the zastroika.**

Never return the pot to the heat or cover it with a lid once the yogurt and egg mixture has been stirred in, or the soup will separate and curdle.

● **Seek out spearmint.**

Standard peppermint will make the soup taste medicinal. If you cannot find dried spearmint at a Middle Eastern market, use a very light touch of standard dried mint mixed with fresh parsley.

● **Buy feta in brine.**

Pre-crumbed American feta is too dry and coated in anti-caking agents. Look for a block of sheep's milk feta submerged in brine for the authentic creamy, sharp tang.



# Gyuveche in a Dutch Oven

Голямо гювече

*go-LYA-mo gyoo-VEH-cheh*

This is the ultimate magic trick of the Bulgarian home kitchen. Traditionally, gyuveche is a quick meal layered in small clay pots and topped with a baked egg. But on a weeknight in Ohio, no one has time to clean six little pots. Scaling this into a cast-iron Dutch oven perfectly mimics the steaming and roasting properties of Troyan ceramics. Just remember the golden rules: buy real block feta in brine, never stir the layers, and do not skip the chubritsa—it is the unmistakable smell of home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 tbsp</b>	olive oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	chubritsa or dried summer savory
<b>1 lb</b>	ground pork or beef and pork blend	<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>4 oz</b>	smoked sausage <i>diced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>thinly sliced into half-moons</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>3 clove</b>	garlic <i>minced</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	water or chicken broth
<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and sliced into 1/4-inch thick rounds</i>	<b>6 oz</b>	Bulgarian sirene or block feta in brine <i>crumbled into large chunks</i>
<b>1 large</b>	red bell pepper <i>cored and chopped</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	kashkaval or mixed low-moisture mozzarella and young Gouda <i>shredded</i>
<b>1 large</b>	green bell pepper <i>cored and chopped</i>	<b>4 large</b>	eggs
<b>14 1/2 oz</b>	canned diced tomatoes <i>undrained</i>	<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>chopped</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 400°F.**

Set your oven before you begin browning the meats so it is fully up to temperature when the pot is ready to bake.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Brown the ground meat and smoked sausage.**

Heat the oil in a Dutch oven over medium-high heat on the stovetop. Cook the ground pork and diced sausage until browned, about 6 to 8 minutes, then remove the meat with a slotted spoon, leaving the rendered fat in the pot.

**1. Coat the potatoes in the rendered fat and spices.**

Off the heat, mix the chubritsa, paprika, salt, and pepper in a small bowl. Lay the sliced potatoes flat in the pork fat remaining in the Dutch oven and sprinkle with half of the spice mixture.

**2. Layer the remaining vegetables and meat without stirring.**

Scatter the sliced onions, minced garlic, browned meats, and chopped bell peppers over the potatoes. Pour the undrained tomatoes, water, and remaining spice mixture over the very top.

**3. Cover and bake for 35 to 40 minutes.**

Place the heavy lid on the Dutch oven and transfer to the oven. The tight lid will trap the moisture, steaming the potatoes perfectly while the flavors meld.

**4. Add the cheeses and crack the eggs.**

Remove the pot from the oven and take off the lid. Check that the potatoes are tender, then scatter the crumbled sirene and shredded kashkaval evenly over the top. Make shallow indentations with the back of a spoon and crack an egg into each.

**5. Roast uncovered for 10 to 12 minutes.**

Return the uncovered pot to the oven and bake until the cheese is bubbling and golden, the egg whites are set, but the yolks still have a slight jiggle.

**6. Rest and garnish.**

Let the pot sit for 5 minutes so the intense heat subsides and the liquids reabsorb, then top with fresh parsley and serve.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Never stir the pot.**

The layering is structural. Mixing the raw tomatoes with the raw potatoes will cause the acid to harden the starch, keeping the potatoes unpleasantly tough.

- **Source the right cheese.**

Dry, pre-crumbled feta from a plastic tub will turn to rubber in the oven. You must buy block sheep's milk feta stored in brine to survive the heat.





# Sunday Moussaka & Stuffed Comforts

*The weekend centerpieces that yield the best Monday leftovers.*

There is a quiet, deliberate rhythm to a Bulgarian Sunday afternoon. It's found in the tactile work of hollowing out peppers and the methodical layering of potatoes and ground pork. This isn't the panicked scramble of a weeknight. This is cooking as a low-simmering meditation—the kind of honest, slow-moving kitchen labor that yields the ultimate prize: spectacular leftovers eaten cold, straight from the fridge on a Monday.

Forget the Greek eggplant variations. Real Bulgarian moussaka is a humble, majestic brick of root vegetables, meat, and a golden baked-yogurt crust. Alongside it sit the pulneni chushki, shifting seamlessly from summer's bright sirene cheese to winter's hearty rice and meat, before finishing with the unapologetic, childhood comfort of sweet baked macaroni. These are the heavy hitters of the Balkan table. Food that knows exactly where it came from.





# Bulgarian Moussaka

българска мусака

*buhl-gar-ska moo-sah-kah*

In the American culinary lexicon, moussaka conjures a heavy Greek casserole drowning under a dense béchamel. But in a Bulgarian home, it means something entirely different, and arguably far more comforting. It is a rustic, unpretentious marriage of diced potatoes and deeply savory pork, unified by the unmistakable piney scent of summer savory blooming in hot fat. Grandmothers used to spend all day frying the potatoes in batches to pull this off. This is the canonical dish, streamlined for a weeknight without sacrificing the essential

chemistry of the homeland: a reaction of baking soda and yogurt that yields a glorious, golden, soufflé-like crust. No shortcuts on the flavor, just a profound respect for the home cook's time.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	crushed canned tomatoes
<b>1 med</b>	carrot <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	warm water
<b>1/2 med</b>	red bell pepper <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	plain whole-milk yogurt
<b>1 1/4 lb</b>	ground pork and beef blend	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	baking soda
<b>1 tbsp</b>	summer savory	<b>3 large</b>	eggs <i>brought to room temperature</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour
		<b>1/4 tsp</b>	kosher salt

## PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven.**

Set the oven to 400°F (200°C) before you begin prepping the vegetables.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. **Sweat the aromatics.**

Heat the sunflower oil in a large skillet or Dutch oven over medium-high heat, then add the onion, carrot, and bell pepper, sautéing until the onion is translucent and soft, about 5 to 7 minutes.

**1. Brown the meat deeply.**

Add the ground meat blend, using a wooden spoon to break it into very fine crumbles. Cook until the moisture fully evaporates and the meat begins to sizzle and fry in its own fat. Do not rush this; deep browning is critical for the authentic flavor.

**2. Bloom the spices.**

Reduce the heat to medium, stir in the summer savory, paprika, black pepper, and the 1 teaspoon of kosher salt. Toast the spices constantly in the hot fat for 30 seconds until highly fragrant. Immediately stir in the crushed tomatoes, let the mixture simmer for 2 minutes to bring it together, and remove from the heat.

**3. Assemble the base and bake.**

Spread the raw diced potatoes in an ungreased 9x13-inch baking dish. Pour the hot meat and tomato mixture directly over the potatoes and toss gently to coat evenly. Pour the warm water over the mixture so it comes halfway up the potatoes, then bake uncovered for 40 to 45 minutes until the potatoes are fork-tender and the liquid is mostly absorbed.

**4. Engineer the fluffy topping.**

During the final 10 minutes of the bake, sprinkle the baking soda over the yogurt in a medium bowl and stir well. Let it sit for 1 minute; you will literally see the yogurt bubble and expand as the lactic acid reacts. Whisk in the eggs, flour, and the remaining 1/4 teaspoon of salt until the mixture is completely smooth and airy.

**5. Crown the moussaka.**

Remove the baking dish from the oven and pour the yogurt topping evenly over the surface of the meat and potatoes, using a spatula to spread it gently to the edges. Return the dish to the oven and bake for another 10 to 15 minutes, until the topping puffs up into a thick, golden-brown crust.

## 1. **Rest the casserole.**

When you pull the moussaka from the oven, you will want to eat it immediately. Do not. Let the casserole rest at room temperature for at least 15 minutes. This allows the juices to settle and the topping to firm up, ensuring it holds together in perfect, structural squares when you cut into it.

### CHEF'S NOTES

- **The non-negotiable herb.**

Summer savory, or chubritsa, is the undeniable soul of this dish. Do not use Italian seasoning, which will instantly drag the flavor profile away from the Balkans. If you are truly desperate, substitute dried oregano mixed with a little dried thyme, but promise yourself you will buy the real thing soon.

- **Sourcing the right potato.**

Stick to waxy or all-purpose potatoes like Yukon Gold or standard white potatoes. Russets will disintegrate into mush during the bake and ruin the texture.

- **How to serve.**

In Bulgaria, it is practically illegal to eat a slice of moussaka without a generous dollop of cold, plain yogurt on the side to balance the rich, savory meat.



# Winter Pulneni Chushki

Зимни пълнени чушки

*ZEEM-nee PUHL-neh-nee CHOOSH-kee*

In the agrarian villages of Bulgaria, fresh peppers vanished with the first frost. To survive, grandmothers dried sweet red peppers in the late summer sun. You could absolutely make this with fresh supermarket bells—modern Bulgarians do—but if you want that real, smoky, snowed-in Balkan nostalgia, hit the Hispanic aisle for dried California chiles. They are a dead ringer for authentic suhi chushki. Stuffed with pork, beef, and rice, sealed with a genius flour trick, and drowned in a tangy yogurt sauce tempered with the roasting juices, this is straight, unapologetic comfort.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>10</b>	dried California or New Mexico chiles <i>steeped, stems and seeds removed</i>	<b>1 tbsp</b>	tomato paste
<b>2 tbsp</b>	sunflower oil	<b>1 tbsp</b>	dried summer savory
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>1 med</b>	carrot <i>finely grated</i>	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground pork	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1/2 lb</b>	ground beef	<b>3 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour <i>placed in a shallow dish</i>
<b>1/2 cup</b>	medium-grain rice <i>rinsed well under cold water</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	plain whole milk yogurt
		<b>2 large</b>	eggs
		<b>1 1/2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Rehydrate the dried chiles.

Place the dried peppers in a large heat-proof bowl and pour boiling water over them until completely submerged. Weigh them down with a plate and steep for 20 to 30 minutes until soft and pliable, then carefully drain the water, slice off the stem tops, and shake out the seeds.

### 2. Build the flavor base.

Preheat your oven to 375°F. In a large, deep skillet, heat the sunflower oil over medium heat, then add the diced onion and grated carrot and sauté until soft and translucent, about 5 minutes.

### 3. Brown and heavily season the meat.

Add the pork and beef to the skillet, breaking it apart with a wooden spoon until it's no longer pink. Stir in the tomato paste, summer savory, sweet paprika, salt, and black pepper, letting the spices bloom in the hot fat for 30 seconds until highly fragrant.

**1. Pre-swell the rice so it doesn't split the peppers.**

Add the rinsed rice to the skillet and stir for 1 to 2 minutes until the grains look slightly glossy. Pour in 1/2 cup of warm water, reduce the heat to low, and simmer gently until the liquid is entirely absorbed.

**2. Stuff and seal using the grandma flour trick.**

Using a small spoon, gently fill each pepper with the meat and rice mixture, leaving a tiny bit of room at the top for the rice to finish expanding. Press the open, exposed meat end of each pepper directly into the shallow dish of all-purpose flour to coat it—this seals the pepper and stops the filling from washing out into the broth.

**3. Bake in a shallow bath.**

Arrange the stuffed peppers snugly in a single layer in a 9x13 inch baking dish. Pour enough warm water into the bottom of the dish to come up about 1/2 inch, cover tightly with aluminum foil, and bake for 40 minutes. Remove the foil and bake for another 10 to 15 minutes to allow the tops to slightly blister.

**4. Whisk the yogurt base.**

While the peppers finish their uncovered bake, vigorously whisk the yogurt, eggs, 1 1/2 tablespoons of flour, and a pinch of salt in a medium saucepan off the heat until perfectly smooth.

**5. Temper the sauce with the roasting juices.**

When the peppers come out of the oven, tilt the baking dish and ladle out about 1 cup of the hot, savory broth. Slowly stream this hot broth into the yogurt mixture while whisking constantly to prevent the eggs from scrambling, then stir continuously over medium-low heat for 3 to 5 minutes until the sauce thickens into a rich gravy.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **Using fresh or frozen bell peppers.**

If you don't want to use dried chiles, you can use 6 medium fresh or frozen bell peppers. Skip the rehydration step, core them, and prick the skins 2 to 3 times with a fork so they don't burst in the oven.

- **Sourcing Chubritsa.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is the defining flavor of a Bulgarian kitchen. If you absolutely cannot find it, substitute 2 teaspoons of dried oregano mixed with 1 teaspoon of dried mint.



# Summer Chushki Byurek

Чушки бюрек

*chush-ki byu-rek*

The scent of red peppers blistering over open fires is the undeniable perfume of a Bulgarian autumn, a smoke signal that pulls the diaspora right back to their mothers' kitchens. Historically, these feta-stuffed, breaded peppers were painstakingly pan-fried, leaving the stove slicked in oil and the cook exhausted. Modern grandmothers aren't martyrs; they bake them. Roasting on high heat yields the exact same golden, comforting crunch with a fraction of the mess, bringing an uncompromising taste of home to a chaotic Wednesday night.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>32 oz</b>	whole roasted red peppers <i>drained</i>	<b>2 small</b>	garlic cloves <i>microplaned or mashed to a paste</i>
<b>7 oz</b>	feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>3 oz</b>	whole-milk ricotta	<b>1 cup</b>	plain unseasoned breadcrumbs
<b>4 large</b>	eggs <i>divided</i>	<b>3 tbsp</b>	melted butter or neutral oil
<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	black pepper
		<b>1/4 tsp</b>	salt

## PREPARATION

- **Extract the moisture from the peppers.**

Remove the jarred peppers from their liquid, make a small slit down the side to open them like a book, and gently scrape out any stray seeds.

- **Press the peppers completely dry.**

Lay the opened peppers flat between triple layers of paper towels and leave them for 10 to 15 minutes. A wet pepper will violently reject its breading, leading to a soggy final dish.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Formulate the cheese filling.**

In a medium bowl, vigorously mix the crumbled feta, ricotta, one egg, parsley, garlic, and black pepper until it forms a cohesive, thick paste. If it feels overly wet or runny, stir in a tablespoon of breadcrumbs to absorb the excess moisture and prevent leakage.

- 2. Stuff the dried peppers.**

Spoon one to two heaping tablespoons of the cheese mixture into the center of each pepper, then gently fold the sides back over to recreate its original shape. Do not overstuff; the pepper should close comfortably around the cheese.

**1. Prepare the breading station.**

Preheat your oven to 400°F and line a heavy-duty baking sheet with parchment paper, brushing it generously with melted butter or oil. Set up three shallow bowls: one with the flour, one with the remaining three eggs lightly beaten with the salt, and one with the breadcrumbs.

**2. Bread the stuffed peppers.**

Working one by one, gently dredge a pepper in the flour to create a dry surface, submerge it completely in the egg wash, and finally lay it in the breadcrumbs, pressing lightly to form a solid, protective crust.

**3. Bake until golden and crisp.**

Transfer the breaded peppers to the oiled baking sheet, brush or spray their tops generously with the remaining butter or oil, and bake on the middle rack for 15 to 20 minutes.

**4. Flip and finish the crust.**

Carefully turn each pepper with a thin spatula and bake for an additional 10 minutes until the entire exterior is deeply browned and crisp.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Keep the filling beautifully simple.**

Resist the urge to add smoked paprika or onions; the authentic flavor profile relies entirely on the tang of the dairy, the smoke of the pepper, and the grassy brightness of the parsley.

● **A note on frying.**

While culinary purists will insist these must be shallow-fried in an inch of sunflower oil, this modern oven-baked method guarantees a perfectly crispy weeknight meal without making your kitchen smell like a fryolator for three days.

● **Serve with cold contrast.**

This is a profoundly rich dish that demands acidity. Serve it alongside a cold garlic-yogurt sauce or a crisp, hydrating Shopska salad to cut through the fat.



# Tikvichki s Oriz

Тиквички с ориз

*tik-vich-ki s oh-riz*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know this smell. It's the scent of late June, when the garden is overrun with zucchini and dill. Tikvichki s Oriz is a masterclass in making something profound out of almost nothing. The secret your grandmother knew, but probably never explained, lies in two steps: salting the zucchini so it doesn't turn your dinner into soup, and toasting the rice in oil until it looks like glass. We finish it in the oven so the top gets a slightly crispy, caramelized edge. Eat it hot or at room temperature, but whatever you do, do not skip the giant dollop of plain yogurt on top—it is the acidity that brings the whole dish to life.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>3 med</b>	green zucchini <i>ends trimmed and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	Arborio or Calrose rice <i>rinsed well</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 tsp</b>	sweet paprika
<b>3 tbsp</b>	extra virgin olive oil	<b>1/2 cup</b>	tomato passata
<b>1 large</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>2 1/2 cup</b>	vegetable or chicken broth <i>heated</i>
<b>1 med</b>	carrot <i>finely diced</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper
<b>3 med</b>	garlic	<b>1 bunch</b>	fresh dill <i>chopped</i>
<b>clove</b>	<i>minced</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	plain whole milk yogurt <i>for serving</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Draw out the moisture.**

Toss the cubed zucchini with the kosher salt in a colander and let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes to pull out excess water, then give it a gentle squeeze.

- **Preheat the oven.**

Set your oven to 400°F.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the aromatic base.**

In a large, deep oven-proof skillet, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat, add the onion and carrot, and sauté for 5 to 7 minutes until soft. Stir in the garlic and cook for 1 minute more.

- 2. Glass the rice.**

Add the rinsed rice to the skillet and stir continuously for 2 to 3 minutes until the oil coats the grains and their edges turn translucent. This is the absolute secret to ensuring your rice cooks up fluffy and separate rather than turning into mush.

**1. Marry the flavors.**

Stir in the sweet paprika for 15 seconds to release its oils, then immediately pour in the tomato passata to prevent burning. Fold in the drained zucchini.

**2. Bake the casserole.**

Pour in the hot broth, season with black pepper, and transfer the uncovered skillet to the middle rack of the oven. Bake for 30 to 35 minutes until the rice absorbs the liquid and the top layer looks golden, dry, and slightly crispy.

**3. Finish with herbs.**

Remove the dish from the oven and immediately fold in the fresh dill while it is still piping hot. Adding herbs off the heat ensures they keep their bright color and aromatic oils instead of turning muddy in the oven.

**CHEF'S NOTES**

● **Serve with yogurt.**

Let the dish rest for 10 minutes to allow the starches to set, then serve with a large spoonful of plain whole milk yogurt right in the center of the plate.

● **Avoid mushy rice.**

If your rice comes out overly soft, it means you either did not toast it long enough in the oil, or you skipped draining the zucchini.



# Weeknight Drob Sarma

Пилешка дроб сарма

*pi-lesh-ka drob sar-ma*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of Drob Sarma baking means one of two things: it's a major spring holiday, or your grandmother loves you enough to spend three hours boiling lamb offal. But for a busy weeknight in an American kitchen, we are leaning into a widely accepted, highly authentic homeland secret: chicken livers. You bypass hours of tedious prep work while maintaining the rich, savory depth of the original. The true secret isn't the meat anyway—it's the generous handful of spearmint and the magical, fluffy crust made by

reacting baking soda with yogurt. This isn't a shortcut; it's exactly how modern Bulgarian home cooks feed their families on a Tuesday night. It yields the exact aroma of home, with zero fuss.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	fresh chicken livers <i>trimmed and roughly chopped into 1/2-inch pieces</i>	<b>1 1/2 tbsp</b>	dried spearmint
<b>3 tbsp</b>	neutral oil	<b>1 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>finely diced</i>	<b>3 1/2 cup</b>	low-sodium chicken broth <i>hot</i>
<b>1 large bunch</b>	scallions <i>both white and green parts, finely chopped</i>	<b>3 large</b>	eggs
<b>1 cup</b>	medium-grain white rice <i>rinsed well in cold water and drained</i>	<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	plain whole-milk yogurt
<b>1 tbsp</b>	sweet paprika	<b>2 tbsp</b>	all-purpose flour
<b>1 tsp</b>	freshly ground black pepper	<b>1/4 tsp</b>	baking soda
		<b>1 pinch</b>	salt

## PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 375°F (190°C).**

Grease a standard 9x13-inch baking dish or a similarly sized ceramic casserole and set it aside.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. **Sauté the yellow onion and sear the chicken livers.**

In a large, deep skillet or Dutch oven, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the yellow onion and sauté until softened, about 3 to 4 minutes. Toss in the chopped chicken livers and sear them quickly, stirring occasionally, just until the outside loses its raw pink hue. Do not overcook them here; they only need 3 to 4 minutes and will finish cooking in the oven.

**1. Toast the rice until glassy.**

Add the chopped scallions to the pan and cook for 1 minute. Lower the heat to medium, pour in the rinsed rice, and cook, stirring constantly, for 2 to 3 minutes until the grains become slightly translucent at the edges. This crucial step coats the rice in fat and toasts the starches, ensuring the grains remain distinct and fluffy instead of turning to mush during the bake.

**2. Season the mixture off the heat.**

Remove the skillet from the heat so the spices don't scorch and turn bitter. Stir in the sweet paprika, black pepper, spearmint, and kosher salt. Transfer the entire mixture into your prepared baking dish, spreading it out into an even layer.

**3. Braise the rice and liver mixture in the oven.**

Gently pour the hot chicken broth over the rice and liver mixture. Carefully transfer the dish to the middle rack of the preheated oven. Bake uncovered for 25 to 30 minutes, or until the rice is tender and has absorbed almost all of the liquid, leaving the surface looking mostly dry.

**4. Activate the yogurt crust.**

While the rice finishes its braise, prepare the zalivka topping. In a medium bowl, whisk the yogurt and baking soda together and let it sit for 30 seconds; the yogurt will visibly expand and become aerated. Whisk in the eggs, flour, and a pinch of salt until perfectly smooth.

**5. Bake the casserole until the crust is puffed and golden.**

Remove the casserole from the oven, leaving the heat on. Pour the fluffy yogurt mixture evenly over the top of the hot rice, using a spatula to spread it to the edges. Return the dish to the oven and bake for an additional 15 to 20 minutes, or until the crust is set and deeply golden brown.

**6. Let the casserole rest before slicing and serving.**

Allow the Drob Sarma to rest at room temperature for 10 to 15 minutes. This lets the starches settle and the crust stabilize, ensuring clean, beautiful slices.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **The magic of djodjen.**

If you want your food to taste like it came from a kitchen in Sofia or Plovdiv, you need djodjen. Often translated simply as 'mint,' Bulgarian djodjen is specifically spearmint. It has a sweet, earthy, deeply savory profile that is entirely different from the sharp, cooling menthol of peppermint. It is the undisputed king of herbs for any dish involving lamb, offal, or rich rice casseroles. Don't be shy with it—authentic Drob Sarma requires a heavy hand.

- **The chemistry of the fluffy crust.**

Look at a French gratin and you'll see heavy cream and cheese, or a Greek Moussaka with a thick, buttery béchamel. But look at a Bulgarian bake, and you'll see the genius of the zalivka. Bulgarian grandmothers figured out that by adding a tiny pinch of baking soda to their daily staple—acidic, tangy yogurt—it creates a chemical reaction that whips the liquid into a frothy cloud. When mixed with eggs and baked, it sets into a light, tangy, soufflé-like crust that perfectly cuts through the richness of the meat.



## Mini Rulo "Stefani"

Мини руло Стефани

*mee-nee roo-loh steh-fah-nee*

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know the smell of Rulo Stefani. It's the undisputed king of childhood comfort food—a savory, cumin-laced meatloaf hiding a colorful treasure of hard-boiled eggs, tender carrots, and tangy pickles. Traditionally, grandmothers spent Sunday afternoons carefully wrapping a massive meat log in a wet towel, praying it wouldn't crack. But when our parents moved to America and had to get dinner on the table after a long commute, they adapted. This muffin-tin method cuts the baking time in half and

eliminates the stress of the 'roll and tuck.' No performative twists here —just the exact flavor of a Sofia kitchen table, made foolproof for a busy weeknight in Ohio.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	ground pork	<b>1 tsp</b>	ground cumin
<b>1 lb</b>	ground beef <i>80/20 lean</i>	<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	kosher salt
<b>2 slices</b>	stale white bread <i>crusts removed</i>	<b>1/2 tsp</b>	black pepper <i>freshly ground</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	whole milk <i>or water</i>	<b>3 large</b>	eggs <i>hard-boiled, peeled, and quartered lengthwise</i>
<b>1 large</b>	large egg <i>lightly beaten</i>	<b>1 large</b>	carrot <i>peeled, boiled until tender-crisp, and cut into 12 matchsticks</i>
<b>1 med</b>	yellow onion <i>grated on a box grater, juices reserved</i>	<b>2 large</b>	Kosher dill pickles <i>cut into 12 matchsticks</i>
<b>1/4 cup</b>	fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i>	<b>1 cup</b>	Kashkaval cheese <i>grated (or substitute mild Gouda, Monterey Jack, or Provolone)</i>
<b>1 1/2 tsp</b>	summer savory <i>or 1 tsp dried oregano and 1/2 tsp dried thyme</i>	<b>1 pinch</b>	dry breadcrumbs <i>optional</i>

## PREPARATION

- **Prepare the filling ingredients.**

Boil the eggs and carrot ahead of time. Ensure the eggs are fully hard-boiled and the carrot is just tender-crisp before cutting them into matchsticks.

## INSTRUCTIONS

### 1. Prepare the panade.

Place the stale bread slices in a shallow bowl and pour the milk over them. Let soak for 3 minutes until mushy, then squeeze out the excess liquid and tear the bread into tiny pieces in a large mixing bowl. Do not skip this; the panade is the authentic grandmother's secret to a yielding, tender meatloaf.

### 2. Mix and knead the meat.

Add the ground pork, ground beef, grated onion with its juices, beaten egg, parsley, summer savory, cumin, salt, and pepper to the bowl with the bread. Knead everything together with your hands for 2 to 3 minutes until cohesive and slightly sticky. Let it rest for 15 minutes so the flavors meld.

### 3. Form the mini meatloaves.

Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C) and lightly grease a standard 12-cup muffin tin. Divide the meat mixture into 12 equal portions. Flatten one portion in your palm, place a quarter of an egg, a carrot matchstick, and a pickle matchstick in the center, and fold the meat over to seal it completely. Place into the muffin tin and repeat.

### 4. Bake the meatloaves.

Sprinkle a tiny pinch of dry breadcrumbs over each mini loaf. Bake in the preheated oven for 30 minutes.

### 5. Add the cheese crown.

Remove the tin from the oven and carefully top each mini loaf with a generous pinch of grated Kashkaval or Gouda cheese. Return to the oven for 7 to 10 minutes, until the cheese is melted, bubbly, and turning golden brown.

### 6. Rest and serve.

Let the mini meatloaves rest in the tin for 5 minutes before gently lifting them out with a spoon. Serve immediately alongside a massive scoop of buttery mashed potatoes.

## CHEF'S NOTES

- **The Meat Ratio.**

In Bulgaria, a 50/50 mix of pork and beef is called 'smes' and is essential for tender, flavorful meat dishes. American supermarkets rarely sell this pre-mixed, so simply buy one package of each.

- **Sourcing the Pickles.**

Do not use sweet or bread-and-butter pickles under any circumstances. They will completely ruin the flavor profile. Seek out Kosher dill or Eastern European-style sour pickles to provide the crucial acidic punch.



# Sweet Makaroni na Furna

Сладки макарони на фурна

*slad-ki ma-ka-ro-ni na fur-na*

If you spent Sunday afternoons in a Bulgarian grandmother's kitchen, you know exactly what this smells like. This is Eastern European ingenuity at its finest, turning humble pantry staples into a masterpiece that sits somewhere between baked mac and cheese and a rich vanilla crème caramel. The secret to that authentic, elusive homeland flavor is a generous crumble of salty sheep's milk feta hidden among the sweet noodles. Hit the top with butter and sugar right before it goes in the oven for a crackling caramel crust. It is sweet, salty, deeply comforting, and absolutely bulletproof.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 lb</b>	short tubular pasta <i>null</i>	<b>1 qt</b>	whole milk
<b>1 tbsp</b>	kosher salt	<b>1 1/4 cup</b>	granulated sugar <i>divided</i>
<b>1 tsp</b>	neutral oil	<b>2 tsp</b>	vanilla extract
<b>6 tbsp</b>	unsalted butter <i>divided, plus extra for greasing the pan</i>	<b>6 oz</b>	sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled</i>
<b>5 large</b>	eggs		

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 375°F and heavily butter a deep 9x13-inch baking dish.**  
Ensure there is at least an inch of space at the top of the dish to prevent the custard from bubbling over as it bakes.
- 2. Boil the pasta in salted, oiled water until just shy of al dente.**  
Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add the kosher salt and oil, and cook the pasta for two to three minutes less than the package directions.
- 3. Drain the pasta immediately and rinse it thoroughly under cold running water.**  
This thermal shock halts the cooking process and strips away surface starch, preventing the noodles from congealing into a mushy block once submerged in the custard.
- 4. Toss the warm pasta with four tablespoons of the butter and the crumbled feta.**  
Cut the butter into small pieces so it melts evenly over the noodles, then fold in the cheese and transfer everything to the prepared baking dish.
- 5. Whisk the eggs, whole milk, one cup of the sugar, and the vanilla extract into a smooth custard.**  
Whisk vigorously until the sugar is completely dissolved and the mixture is uniformly pale, then pour it directly over the pasta and cheese. Gently press down any stray noodles with a spoon so they are submerged.

- 1. Dot the surface with the remaining two tablespoons of butter and evenly sprinkle the remaining quarter cup of sugar over the top.**

This is the grandmother's trick for achieving a crackling caramel crust as the casserole bakes in the oven.

- 2. Bake uncovered on the center rack for 40 to 45 minutes.**

The custard should be just set with a slight jiggle in the dead center, and the top deeply golden brown and caramelized.

- 3. Let the casserole rest for at least 15 minutes before slicing and serving.**

Serve it warm, or do as the Bulgarians do and eat it cold straight from the fridge the next morning.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing the right cheese is critical to the dish.**

Traditional Bulgarian sirene is ideal, but a high-quality sheep's milk feta (like Greek or French) provides the necessary crumbly texture and sharp salinity that American cow's milk feta lacks.



# Express Tikvenik

ТИКВЕНИК

*teek-veh-neek*

If the savory banitsa is the indisputable king of the Bulgarian table, then the sweet, coiled tikvenik is the queen. Traditionally, this pastry is a labor of love for Christmas Eve, demanding an hour hunched over a hot stove cooking down hand-grated squash. But ask any modern Bulgarian grandmother how she feeds her family on a busy Tuesday, and she'll hand you a brilliant cheat code. By hitting standard supermarket butternut squash with a food processor and tossing the raw shreds with a handful of semolina, the pastry absorbs the juices

perfectly as it bakes. It's an authentic, shatteringly crisp masterpiece that bypasses the grunt work and smells exactly like a memory of home.

## INGREDIENTS

<b>1 1/2 lb</b>	butternut squash <i>peeled, seeded, and cut into chunks</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	raisins
<b>1 cup</b>	granulated sugar	<b>16 oz</b>	phyllo dough <i>thawed</i>
<b>1 1/2 cup</b>	walnuts <i>coarsely chopped</i>	<b>1/2 cup</b>	unsalted butter <i>melted</i>
<b>1 tbsp</b>	ground cinnamon	<b>1/4 cup</b>	neutral oil
<b>3 tbsp</b>	semolina	<b>1/4 cup</b>	powdered sugar

## PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough in the refrigerator overnight.**

Do not thaw commercial phyllo on the counter at room temperature. The rapid temperature change causes condensation, which will make the fragile sheets stick together and tear.

## INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 375°F and grease your baking dish.**

Whisk the melted butter and neutral oil together in a small bowl, then brush the bottom and sides of a 10-inch or 12-inch round baking dish or cast-iron skillet.

- 2. Shred the butternut squash using the grating attachment of a food processor.**

If you don't have a food processor, a standard box grater works fine, it just requires a bit of elbow grease.

- 1. Toss the grated squash with the sugar, walnuts, cinnamon, and semolina.**  
Mix this right before you intend to roll; if it sits too long, the sugar will draw excess water out of the squash. The semolina is the grandmother's secret here, acting as a sponge to absorb moisture during baking so the pastry stays crisp.
- 2. Layer two sheets of phyllo dough, brushing each lightly with the butter and oil mixture.**  
Keep the unrolled phyllo covered with a slightly damp kitchen towel so it doesn't dry out. Place one sheet down, flick or brush the fat over it, top with a second sheet, and grease again.
- 3. Scatter the pumpkin filling across the phyllo and roll the sheets into a tight cylinder.**  
Use about a half cup of the mixture per double-sheet of phyllo, leaving a one-inch border. Roll from the long edge closest to you like a cigar.
- 4. Coil the cylinder into the center of the baking dish and repeat to form a large spiral.**  
As you finish each new roll, attach it to the end of the previous one, continuing the spiral outward until the pan is completely filled.
- 5. Brush the assembled pastry generously with the remaining fat and bake for 45 to 55 minutes.**  
This final wash of fat ensures the signature flakiness. Keep an eye on it after 30 minutes; if the top browns too rapidly, tent it loosely with aluminum foil. Bake until deeply golden brown and crisp to the touch.
- 6. Cool for thirty minutes, dust heavily with powdered sugar, and serve.**  
The resting period is not optional. It allows the semolina to finish absorbing the internal steam, setting the filling perfectly.

#### CHEF'S NOTES

- **Never use canned pumpkin purée.**  
Canned purée will destroy the texture of this pastry. The structural integrity of freshly grated, fibrous squash is entirely non-negotiable for an authentic tikvenik.