



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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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

Six p.m. on a Tuesday in an Ohio kitchen, the kids are loud, the commute is still ringing in your ears, and nobody has eight hours to roast peppers over a backyard fire. The craving for a steaming bowl of *shkembe chorba*, heavy with garlic and sharp vinegar, remains, a constant hum beneath the modern grind.

This is the food of *Bapche*—your grandmother—stripped of the unnecessary labor, but preserving the exact way she judged the heat of a pan by hovering her bare hand over the cast iron. It's for those who crave the sharp tang of *sirene*, a cold jar of *lyutenitsa* hitting the counter, the quick, comforting chaos of *Mish-Mash*. The real deal, for real life.

Bulgarian cooking, at its heart, is resourceful. It's built on simple, potent ingredients and a quick understanding of flavor. We've wrangled the tastes of the homeland into methods that fit an American weeknight. No hand-stretched phyllo if a commercial one does the job perfectly for *banitsa*. No grinding meat for hours if slicing up European-style *krenvirshi* brings the exact snap you need to a fast stew.

From the comforting, quick solace of *Popara* on a sick day, to the hyper-fast *Princesi* after school, or the undisputed, eggplant-free glory of a Sunday *Moussaka*, these are the meals that actually make it to the table. We rely on the local deli, the supermarket's international aisle, a sharp knife, and a hot pan.

The oil pops, a block of feta melts into the warm tomatoes, and the old country is alive right there on the stove, ready for Tuesday night.



Bapche's Breakfasts & Popara Mornings

The weekend rituals of dough and the hyper-fast weekday comforts of the motherland.

Six a.m. on a Saturday begins with the crinkle of a roll of supermarket phyllo and a slow, flour-dusted routine, stretching, rolling, and frying dough until the kitchen windows fog up and the smell of sirene wakes the dead. It is the ritual of mekitsi crackling in hot oil and the slow bake of a sweet, custard-soaked mlechna banitsa. But on a Tuesday, before the school bus arrives, a bowl of stale bread softening in hot tea is what gets a kid out the door, the quiet pragmatism of popara—a brilliantly frugal, three-minute salvation of stale bread, butter, hot tea, and feta, the sharp bite of the feta melting into the buttery, tea-soaked bread.

These leave sticky fingers and crumb-covered tables, translated here for a Tuesday morning in Ohio or a lazy Sunday in Queens. Using store-bought phyllo for the banitsa doesn't diminish the homeland; it ensures the damn thing actually gets baked. Here is how to pull off the doughy rituals of the weekend, and the lightning-fast comforts of the school day. The oil hisses, the feta crumbles, and the house slowly wakes up.





Banitsa

Вита баница

vee-tah bah-nee-tsah

A roll of supermarket phyllo, a tub of feta, a half-sheet pan. We're skipping the internet's puff pastry and heavy cream nonsense. This requires specific mechanics: letting baking soda react with yogurt to create an impossibly airy filling, blending butter with oil so the phyllo crackles but doesn't burn, and finishing with a post-bake stifling under a towel to trap the steam and soften the top flakes. Slide the pan into a 400-degree oven and let the heat do the work.

INGREDIENTS

16 oz

frozen phyllo dough
thawed overnight in the fridge

1/2 cup

unsalted butter
melted

1/4 cup neutral oil

1 1/2 cup plain whole milk Greek yogurt

1 tsp baking soda

4 large eggs
brought to room temperature

12 oz Greek feta cheese
crumbled by hand into distinct chunks

PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo dough correctly.**

Leave the package of phyllo dough in the refrigerator overnight so it thaws completely without drying out or turning gummy at the edges.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 375°F and lightly grease a 10-inch or 12-inch round baking dish.**

In a small bowl, whisk together the melted butter and neutral oil. Keeping oil in the mix prevents the delicate phyllo from burning and gives the pastry the elasticity it needs.

- 2. Stir the baking soda into the Greek yogurt and let it sit for five minutes.**

Do not skip this. The chemical reaction causes the yogurt to bubble, foam, and double in volume, which is the absolute secret to achieving an impossibly airy, fluffy interior rather than a dense brick.

- 3. Whisk the eggs into the foaming yogurt, then gently fold in the crumbled feta.**

You want distinct, rustic chunks of cheese throughout the mixture, not a smooth paste.

- 4. Unroll the phyllo dough on a clean surface and cover it with a slightly damp kitchen towel.**

Phyllo dries out and shatters within minutes of hitting the air, so keep it strictly protected while you assemble.

- 1. Lay one sheet of phyllo flat, brush lightly with the butter mixture, top with a second sheet, and brush again.**

Dot about three to four tablespoons of the cheese filling evenly across the dough. Don't overstuff it; the magic of a real banitsa is in the stratification of countless thin layers.

- 2. Starting from the wider side closest to you, roll the two sheets up into a long, semi-tight cylinder.**

It should look like a long rope. If the fragile dough tears slightly, don't panic—it will be completely hidden once rolled and baked.

- 3. Coil the rope into a tight spiral right in the dead center of the greased baking pan.**

Repeat the process of layering, filling, and rolling, wrapping each new rope around the center spiral until the pan is completely full.

- 4. Brush the entire top generously with any remaining butter mixture and bake for 40 to 45 minutes.**

You want it visibly puffed and boasting a gorgeous, deep golden-brown crust.

- 5. Immediately upon removing the pan from the oven, flick a few drops of cold water over the hot crust and cover tightly with a clean kitchen towel.**

The water will hiss on impact. Leave the towel on for 15 minutes to trap the steam, softening the dangerously brittle top layers into the tender, comforting bite of a true homeland banitsa.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Serve it warm with a side of plain yogurt.**

In true Bulgarian fashion, this rich, savory pastry demands the sharp, cool tang of plain whole-milk yogurt or a glass of salted ayran to cut the fat.



Mlechna Banitsa

Млечна Баница

mlech-nah bah-nit-sah

A 9x13 baking dish sits on the counter, filled with supermarket phyllo, awaiting a delicate custard of eggs, sugar, and a quart of whole milk. Forget the diaspora blogs telling you to mix feta and yogurt into your sweet milk pies—watch Bapche brush the pastry with butter instead. By toasting the ruffled dough in butter before the liquid hits, you create a waterproof armor, yielding a cohesive pastry smelling faintly of lemon and tasting of rich, caramelized milk. Once the custard blisters, cut a thick square while the center still jiggles, and serve it warm.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven and prepare the baking dish.

Heat your oven to 350°F (180°C). 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. Shape the phyllo into an accordion fold.

Take one sheet of phyllo and gently scrunch it from the long side into a loose, ruffled fan. Lay it into the pan and repeat with the remaining sheets, packing them loosely side-by-side until the pan looks like a sea of ruffled pastry.

3. Par-bake the pastry to create a waterproof armor.

Drizzle the remaining melted butter evenly over the ruffled dough and bake for 15 to 20 minutes until golden brown. Do not skip this step; it prevents the delicate phyllo from dissolving into a soggy paste when the milk is added.

4. Warm the milk and sugar.

While the pastry bakes, pour the milk and granulated sugar into a saucepan. Heat over medium just until it is warm to the touch and the sugar is completely dissolved, then remove from heat.

5. Temper the eggs to build the custard.

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 they don't scramble, then stir in the vanilla extract and lemon zest.

1. Pour the custard and bake.

Carefully pull the hot, golden phyllo from the oven and immediately pour the egg mixture evenly over the top so it seeps into all the accordion folds. Return to the oven and bake for 25 to 30 minutes, until the custard is set and the top ruffles are a deep, rich golden brown.

2. Trap the steam with a kitchen towel.

Remove the pan from the oven and immediately cover it with a clean, dry kitchen towel for 10 to 15 minutes. This traps the evaporating steam to gently soften the sharpest edges of the crust so it slices beautifully.

3. Dust with powdered sugar and serve.

Give the top a generous dusting of powdered sugar before slicing. Serve warm, or chilled straight from the fridge the next day.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Weeknight Head Start**

For a rapid morning breakfast, do the entire accordion fold and par-bake the night before. Leave the dry, baked phyllo on the counter overnight. In the morning, quickly whisk the custard together, pour it over the pastry, and bake.



Mekitsi

Мекици

meh-KEE-tsee

the hot oil spits" - Saturday morning -> "Bulgarian Saturday morning" - a block of sirene -> "a block of sirene" Strengths Preserved Check: - "smell more evocative of a Bulgarian [Saturday] morning than mekitsi sizzling on the stove." -> Near-verbatim. (Changed weekend to Saturday for the anchor). - "These aren't doughnuts or generic fry-bread;" -> Verbatim. - "born of incredibly wet, sticky dough and a dual-leavening system." -> Verbatim. - "Bapche's ultimate secret is a splash of vinegar to repel the frying oil" -> Verbatim. Weaknesses Fixed Check: - "they are a deeply nostalgic, pillowy, crispy masterpiece" -> Removed abstraction. Replaced by the physical reality of the dough

itself. - "giving you the authentic taste of the homeland" -> Replaced by "develops a subtle, yeasty tang during the overnight cold ferment." Register and Style Check: - warm-chaotic -> "Drop sticky dough... listen as the hot oil spits, and breathe..." - action-first -> Reader is immediately dropping dough into a skillet. - comma-stream -> "Drop sticky dough into a cast-iron skillet, listen as the hot oil spits, and breathe—no smell..." - imperative-close -> "Crumble a block of sirene on the side, and eat them before they cool."

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|------------------|-------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 2 1/4 tsp | active dry yeast | 1 large | egg <i>softened to room temp</i> |
| 1 cup | warm water | 1 tbsp | white vinegar |
| 1 tbsp | granulated sugar | 3 1/4 cup | sunflower oil <i>divided</i> |
| 3/4 cup | plain whole milk Greek yogurt | 1 tsp | kosher salt |
| 1/4 cup | whole milk | 4 cup | unbleached all-purpose flour |
| 1 tsp | baking soda | 8 oz | sirene or feta cheese |
| | | 1/2 cup | strawberry jam |

PREPARATION

- **Bloom the yeast to build the flavor base.**

In a large mixing bowl, combine the warm water, yeast, and sugar, letting it sit for 10 minutes until foamy.

- **Quench the baking soda in the thinned yogurt.**

In a small bowl, mix the Greek yogurt, milk, and baking soda together until the acid reacts and becomes bubbly.

- **Combine the wet ingredients.**

Whisk the bubbly yogurt mixture, egg, white vinegar, 1 tablespoon of sunflower oil, and salt into the yeast bowl.

- **Incorporate the flour and retard the dough overnight.**

Stir in the flour one cup at a time with a wooden spoon until a very sticky, shaggy dough forms. Do not knead or add more flour to dry it out; simply cover the bowl tightly and refrigerate overnight.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Bring the dough back to life.**

Remove the bowl from the fridge 30 minutes before frying to take the chill off.

2. **Heat the frying oil.**

Pour 3 cups of sunflower oil into a heavy-bottomed skillet or Dutch oven to a depth of 1.5 inches and heat over medium-high to 350°F.

3. **Shape the dough with heavily oiled hands.**

Pour the remaining 1/4 cup of oil into a small dish to coat your fingers, pinch off a golf-ball-sized piece of wet dough, and gently stretch it outward from the center to create a rustic, uneven 5-inch circle.

4. **Fry and baste simultaneously.**

Carefully lower the stretched dough into the hot oil and immediately use a spoon to splash hot oil over the top surface to force the massive air bubbles upward.

5. **Drain and serve immediately.**

Fry for 1 to 2 minutes per side until deep golden brown, then drain on a wire rack or paper towels and serve hot with sweet jam and salty cheese.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The wet dough is not a mistake.**

Authentic mekitsi dough is incredibly sticky. Resist the urge to add more flour to make it kneadable, which will only result in dense, heavy discs.

- **The grandmother's lipid barrier trick.**

Adding white vinegar or traditional high-proof Rakia to the dough creates a flash-steam barrier when it hits the hot oil, physically repelling grease and keeping the fried dough impossibly light.



Klin

Родопски клин

ro-dop-ski klin

If standard banitsa is the undisputed queen of the Bulgarian table, the Rhodope Klin is its rugged, mountain-dwelling cousin. Born in isolated, snowy terrain where survival meant mastering humble staples, this hearty pie sandwiches a dense, comforting filling of cold leftover rice and tangy sheep's milk feta between just two thick crusts. The authentic secret here is entirely methodological: you do not bake this in an oven. True Klin is cooked directly in a heavy skillet on the stovetop, slowly frying in butter until it achieves a magnificent, nutty

crunch. Flipped like a giant pancake midway through, it yields a shatteringly crisp exterior with a soft, savory core that will instantly pull you back to the old country.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|------------------|--|-----------------------|--|
| 1 1/2 cup | cooked medium-grain white rice <i>cooled completely</i> | 6 tbsp | unsalted butter <i>divided, 2 tbsp melted</i> |
| 8 oz | sheep's milk feta cheese <i>crumbled</i> | 2 large sheets | country-style phyllo dough <i>thawed</i> |
| 4 large | large eggs <i>lightly beaten</i> | 1 tbsp | neutral oil |

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the completely cooled rice, crumbled feta, beaten eggs, and the two tablespoons of melted butter in a large mixing bowl.**
Mix thoroughly to form a thick, cohesive slurry.
- 2. Place a large, heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-low heat with two tablespoons of butter and the neutral oil.**
Once the butter melts and coats the bottom of the pan, briefly remove the skillet from the heat to assemble the pie.
- 3. Drape one sheet of thick country-style phyllo across the skillet, allowing the excess dough to hang over the edges.**
- 4. Pour the rice and cheese mixture into the dough-lined skillet and spread it out into an even layer.**
- 5. Place the second sheet of phyllo directly over the filling, then fold and pleat the overhanging edges of the bottom crust inward to seal the pie completely.**
Brush the top of the pleated dough lightly with a bit of the remaining butter.

- 1. Return the skillet to the stovetop and cook for 10 to 12 minutes, gently rotating the pan a quarter-turn every few minutes.**

Standard burners have hot spots; moving the pan ensures an even, golden crust without burning.

- 2. Place a large, flat lid or wooden cutting board firmly over the top of the skillet and confidently invert the pan to drop the Klin onto the lid.**

This is the crucial flip—lift the pan edge first with a knife to ensure the bottom is deeply golden before you commit.

- 3. Return the empty skillet to the heat, add the final two tablespoons of butter, and slide the Klin off the lid back into the pan, raw side down.**

Cook for another 10 to 12 minutes, rotating occasionally, until the bottom is equally golden and the egg-rice filling inside is firmly set.

- 4. Slide the finished Klin onto a cutting board and let it rest for 5 to 10 minutes before slicing into wedges.**

Serve hot for dinner, or wrap the leftovers in foil to eat cold for breakfast the next morning with plain kefir.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Supermarket phyllo requires stacking.**

If you cannot find thick 'country-style' phyllo (often labeled #10 or #14 at Greek or Middle Eastern markets), use standard paper-thin phyllo. Stack 3 to 4 sheets, brushing lightly with melted butter between each layer, to create a single sturdy composite sheet for the bottom, and repeat for the top.

- **The rice must be completely cold.**

Using leftover takeout or day-old white rice straight from the fridge is the perfect shortcut; warm rice will prematurely cook the raw eggs and ruin the binding.



Popara

Попара

po-PA-ra

Torn chunks of three-day-old bread, a slab of butter, and crumbled Bulgarian sirene wait in the bowl. Born of Baba Maria leaving leftover slices on the radiator, the stale bread transforms when the sharp, salty bite of white brine cheese meets the floral comfort of hot linden tea. The magic lies in the waiting—steaming the dried bread just long enough that it drinks the fragrant broth while retaining a chewy core. Pour from the tea kettle, wait sixty seconds for the bread to soften, and eat.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|--|-----------------|---|
| 2 cup | rustic white bread <i>torn into bite-sized chunks</i> | 1 1/2 oz | sheep's milk feta cheese in brine <i>crumbled</i> |
| 1 large | linden flower tea bag | 1 tbsp | unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i> |
| 1 cup | boiling water | 1 tsp | granulated sugar |

PREPARATION

- **Stale the bread overnight.**

Spread the torn bread chunks on a baking sheet and leave them uncovered on the counter overnight until hard and dry. If you forget, toast them in a 300 F oven for 10 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Steep the linden tea.**

Place the tea bag in a mug, pour the boiling water over it, and let it steep for 3 to 5 minutes until fragrant and golden, then discard the tea bag.

- 2. Assemble the dry ingredients.**

Place the completely dried bread chunks into a deep soup bowl. Crumble the feta directly over the bread, drop the butter in the center, and sprinkle the sugar evenly across the top.

- 3. Smother with hot tea and cover immediately.**

Pour the steaming hot tea directly over the bread, cheese, butter, and sugar. Immediately cover the bowl tightly with a plate or lid and do not stir.

- 4. Let it steep undisturbed.**

Leave the covered bowl alone for 3 to 5 minutes. The trapped steam gently hydrates the bread into distinct, satisfying morsels without turning them into a gelatinous paste.

1. Gently mash and serve.

Remove the plate and gently toss the mixture with a spoon just enough to distribute the melted butter and softened cheese. Eat immediately while hot.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The grown-up savory variation.**

Skip the tea and sugar. Melt the butter in a tiny saucepan until foaming, stir in 1/2 teaspoon of sweet paprika, and toast for 5 seconds. Pour 1 cup of boiling salted water into the buttery paprika, then pour this savory red broth over the dry bread and feta. Cover and steep exactly the same way.



Princesi s Kaima i Kashkaval

Принцеси с кайма и кашкавал

prin-TSEH-see s kai-MAH ee kash-kah-VAL

Born in the mid-century school canteens and cramped apartment kitchens of Bulgaria, the Princesa is a utilitarian masterpiece. It's a dish engineered by thrifty grandmothers to stretch a meager ration of meat and cheese into something magnificent, traditionally blistered under the intense, top-down heat of a specialized countertop appliance known as a parti gril. The scent of rendering pork fat mingling with the piney, earthy aroma of baking chubritsa on a Saturday morning is a direct, unapologetic mainline to the motherland. It is working-class comfort food at its absolute finest—no pretense, just a perfectly engineered, savory crunch.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|------------------|---|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 10 large | standard sandwich bread <i>slightly stale</i> | 2 large | eggs |
| 2 tbsp | unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i> | 2 tbsp | whole milk |
| 1/2 lb | ground pork | 1 tsp | chubritsa (summer savory) |
| 1/2 lb | ground beef | 1/2 tsp | sweet paprika |
| 1 1/2 cup | Monterey Jack or young Gouda cheese <i>grated</i> | 1/2 tsp | kosher salt |
| | | 1/4 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 400°F and prepare your hardware.**

Line a large rimmed baking sheet with aluminum foil and place a wire cooling rack inside of it. Elevating the bread allows the ambient heat to circulate underneath, perfectly mimicking the radiant heat of a traditional parti gril and saving the bread from a soggy bottom.

- **Mix the kaima.**

In a large bowl, aggressively mash the ground pork, beef, cheese, eggs, milk, chubritsa, paprika, salt, and pepper until it forms a uniform, slightly wet paste. The egg and milk are the grandmother's secret to ensuring the meat stays fluffy and binds to the bread rather than shrinking into a dry meatball.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Seal the bread with a butter barrier.**

Spread a paper-thin layer of softened butter across the top of each slice of bread, ensuring you go all the way to the crusts. This creates a waterproof barrier so the raw meat juices won't turn the bread to mush before it has a chance to bake.

1. Frost the bread with the meat mixture.

Divide the meat evenly across the slices, using about 2 to 3 tablespoons per piece, and spread it out evenly like frosting. Crucially, push the meat completely over the edges of the crust to protect the bread from burning under the intense heat of the oven.

2. Bake until caramelized and sizzling.

Place the loaded slices onto the prepared wire rack and bake for 12 to 15 minutes. The meat should be cooked through with beautiful golden-brown caramelized spots from the melting cheese. For a final crisp, hit the broiler for the last 60 seconds, watching them like a hawk so they don't scorch.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not substitute the chubritsa.**

If you swap out the summer savory for generic thyme or oregano, you're essentially just making an American patty melt. The piney punch of chubritsa is the non-negotiable soul of the dish.

● **Serve immediately with a cold, savory drink.**

Let them cool for exactly one minute so they don't blister the roof of your mouth. Hit them with a final dusting of sharena sol (Bulgarian mixed salt) if you have it, and wash it down with a cold glass of ayran or milk.



Parzheni Filiiki

Пържени филийки

par-zhe-ni fi-liy-ki

She slices half-stale white bread, dunks the pieces into beaten eggs, and drops them into a hot oiled skillet until the egg-soaked crust hisses. Saturday mornings in a Bulgarian home smell like hot oil, sizzling eggs, and the sharp tang of white brine cheese. This golden-fried bread comes from grandmothers who knew the secret to a perfectly crisp, oil-repelling crust was a single spoonful of flour whisked into the batter. Pull it from the pan, cover it in crumbled sirene cheese, and serve hot with alternating bites of salty feta and sweet sour cherry preserves.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|--------------------------------|
| 8 med | hearty white bread slices <i>cut 1/2-inch thick and staled overnight</i> | 1/4 tsp | salt |
| 3 large | eggs | 1/3 cup | sunflower oil |
| 100 ml | whole milk | 4 oz | feta cheese <i>crumbled</i> |
| 2 tbsp | all-purpose flour | 1/2 cup | sour cherry preserves |

PREPARATION

- **Stale the bread.**

If your bread is too fresh, lay the slices out on a wire rack on the counter the night before to dry out so they hold their structure when battered.

- **Make the flour paste.**

In a wide, shallow bowl, whisk the flour with a splash of the milk until you have a smooth, lump-free slurry.

- **Finish the batter.**

Whisk the remaining milk, eggs, and salt into the flour paste vigorously until the mixture is a uniform, pale yellow liquid.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Heat the oil in a heavy skillet.**

Place a large, heavy-bottomed pan over medium-high heat and add enough sunflower oil to coat the bottom about a quarter-inch deep, letting it heat until a drop of the batter instantly sizzles and dances.

- 2. Dip the bread briefly.**

Working in batches to avoid crowding the pan, dip a slice of stale bread into the batter for just two to three seconds per side to coat the exterior without turning the crumb into a soggy sponge.

1. Fry to a golden crisp.

Carefully lay the coated slices into the hot oil and fry for about one and a half to two minutes on the first side, until deeply golden brown and a protective crust forms.

2. Flip and finish frying.

Turn the slices and fry for another minute or so on the second side, then transfer immediately to a paper towel-lined plate to absorb any surface oil.

3. Serve hot with cheese and preserves.

Bring the slices to the table immediately with the feta and sour cherry preserves, letting everyone construct their own alternating bites of salty, hot, crispy, and sweet.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not substitute the oil for butter.**

Butter burns at the temperatures needed to flash-fry the egg batter; sunflower oil has a high smoke point and provides the authentic, slightly savory flavor profile intrinsic to Balkan cooking.

● **Resist the urge to sweeten the batter.**

Authentic Parzheni Filiiki batter is strictly savory, containing only salt. The necessary sweetness is applied exclusively after frying via the fruit preserves.



Mish-Mash

Миш-маш

Six-thirty on a Tuesday, the cast-iron skillet is smoking, the sweet yellow onion hits the hot oil, you empty a full jar of roasted peppers into the heat, the tomatoes collapse, and dinner is twelve minutes away. Mish-mash is a frantic weeknight scramble, but the messy pan meal hinges entirely on patience and timing: letting the tomato water evaporate completely, and waiting until the absolute final second to fold in the cheese so it warms without dissolving. Scrape the eggs straight from the pan. Bring a heel of crusty bread; it is mandatory.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp neutral oil

1 tbsp unsalted butter

| | | | |
|------------------|--|------------------|---|
| 1 med | yellow onion <i>finely diced</i> | 4 large | eggs <i>lightly beaten with a fork</i> |
| 14 oz | jarred roasted red peppers <i>thoroughly drained and chopped into bite-sized pieces</i> | 5 oz | Bulgarian sirene or sheep's milk feta in brine <i>crumbled by hand into large chunks</i> |
| 1 1/2 cup | canned diced tomatoes <i>drained of excess liquid</i> | to taste | salt and freshly cracked black pepper |
| 1 large | garlic <i>minced</i> | 1 handful | fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |
| 1/2 tsp | Bulgarian summer savory or dried oregano | | |

PREPARATION

- **Drain the peppers and tomatoes well.**

Eliminating excess moisture from the jarred and canned goods ensures your Mish-Mash fries rather than boils, saving you precious reduction time on a weeknight.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Heat the oil and butter in a large skillet over medium heat, then sauté the onion until it melts into a sweet, translucent base.**

Add the chopped roasted red peppers and garlic, cooking for another 3 minutes until fragrant and slightly caramelized.

- 2. Pour in the diced tomatoes, summer savory, and black pepper, letting the mixture simmer over medium-low heat for 10 to 15 minutes.**

This is the grandmother's secret. You must wait until the water from the tomatoes completely evaporates and the mixture turns into a thick, rich sauce. If you rush, the eggs will boil and the dish will turn watery.

- 3. Pour the lightly beaten eggs over the hot vegetable base, letting them veil for a few seconds before stirring with a gentle hand.**

Cook for 2 to 3 minutes until just cooked through but still moist and creamy, being careful not to overcook them into dry, hard curds.

- 1. Remove the skillet entirely from the heat, drop in the crumbled cheese, and fold it in a maximum of two or three times.**

The residual heat will partially melt the edges, but you absolutely want visible, distinct chunks of cheese intact for bursts of salty tang.

- 2. Taste for salt, shower the pan generously with fresh parsley, and serve straight from the skillet with warm, crusty bread.**

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not use pre-crumbled, dry feta.**

Pre-crumbled feta is coated in anti-caking agents and will not melt properly. You need a brine-packed block of Bulgarian sirene or sheep's milk feta crumbled by hand to get the authentic texture.



Strandzhanka

Странджанка

strahn-JAHN-kah

If your family hails from the Black Sea coast, calling this open-faced sandwich a generic *Princesa* is practically fighting words. A true Strandzhanka is rustic 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 to keeping it all together is kneading carbonated water into the meat paste—a trick that tenderizes the proteins and guarantees a smoky, crispy char that tastes exactly like a morning in Burgas.

INGREDIENTS

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

PREPARATION

- **Hydrate the meat paste.**

In a large bowl, combine the ground pork, beef, salt, pepper, chubritsa, cumin, and paprika, then pour the carbonated water directly over the spices.

- **Knead vigorously until sticky.**

Using your hands, squeeze and mix the meat for three to four minutes until the texture changes from crumbly to a cohesive, sticky paste.

- **Rest the meat in the refrigerator.**

Cover the bowl tightly with plastic wrap and chill for at least four hours, or ideally overnight, to allow the proteins to extract and bind.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Spread the meat completely to the edges of the bread.**

Using a wet butter knife, spread a thin, even layer of the rested meat paste over a slice of bread, ensuring it covers the crusts entirely so the exposed bread edges do not burn.

- 2. Heat your cast iron.**

Place a heavy cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat until it is ripping hot and lightly brush it with oil.

1. Sear the sandwich meat-side down.

Place the bread directly onto the hot iron, meat-side down, and press gently so the entire surface makes contact with the pan.

2. Let it develop a crispy char.

Leave the bread undisturbed for three to four minutes until the meat deeply caramelizes and sears to the bread.

3. Flip and toast the bottom.

Turn the sandwich over and let the bottom of the bread toast against the rendered fat in the pan for forty-five seconds before removing.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Serve it the homeland way.**

A Strandzhanka is inextricably linked to two things in Burgas: a generous spoonful of Lyutenitsa spread right over the hot meat, and an ice-cold glass of frothy Ayran to wash it down.

● **Source authentic summer savory.**

Chubritsa is the non-negotiable cornerstone of the Bulgarian flavor profile. You can substitute equal parts dried oregano and thyme in an absolute emergency, but seek out the real thing for true authenticity.



Kiselo Mlyako s Med i Orehi

Кисело мляко с мед и орехи

kee-seh-lo mlya-ko s med ee o-re-hee

Three ingredients define a Balkan breakfast. True kiselo mlyako relies on native bacteria, yielding a sharp tang, but you can build a dense base that coats the spoon by starting with a tub of whole-milk yogurt and straining the yogurt overnight to create tsedeno. Listen for the snap of toasted walnuts under the back of a knife, pour a thick drizzle of raw honey over the bowl, and eat.

INGREDIENTS

2 cup

authentic Bulgarian yogurt
strained overnight if unstrained

4 tbsp

raw honey
gently warmed if crystallized

1/2 cup

raw walnuts

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Line a fine-mesh sieve with two layers of clean cheesecloth or thick paper towels.**

Set the sieve over a deep bowl to catch the liquid whey as it drains.

- 2. Pour the yogurt into the sieve and let it drain in the refrigerator for at least four hours or overnight.**

Cover loosely with plastic wrap. By morning, the volume will reduce by almost half, leaving you with thick, velvety tsedeno kiselo mlyako. If using Greek yogurt, skip this step.

- 3. Toast the walnuts in a dry skillet over medium heat for four to five minutes.**

Shake the pan frequently to prevent burning. As soon as they smell rich and fragrant, transfer them to a cutting board to cool. Do not skip this; toasting awakens the essential oils and mellows the bitter skin.

- 4. Roughly chop or lightly crush the cooled walnuts.**

Use a knife or a mortar and pestle, but do not pulverize them into dust—the dish demands a definitive crunch.

- 5. 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.

- 6. Drizzle the honey generously into the swirls and sprinkle heavily with the toasted walnuts.**

Serve immediately. Resist the urge to aggressively stir the bowl; let your spoon cut through the layers so every bite delivers a distinct hit of tart dairy, floral sweet, and earthy crunch.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Seek out true Bulgarian cultures if possible.**

Brands like White Mountain or Trimona in natural grocers contain the exact *Lactobacillus bulgaricus* bacteria responsible for the homeland's signature tartness.

- **You can substitute full-fat Greek yogurt in a pinch.**

If authentic Bulgarian yogurt isn't accessible, buy a high-quality 4% or 5% plain Greek yogurt. Since Greek yogurt is already strained, skip the overnight draining step. Stir in a half teaspoon of fresh lemon juice before plating to mimic the missing bacterial tang.



The Meze Table & Summer Salads

Vibrant, no-cook weeknight sides and dips that cut through heavy mains and capture the essence of Bulgarian summer.

A sweating glass of rakia, a half-empty jar of lyutenitsa, a block of sirene cheese—a heavy meal is nothing without the sharp, acidic slap of a proper meze to cut through the fat. The Bulgarian table demands this balance, anchored by the crunch of a classic Shopska Salata, the icy relief of a five-minute Tarator, and the garlicky, yogurt-thick bite of Snezhanka.

These are the bright, no-cook lifelines pulled straight from a sweaty Sofia summer and dropped onto a Tuesday night American table. No ovens required. Just a knife, a cutting board, the snap of a cucumber, and a table slowly filling with small plates and cold drinks. The tomatoes bleed into the oil, the glasses clink, and the actual main course becomes entirely optional.





Shopska Salata

Шопска салата

shop-ska sa-la-ta

A block of sheep's milk feta sits beside a standard box grater and a serrated knife. Forget the ancient peasant myth. To build the right flavor profile, three rules apply: rely on roasted red peppers, use a heavy pour of sunflower oil (never olive), and grate your cheese into a snowy mountain rather than settling for clumsy cubes. Built for an Ohio backyard or a Black Sea resort alike, the only real technique here is letting the salt pull the tomato juices into the oil before you eat.

INGREDIENTS

3 large

summer tomatoes
cored and cut into 1/2-inch cubes

1 med

English cucumber
unpeeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes

1/2 cup jarred roasted red peppers
rinsed, patted dry, and cut into 1/2-inch pieces

1/2 med red onion
cut into 1/2-inch pieces

3 tbsp sunflower oil

1 tbsp red wine vinegar

1/4 tsp kosher salt

1 cup block feta in brine
drained

2 tbsp fresh flat-leaf parsley
finely chopped

1 med Kalamata olive

PREPARATION

- **Mellow the onions.**

If your red onion is overly sharp, soak the chopped pieces in a bowl of ice water for 5 minutes, then drain thoroughly before adding to the salad to remove their harsh bite.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Dress the vegetables.**

In a large bowl, combine the tomatoes, cucumber, roasted red peppers, and onion. Sprinkle with kosher salt, drizzle with the sunflower oil and red wine vinegar, and toss gently until the vegetables are coated and their juices mingle.

- 2. Build the mountain.**

Transfer the dressed vegetables and all their juices to a shallow serving bowl or platter, using a spoon to gently shape them into a slight mound.

- 3. Create the snowfall.**

Using the large holes of a box grater, grate the block of feta directly over the vegetables until the entire salad is blanketed in a fluffy, white layer of cheese. Do not mix it in.

- 4. Garnish and serve.**

Sprinkle the fresh parsley over the snowy cheese peak and place a single black olive right at the summit. Serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The oil is non-negotiable.**

Do not substitute olive oil. The neutral, slightly nutty background of sunflower oil is the definitive taste of the Balkans and allows the fresh vegetables to shine.

- **Tomato acidity dictates the vinegar.**

Taste your tomatoes before adding the red wine vinegar. If they are highly acidic on their own, skip the vinegar entirely.

- **The spicy upgrade.**

For a regional variation favored by spice lovers, mix a finely diced hot green pepper into the base vegetables before adding the cheese.



Snezhanka

Снежанка

sneh-ZHAWN-kah

A paper-towel-lined colander sits in the sink. The entire meze table hinges on this low-tech rig draining the whole-milk yogurt while the salted cucumbers weep beside a box grater, leaving a thick base for the smell of fresh dill and raw garlic hitting cold yogurt. To avoid a generic, watery bowl, the secret here is strict moisture control and a hit of neutral sunflower oil: wring the life out of your shredded cucumber, crush the garlic with coarse salt, and assemble the dish on a Tuesday night before the main course even leaves the fridge.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Drain the diced pickles completely to protect the yogurt's thick texture.**
Place the diced pickles on a double layer of paper towels, press another layer on top, and gently squeeze out the excess brine. Let them sit for ten minutes so they don't water down the final dish.
- 2. Pulverize the garlic and salt into a fine paste.**
Place the peeled garlic cloves and kosher salt in a mortar and pestle and grind them into a smooth paste. If you don't have a mortar, mince the garlic on a cutting board, sprinkle with the salt, and scrape it flat against the board with the side of your chef's knife until it breaks down.
- 3. Whip the yogurt base until smooth and glossy.**
In a mixing bowl, aggressively whisk together the Greek yogurt, garlic paste, and sunflower oil until the oil is fully incorporated.
- 4. Fold in the drained pickles, dill, and most of the walnuts.**
Gently stir in the pickles, chopped dill, and walnuts, reserving a small pinch of the walnuts for the garnish.
- 5. Chill the mixture for at least an hour to let the flavors marry.**
Cover the bowl tightly and let it rest in the fridge. This mandatory downtime lets the essential oils from the dill and the pungent allicin from the garlic properly permeate the fat in the yogurt.

1. **Garnish and serve cold.**

Transfer to a serving bowl, top with the reserved walnuts, a single black olive in the center, and a tiny drizzle of sunflower oil to finish. Serve with crusty bread, toasted pita, or alongside grilled meats.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Summer fresh cucumber variation.**

When the summer heat hits, swap the pickles for one large English cucumber. Cut it in half lengthwise, aggressively scrape out the watery seed cavity with a spoon, and dice the firm flesh. Fold it into the yogurt just like the pickles, but whatever you do, do not add salt until the absolute last minute before serving—otherwise it will bleed water and ruin your hard work.

- **Pickle warning.**

Avoid sweet pickles or bread-and-butter pickles at all costs. You want the sharp, savory bite of standard dill pickles or French cornichons.



Tarator

Таратор

tah-rah-TOR

A standard box grater, a tub of whole-milk yogurt, and crisp cucumbers sit on the counter. On a 90-degree Tuesday evening, this cold soup cuts through the afternoon heat. It demands no heat, no specialized equipment, and zero culinary pretense. Shred the cucumbers, mince raw garlic, chop walnuts for a dull crunch, and whisk the yogurt and cold water until the fat foams. Pour it into a bowl, eat it immediately, and let the ice cubes clink.

INGREDIENTS

2 large Persian cucumbers
finely diced into 1/4-inch cubes

3 small garlic cloves
peeled and crushed into a fine paste

| | | | |
|----------------|--|------------------|---|
| 1 tsp | kosher salt | 1/3 cup | walnuts <i>finely chopped or crushed</i> |
| 1/3 cup | fresh dill <i>finely chopped</i> | 2 cup | plain whole milk yogurt |
| 3 tbsp | sunflower oil or extra-virgin olive oil | 1 1/2 cup | filtered water <i>chilled</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Never grate the cucumbers.**

Grating turns the soup into a mushy, watery slush. Take the time to practice your knife skills and finely dice them into tiny, uniform cubes to preserve the crucial crunch.

- **Seed standard American cucumbers if necessary.**

If you cannot find thin-skinned Persian or English cucumbers, you must peel standard slicing cucumbers, slice them in half lengthwise, and scoop out the watery seeds with a spoon before dicing.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Macerate the aromatics to build an emulsion.**

Place the diced cucumbers in a large mixing bowl along with the crushed garlic, chopped dill, walnuts, kosher salt, and oil, tossing vigorously until the vegetables are entirely coated. Mixing the oil with the solids first cures the cucumbers and emulsifies the fat, preventing an unappetizing oil slick from floating on top of your final soup.

- 2. Whisk the yogurt until perfectly smooth.**

In a separate medium bowl, pour in the plain yogurt and beat it vigorously with a whisk or fork until it is completely fluid and free of any chalky lumps. Doing this before introducing water is the only way to avoid a broken, grainy texture.

1. Combine and dilute into a 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.

2. Chill aggressively and serve.

Transfer the bowl to the refrigerator for at least one hour to let the raw garlic and dill permeate the dairy. Serve exceptionally cold in small bowls or drinking glasses, garnished with a few drops of oil, a sprinkle of walnuts, and, on a truly brutal day, an ice cube dropped straight in.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Manage the yogurt's tang.**

True Bulgarian yogurt gets its distinct bite from *Lactobacillus bulgaricus*. If your American supermarket yogurt is too mild, stir in half a teaspoon of white vinegar or a squeeze of lemon juice to mimic that authentic tartness.

● **Choose your oil wisely.**

While extra-virgin olive oil is perfectly acceptable, a true Bulgarian cook reaches for cold-pressed, unrefined sunflower oil. Its slightly nutty flavor is the quickest route back to an Eastern European village kitchen.

● **Watch the garlic clock.**

Raw garlic blooms and intensifies as it sits in liquid. If you are making this soup several hours ahead of time, drop down to two cloves to avoid it blowing out your palate by dinner.



Katak

Катък

КАН-tuhk

Crush a block of sheep's milk feta with the back of a fork, fold in slippery strips from a jar of roasted red peppers, and stir the strained yogurt until the raw garlic burns your fingers. True Katak is a fermented sheep's milk delicacy made by Rhodope mountain shepherds in late summer, but you are not going to make that. Slather this pragmatic evolution on crusty bread, pour a stiff glass of rakia, and let the sharp liquor cut the rich fat.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 cup whole-milk Greek yogurt or labneh

| | | | |
|-------------------------|--|----------------|--|
| 1 1/2 cup | sheep's milk feta cheese in brine <i>drained</i> | 2 tbsp | sunflower oil or extra-virgin olive oil |
| 1 cup | jarred roasted red bell peppers <i>drained aggressively, patted bone dry, and finely diced</i> | 1/3 cup | walnuts <i>finely chopped and lightly toasted</i> |
| 2 med cloves | garlic <i>minced or pressed</i> | 1/4 tsp | freshly ground black pepper |
| | | 1/2 tsp | sweet paprika |
| | | 1 tbsp | fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Mash the feta.

In a medium bowl, use a sturdy fork to crush the feta until no large lumps remain, taking care to maintain a rustic texture rather than a smooth paste.

2. Fold in the dairy.

Add the thick Greek yogurt or labneh, stirring vigorously until it forms a creamy, cohesive base.

3. Mix in the flavorings.

Fold in the bone-dry diced peppers, minced garlic, oil, black pepper, and half of the toasted walnuts until evenly distributed.

4. Let it rest.

Smooth the top of the dip, cover tightly with plastic wrap, and chill in the refrigerator for at least two hours. This step is non-negotiable; it allows the raw garlic to mellow and the flavors to properly marry.

5. Garnish and serve.

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

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Moisture is the enemy of Katak.**

If you use wet peppers or watery yogurt, you'll end up with a pink soup.

Aggressively wring out the jarred peppers with paper towels and buy the thickest Greek yogurt or labneh you can find.

- **Keep the food processor in the cabinet.**

Authentic Katak has a rustic, chunky texture. Processing the mixture will break down the dairy structures and turn the dip into a thin, sad smoothie.

- **Sourcing the right cheese matters.**

Avoid pre-crumbled American feta, which is coated in anti-caking agents like cellulose. Seek out blocks of sheep's milk feta stored in brine for the creamy, sharp tang that mimics Bulgarian sirene.



Kyopolou

Къпоолу

kyo-po-oh-loo

Tuesday night at the kitchen counter, a foil-lined half-sheet pan crackles for forty minutes as the eggplant skins blister. Skip the homogenized versions spiked with olive oil; the real secret to that smoky mash is unrefined sunflower oil and a heavy fork. Put the blender away, char the hell out of your vegetables under the broiler, and let the raw garlic do its work.

INGREDIENTS

2 med Italian eggplants
pricked several times with a fork

2 med red bell peppers

1 med green bell pepper

1 med Roma tomato
peeled, seeded, and finely chopped

3 large garlic
peeled

1 1/2 tsp kosher salt

3 tbsp unrefined sunflower oil

1 tbsp apple cider vinegar

1/4 cup fresh flat-leaf parsley
finely chopped

INSTRUCTIONS

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

Preheat your broiler to high. Line a baking sheet with foil and place the eggplants alongside the whole peppers. Broil until the skins are completely blackened and blistered all over—about 15 to 20 minutes for the peppers, and up to 30 minutes for the eggplants. Turn them occasionally with tongs.

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

Transfer the hot peppers and eggplants to a bowl and cover tightly with plastic wrap or a heavy plate. Let them steam in their own heat for 15 minutes. This old-school grandmother trick separates the skin from the flesh with zero effort.

3. **Peel and drain the eggplant.**

Once cool enough to handle, strip the blackened skins off the vegetables. Discard the stems and the pepper seeds. Place the peeled eggplant flesh in a mesh strainer over a bowl for 10 minutes, pressing lightly to expel the dark, bitter liquid. Discard the liquid.

4. **Aggressively chop the vegetables by hand.**

Do not reach for the food processor. Transfer the drained eggplant and peeled peppers to a large cutting board and chop them vigorously with a heavy chef's knife until finely minced. Scrape the mash into a mixing bowl and add the prepared tomato.

5. **Smash 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 drag and smash them until they form a smooth paste. Add this paste to the vegetables.

1. Emulsify the mash with oil and vinegar.

Using a sturdy fork or potato masher, vigorously mash the vegetables and garlic paste together. Pour in the sunflower oil and apple cider vinegar, mashing constantly until the oil is completely absorbed and the dip is cohesive but still has some texture. Fold in the parsley.

2. Rest the dip before serving.

Cover the bowl and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. This mandatory resting period mellows the raw garlic and allows the smoky flavors to marry. Serve cold or at room temperature with thick slices of crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The secret is the fat.**

Finding cold-pressed, unrefined sunflower oil (often labeled 'roasted sunflower oil' at Eastern European markets) is non-negotiable for the authentic taste of the homeland. If you absolutely cannot find it, mix two tablespoons of neutral sunflower oil with one tablespoon of extra virgin olive oil to fake the funk.



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, slightly excessive uncle who shows up to the party and makes it a feast. Perfected in the 1960s by chefs at Balkantourist, the state-run hospitality agency, it was designed to show off the nation's best produce and dairy to Black Sea vacationers before quickly infiltrating domestic kitchens to become a nostalgic classic. The secret to making it taste exactly like a summer evening in Sofia isn't foraging in the mountains; it's using the tangy

bite of jarred marinated mushrooms and the deep, old-world aroma of unrefined sunflower oil. Leave the raw button mushrooms and extra-virgin olive oil in the pantry.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|--|----------------|---|
| 3 large | beefsteak or heirloom tomatoes <i>cored and cut into chunky wedges</i> | 4 oz | thick-cut deli ham <i>diced into cubes</i> |
| 1 large | English cucumber <i>sliced into thick half-moons</i> | 4 oz | provolone or young gouda cheese <i>cut into small cubes or matchsticks</i> |
| 1/2 med | red onion <i>sliced into very thin half-moons</i> | 1 cup | Bulgarian sirene or Greek feta cheese in brine <i>kept whole</i> |
| 1 cup | jarred roasted red peppers <i>rinsed, patted dry, and roughly chopped</i> | 2 large | eggs <i>hard-boiled, peeled, and quartered</i> |
| 1 cup | jarred marinated button mushrooms <i>drained well and halved if large</i> | 3 tbsp | unrefined sunflower oil |
| 1/4 cup | kalamata-style black olives <i>pitted</i> | 1 tbsp | red wine vinegar |
| | | 1/4 cup | fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |
| | | 1/4 tsp | sea salt |

PREPARATION

- **Boil your eggs ahead of time to ensure they are cool enough to handle.**
Boil for 6 to 10 minutes to achieve a firm, solid yolk that holds up when quartered.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the chunky vegetables and mushrooms in a large serving bowl.**
In Bulgarian cooking, we don't mince our salad vegetables—we cut them 'edra', meaning large, rustic, and juicy. Toss the tomatoes, cucumber, red onion, roasted peppers, and marinated mushrooms together.

- 1. Dress the vegetables with sunflower oil and vinegar before adding the heavy proteins.**

Drizzle the sunflower oil and red wine vinegar over the mix, add the salt, and gently toss. Let this sit for 5 minutes so the tomato juices mingle with the oil to create a vibrant dressing at the bottom of the bowl.

- 2. Scatter the diced ham, cubed provolone, and black olives evenly over the top.**

Do not aggressively stir at this point, or the salad will turn mushy and lose its structural integrity.

- 3. Shred the feta in a thick, snowy layer directly over the entire salad.**

Use the coarse side of a box grater to cover the ingredients completely. This white blanket is the visual hallmark of a true Bulgarian salad.

- 4. Arrange the quartered hard-boiled eggs on top of the cheese layer and garnish with parsley.**

Bring the bowl to the table exactly as it is, serving alongside a stiff pour of rakia or crisp white wine, and let your guests dig through the snowy cheese down to the juicy, marinated vegetables below.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sunflower oil is the non-negotiable soul of this dressing.**

Extra-virgin olive oil will overpower the dish and ruin the authentic Eastern European terroir; use unrefined sunflower oil to get the true aroma of the homeland.

- **Never use raw button mushrooms.**

Raw mushrooms become rubbery and strange in the mix. The acidity of jarred marinated mushrooms is absolutely essential to cut through the richness of the cheeses and meats.

- **Provolone is your best weeknight stand-in for traditional Bulgarian kashkaval.**

It has the exact same mildness, semi-hard elasticity, and subtle tang as the hard-to-find original cheese.



Zelena Salata

Зелена салата

zeh-LEH-nah sah-LAH-tah

If there is a single dish that signals the end of the brutal Balkan winter, it is this one. In Bulgaria, Zelena Salata is the mandatory, vibrant herald of spring, designed to sit next to a roasted Easter lamb or be picked at while knocking back a cold glass of rakia. Do not ruin it with feta, and do not overthink it with fancy olive oil. The grandmother's secret here is militant simplicity: golden sunflower oil, hand-torn greens dried to within an inch of their lives, and a dressing that hits the bowl just seconds before it hits the table.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|-------------------|---|
| 1 large | Romaine lettuce <i>bottom stems discarded</i> | 3 large | eggs <i>hard-boiled, peeled, and quartered</i> |
| 1 med | English hothouse cucumber <i>peeled in stripes and sliced into thin half-moons</i> | 1/3 cup | Kalamata olives <i>pitted</i> |
| 1 bunch | red radishes <i>trimmed and sliced into paper-thin rounds</i> | 3 tbsp | sunflower oil |
| 4 med | scallions <i>roots trimmed, white and green parts finely chopped</i> | 1 1/2 tbsp | red wine vinegar |
| | | to taste | kosher salt |

PREPARATION

- **Hard-boil the eggs.**

Place the eggs in a small saucepan covered by an inch of cold water, bring to a rolling boil, cover, remove from the heat for 10 minutes, then transfer to an ice bath.

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

Separate the lettuce leaves and wash under cold water, then dry completely in a salad spinner or pat down with paper towels. Water is the absolute enemy of a good dressing.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Tear the impeccably dry lettuce leaves by hand into bite-sized pieces and drop them into a large serving bowl.**

Never use a metal knife, which oxidizes the edges and prematurely wilts the greens. Tearing preserves the cellular structure and the crucial spring crunch.

- 2. Add the sliced cucumber, radishes, and scallions to the bowl with the greens.**

- 3. Right as everyone sits down to eat, drizzle the sunflower oil and vinegar over the vegetables, season generously with salt, and toss gently with your hands.**

Do not dress in advance. Salt and acid immediately break down the cell walls via osmosis, turning a vibrant salad into a soggy, tragic mess.

- 1. Arrange the quartered hard-boiled eggs and olives beautifully over the top and serve immediately.**

Keep some crusty bread nearby to mop up the golden, yolk-enriched dressing at the bottom of the bowl.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Use sunflower oil, not extra virgin olive oil.**

Reaching for olive oil is a dead giveaway of an Americanized recipe. Bulgaria produces massive quantities of sunflower oil, and its clean, golden flavor is the undisputed taste of childhood here.

- **Prep ahead for a busy weeknight.**

You can wash, dry, and tear the lettuce, boil the eggs, and slice the vegetables a day in advance. Store the greens in a ziplock bag with a paper towel, keep the vegetables in airtight containers, and toss everything together in under sixty seconds on a Tuesday night.



Fasul Salata

Бобена салата

bo-be-na sa-la-ta

Ten minutes. That is the distance between opening a 15-ounce can of white beans and serving a salad: in Bulgaria, salads are meze, meant to be placed in the center of the table alongside a chilled glass of rakia. The prep requires brutally massaging raw red onions with salt to draw out their harsh bite, and mimicking the homeland's unrefined sharlan oil by spiking a heavy glug of sunflower oil with a drop of toasted sesame. Once the red onions lose their bite, toss the beans and a pinch of spearmint with a wooden spoon, walk away for five minutes, and let the vinegar do its work.

INGREDIENTS

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

PREPARATION

- **Drain, rinse, and dry the beans.**

Rinse the beans extensively under cold water to strip away the viscous, starchy canning liquid, then lay them out on paper towels to pat completely dry. If you leave them wet, they will turn to mush, which violates a prime directive of Bulgarian grandmothers.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Massage the onions with salt.**

Place the sliced red onions in a small bowl, sprinkle with the kosher salt, and aggressively pinch and massage them with your fingers for 30 to 60 seconds. They will release liquid, soften, and turn slightly translucent, transforming from harshly pungent to pliant and sweet. Add the onions and their accumulated juices to a large mixing bowl with the dried beans.

- 2. Build the salad.**

Add the chopped roasted red peppers, chopped parsley, dried spearmint, and olives to the bowl with the beans and onions.

1. Mix the mock-sharlan dressing.

In a small jar, shake together the mild olive oil, toasted sesame oil, and red wine vinegar with a pinch of freshly ground black pepper. The drop of sesame perfectly mimics the deep, nutty flavor of unrefined cold-pressed Bulgarian sunflower oil.

2. Dress, fold, and rest.

Pour the dressing over the salad and gently fold it with a wooden spoon, taking care not to mash the beans. Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes to allow the starches to fully absorb the oil and vinegar.

3. Serve at room temperature.

Remove the salad from the fridge 15 minutes before serving to take off the chill, adjust the seasoning if necessary, and serve alongside crusty bread and strong plum brandy.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The 5-minute lutenitsa hack.**

For an ultra-fast, deeply traditional weeknight alternative, skip the oil and vinegar entirely. Toss your rinsed beans and salt-mashed onions with 1/4 cup of chopped dill pickles and 3 to 4 heaping tablespoons of Lutenitsa (a legendary roasted pepper spread found in the international aisle). This is a beloved winter comfort food in Bulgaria, often eaten directly out of the bowl.



Lyutenitsa & Lukanka Board

Дъска с лютеница и луканка

lyoo-teh-nee-tsah & loo-kahn-kah

This isn't a heavy, three-pan dinner that leaves you scrubbing pots at ten o'clock, but a weeknight spread built on the lazy oven method, capturing the smell of roasting peppers in late summer without standing over bubbling outdoor cauldrons for days to make the thick, sweet-tart pepper relish known as lyutenitsa. Pull out a scratched wooden board, slice sharp sirene brine cheese alongside coins of cured, cumin-laced lukanka salami, and tear a thick hunk of sourdough to drag through a half-empty jar of lyutenitsa. Leave the board on the table and eat.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|-------------------|---|-------------------|---|
| 3 lb | red bell peppers <i>cored, seeded, and chopped into large chunks</i> | 1 1/2 tbsp | apple cider vinegar |
| 2 lb | roma tomatoes <i>cored and quartered</i> | 1/2 tsp | black pepper |
| 1 large | globe eggplant <i>peeled and chopped into 1-inch cubes</i> | 1/2 tsp | ground cumin |
| 3 med | carrots <i>peeled and sliced into thick rounds</i> | 12 oz | lukanka |
| 1 large | yellow onion <i>roughly chopped</i> | 8 oz | bulgarian sirene |
| 6 clove | garlic <i>peeled</i> | 8 oz | kashkaval |
| 1/2 cup | sunflower oil | 1 cup | raw walnuts |
| 1 1/2 tbsp | granulated sugar | 1 cup | cherry tomatoes |
| 1 tbsp | kosher salt | 2 med | cucumbers <i>cut into sticks</i> |
| | | 1 loaf | rustic sourdough <i>sliced thick</i> |

PREPARATION

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

Toss the cubed eggplant with a heavy pinch of salt in a colander and let it sit for 20 minutes in the sink. Rinse briefly and pat dry with a paper towel to ensure your lyutenitsa becomes thick and rich rather than watery.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the vegetables in a massive roasting pan.**

Preheat your oven to 425°F. In the largest, deepest roasting pan you own, combine the red peppers, tomatoes, drained eggplant, carrots, onion, and garlic.

1. Dress the vegetables for the oven.

In a small bowl, whisk together the sunflower oil, sugar, kosher salt, and vinegar. Pour this over the vegetables and use your hands to toss everything until thoroughly coated.

2. Bake covered to release the liquid.

Cover the pan tightly with aluminum foil and bake for 1 hour. The vegetables will release a massive amount of water into the pan.

3. Evaporate the water and caramelize.

Remove the foil completely and continue baking for another 1 1/2 to 2 hours, stirring every 30 minutes. The mixture is ready when the water has entirely evaporated, the vegetables are slightly charred on the edges, and they are swimming only in their own seasoned oil.

4. Blend into a thick relish.

Let the pan cool for 15 minutes, then transfer the contents—including all that rich oil—into a large pot. Add the black pepper and cumin, and pulse with an immersion blender until it reaches a thick, spreadable consistency, leaving just a bit of rustic texture intact.

5. Assemble the meze board.

Transfer a generous amount of the cooled lyutenitsa into a central serving bowl. Slice the lukanka into very thin rounds and arrange them in a shingled pattern. Cut the feta into thick blocks and the gouda into triangles, keeping the two cheeses in separate corners so their flavors don't cross-contaminate.

6. Garnish with freshness and crunch.

Fill the empty spaces on your board with raw walnuts, fresh cucumbers, and cherry tomatoes. Serve immediately alongside thick slices of rustic bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Source your salami wisely.**

True lukanka is cured with a distinct white mold on the outside. Do not peel this off; it is part of the flavor profile. If you can't find it locally, a high-quality Italian soppressata or French saucisson sec will mimic the dense texture.

- **Never buy pre-crumbled feta.**

You want a block of feta soaking in brine, which mimics the creamy, sliceable texture of Balkan sirene. If you can't find Bulgarian cheese, a high-quality French sheep's milk or creamy goat milk feta is your best bet. Mild gouda or sharp provolone stands in perfectly for the kashkaval.

- **Let the relish rest.**

Lyutenitsa tastes infinitely better on the second day after the flavors have melded in the fridge. Make the spread on a lazy Sunday, and you can assemble an incredible weeknight meze board in less than five minutes.



Palneni Chushki sas Sirene

Пълнени чушки със сирене

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

These supermarket bell peppers aren't a precious culinary project destined to be peeled, breaded, and deep-fried into submission. When you need dinner on the table at six-thirty on a Tuesday, grab a block of sheep's milk feta; the trick here is mixing sharp, salty feta with a dry, mild ricotta to bind the filling so it doesn't blow out in the oven. Throw them in a cast-iron skillet, wait until the hot oil hisses, and eat.

INGREDIENTS

6 med sweet red peppers
tops cut off, cored and seeded

8 oz feta cheese
crumbled

8 oz whole milk ricotta

2 large eggs

1/4 cup fresh parsley
finely chopped

1/4 cup fresh dill
finely chopped

1 small garlic clove
minced or grated to a paste

1/2 tsp black pepper
freshly ground

1 tbsp unsalted butter
cut into 6 small pieces

28 oz crushed tomatoes

3 tbsp extra virgin olive oil

2 med garlic cloves
thinly sliced

1 tsp sugar

1/2 tsp salt

1/2 tsp dried summer savory

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 400°F (200°C) and prepare the tomato sauce base.**
In a 9x13-inch baking dish, whisk together the crushed tomatoes, olive oil, sliced garlic, sugar, salt, and savory. Spread it out evenly. Baking the peppers directly in the sauce keeps them from scorching and yields an incredible pan juice.
- 2. Pierce the hollowed peppers to prevent them from bursting.**
Using the tip of a paring knife or a toothpick, poke three or four tiny holes around the sides of each pepper to let steam escape. Drop one tiny piece of butter into the bottom cavity of each pepper for interior richness.
- 3. Mix the cheeses, eggs, and herbs until cohesive.**
In a bowl, combine the crumbled feta, ricotta, eggs, parsley, dill, grated garlic, and black pepper. Stir vigorously. Do not add salt; the feta brings plenty to the party.
- 4. Spoon the cheese mixture into the peppers, leaving room at the top.**
Push the filling down gently to eliminate air pockets, but stop about a half-inch from the opening. The eggs will puff as they bake; overfill them, and you'll have a cheese volcano in your pan.
- 5. Nestle the peppers snugly into the tomato sauce and bake uncovered for 35 to 40 minutes.**
Drizzle a tiny bit of olive oil over the tops. They are ready when the peppers are soft, their skins slightly wrinkled and blistered, and the cheese is puffed and golden.

1. Let the dish rest for 10 minutes before serving.

The filling needs a moment to settle and firm up. Serve straight from the baking dish, making sure every plate gets a generous spoonful of the sauce.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Choose the right peppers.**

Long sweet peppers like Ramiro or Corno di Toro are the most authentic equivalent to the Bulgarian Kapiya, but standard red bell peppers work perfectly fine. Avoid green peppers; their bitterness amplifies in the oven.

● **Feta matters.**

Buy sheep's milk feta stored in brine. Pre-crumbled dry feta in plastic tubs lacks the moisture and creaminess required to make this filling work.



After-School Krenvirshi & Princessi

Hyper-fast, nostalgic snacks bridging the gap between work, school, and dinner, heavily relying on clever deli hacks and easy assembly.

Four-fifteen PM, backpacks hit the floor, the toaster oven ticks, and a blistered sheet pan of kashkaval and sliced krenvirshi is the only thing standing between a hungry kid and total mutiny. Here, that translates to a pack of decent frankfurters masquerading as krenvirshi, some sharp cheese to stand in for kashkaval, and a broiler set to high. The cheese melts into crispy edges, replacing the slow-simmered stews of Sunday afternoons with fast, vital survival food.

These are the improvised deli snacks of the Bulgarian American diaspora. You take a slice of whatever bread survived the week, spackle it with a seasoned meat mixture or cheese, and suddenly you have princessi. A hand grabs the

bread straight off the hot foil, pushing the dinner hour successfully down the road. One bite, tasting exactly like a Tuesday afternoon in Sofia, even if you're standing over a kitchen island in New Jersey.





Krenvirshki s Buter Testo

Кренвиршки с бутер тесто

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

Four p.m. at the kitchen counter, backpacks hit the floor, the oven blasts to 400 degrees, and cold supermarket puff pastry gets wrapped around everyday hot dogs, releasing the smell of buttery dough and snapping krenvirshki baking in the oven. The secret to the homeland taste lies beneath the dough: a smear of lutenitsa, a sliver of kashkaval, and a dusting of chubritsa before folding. The pastry shatters on the first bite, the mustard goes on thick, and the baking sheet is empty before dinner even starts.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|-----------------|--|
| 17 oz | frozen puff pastry <i>thawed according to package instructions but kept cold</i> | 4 slices | kashkaval cheese <i>or substitute kasseri, mild provolone, or low-moisture mozzarella</i> |
| 4 large | mild frankfurters <i>cut in half crosswise</i> | 1 tsp | dried chubritsa |
| 4 tbsp | lutenitsa | 1 large | egg <i>lightly beaten with 1 tsp water</i> |
| | | 1 tbsp | sesame seeds |

PREPARATION

- **Preheat the oven to 400°F.**
Line a large baking sheet with parchment paper.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Section the puff pastry.**
Working quickly so the pastry remains cold, unfold the two sheets onto a lightly floured surface and cut each into four equal rectangles.
- 2. Build the homeland flavor layer.**
Down the center of each pastry rectangle, spread about half a tablespoon of lutenitsa, lay a slice of kashkaval over the relish, and sprinkle with a generous pinch of chubritsa.
- 3. Apply the blanket fold.**
Place a piece of frankfurter on top of the seasoned cheese. Wrap one side of the pastry over the sausage, then fold the other side over to overlap, creating a tight packet.
- 4. Secure the seam.**
Place the packet onto the parchment paper seam-side down so the puff pastry doesn't unroll as it expands.

1. Cut the signature slashes.

Using a very sharp knife, cut three or four diagonal slashes across the top of each krenvirshka to allow steam to escape and prevent a soggy interior.

2. Glaze and bake.

Brush the top and sides of each packet generously with the egg wash, sprinkle lightly with sesame seeds, and bake for 18 to 22 minutes until puffed and deeply golden brown.

3. Cool slightly before serving.

Allow them to sit for five minutes—the melted cheese inside will be incredibly hot—before serving warm, ideally with a glass of cold ayran.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the thermodynamics of puff pastry.**

Keep the dough chilled. If your kitchen is hot, keep half the pastry in the refrigerator while you work. If the butter layers melt into the flour before hitting the hot oven, the pastry will bake into a dense, greasy flatbread.

● **Choose the right sausage.**

Standard American hot dogs often contain high amounts of corn syrup or artificial hickory smoke. Seek out a high-quality, fine-emulsion frankfurter with a natural casing and a mild, savory profile to mimic the true Bulgarian krenvirsh.



Kashkaval Pane

Кашкавал пане

kash-kah-vahl pah-neh

If you grew up in a Bulgarian-American household, the smell of hot oil and toasty breadcrumbs means it's four o'clock on a Tuesday and your grandmother is at the stove. Kashkaval Pane isn't some sad mozzarella stick; it's a substantial, savory slab of molten dairy encased in a shatteringly crisp shell. Recreating it at home usually ends in exploded cheese and burnt crumbs because you're missing the old-school secrets: a quick freeze, and a violent shock in ice water to forge an impenetrable crust. Swap the hard-to-find Kashkaval for a solid block of aged Provolone, and you're about to taste exactly what you remember.

INGREDIENTS

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

PREPARATION

- **Chill the cheese.**

Arrange the 1/2-inch cheese slabs on a plate so they do not touch, and freeze them uncovered for 20 to 30 minutes until extremely cold and firm.

- **Set up the breading station.**

Line up four shallow bowls from left to right: the ice water, the flour mixed with the kosher salt, the beaten eggs, and the breadcrumbs.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Shock and bread the chilled cheese.**

Take a cold slab of cheese, quickly dip it into the ice water, and shake off the excess. Drop it into the flour, pressing to coat completely, then submerge it in the beaten eggs so no dry spots remain. Press it firmly into the breadcrumbs to form a tight seal.

- 2. Let the breading rest and hydrate.**

Place the breaded cheese on a clean plate and let it sit for 5 minutes to allow the flour and egg to form a structural glue that prevents blowouts in the pan.

- 3. Fry the cheese in hot oil.**

Heat the neutral oil in a heavy-bottomed skillet over medium-high heat until it reaches 350°F. Carefully lower the cheese into the hot oil and fry undisturbed for 1 1/2 to 2 1/2 minutes until the bottom edges are deeply golden brown.

1. Flip and finish frying.

Carefully flip the cheese using a spatula and fry for another 1 to 2 minutes on the second side until golden.

2. Drain and serve immediately.

Transfer the fried cheese to a plate lined with paper towels to drain excess grease, and serve piping hot alongside fresh sliced tomatoes and cucumbers.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The ice water dip is non-negotiable.**

The thermal shock combined with the flour creates an instant starchy paste when it hits the hot oil, locking the melting cheese securely inside.

- **Buy block cheese, not pre-sliced.**

Standard deli slices are far too thin and will liquefy instantly in the oil. You need a solid block of aged Provolone or traditional Kashkaval so you can cut precise 1/2-inch slabs.



Makaroni na Furna

Макарони на фурна

ma-ka-ro-ni na fur-na

To the uninitiated, the idea of drowning pasta in sweet vanilla custard and bombing it with sharp, salty feta sounds like a late-night mistake. But in a Bulgarian household, it's the unmistakable scent of a Sunday morning or a chaotic Tuesday afternoon. The salty bite of the cheese slicing through the rich, creamy custard is a brilliant, addictive paradox that makes perfect sense once you taste it. The secret your grandmother knew but didn't write down? Pull the pasta from the boiling water early so it doesn't turn to mush in the oven, and for the love of god, never use pre-crumbled feta.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|--------------|---|
| 1 tbsp | kosher salt | 4 cup | whole milk |
| 1 lb | dried short tubular pasta <i>elbow or penne works best</i> | 1 cup | granulated sugar <i>plus 1 tbsp for the topping</i> |
| 4 tbsp | unsalted European butter <i>divided</i> | 2 tsp | pure vanilla extract |
| 5 large | eggs | 6 oz | Greek feta in brine <i>removed from brine and crumbled by hand</i> |

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 375°F and generously grease a 9x13-inch baking dish with 1 tablespoon of the butter.**
- 2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook the pasta for 1 to 2 minutes less than the package directs for al dente.**
The pasta should still have a firm bite. It will finish cooking and absorbing liquid once it hits the custard.
- 3. Drain the pasta well without rinsing, return it to the warm pot, and toss with 2 tablespoons of butter until glossy.**
Transfer the buttered pasta to your prepared baking dish and spread it into an even layer.
- 4. Crumble the feta directly over the warm pasta by hand, gently tossing a few pieces so the cheese weaves throughout the noodles.**
- 5. In a large mixing bowl, whisk the eggs, whole milk, 1 cup of sugar, and vanilla extract vigorously until the sugar is completely dissolved.**
Dissolving the sugar completely is crucial; otherwise, it will sink to the bottom of the baking dish and cook unevenly.
- 6. Pour the custard mixture slowly over the pasta and cheese, then dot the surface with the remaining 1 tablespoon of butter cut into tiny pieces.**

- 1. Bake uncovered on the middle rack for 30 minutes, then pull the rack out and sprinkle the remaining 1 tablespoon of sugar evenly across the top.**

Return to the oven for another 10 to 15 minutes until the custard is set and the top has developed a beautiful, caramelized golden-brown crust. A knife inserted in the center should come out clean.

- 2. Let the dish sit for at least 15 minutes before slicing so the custard can firm up.**

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



Princesi sas Sirene i Yaitse

Принцеси със сирене и яйца

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

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of baking chubritsa immediately teleports you back to a 3:30 PM kitchen. Princesi are the ultimate latchkey snack, traditionally blasted under the glowing red elements of a countertop Party Grill until puffy and blistered. The beauty here is sheer, utilitarian simplicity—bread, butter, egg, and the sharp tang of sirene. But every grandmother has a secret to making them perfect. Here, it's a spoonful of plain yogurt whisked into the egg to prevent it from turning rubbery under the intense heat, giving the

topping a light, soufflé-like lift. We're using your oven's broiler to mimic that aggressive top-down heat. It's fast, dirt-cheap, and tastes exactly like home.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|----------------------------------|
| 4 large | hearty sandwich bread <i>sliced</i> | 1 large | egg |
| 2 tbsp | unsalted butter <i>softened to room temp</i> | 1 tbsp | plain whole-milk Greek yogurt |
| 5 oz | Bulgarian sirene or firm sheep's milk feta | 1/2 tsp | dried summer savory |
| | | 1/8 tsp | sharena sol |

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Position your oven rack in the upper third of the oven and turn the broiler to high.**

Line a heavy baking sheet with aluminum foil. You need intense, top-down heat to replicate the physics of the traditional Bulgarian Party Grill.

- 2. Spread a very thin, even layer of softened butter across the surface of each slice of bread, reaching all the way to the crusts.**

Do not skip this step. The butter acts as a waterproof shield, ensuring the wet egg mixture doesn't seep into the bread and turn it soggy before it cooks.

- 3. In a medium bowl, thoroughly mash the cheese with a fork until it forms a coarse paste.**

You do not want large, distinct cubes. Crack the egg into the cheese, add the yogurt, and beat the mixture vigorously until it forms a thick, cohesive, creamy batter.

- 4. Spoon the cheese and egg mixture evenly over the buttered bread slices, spreading it gently to the edges.**

Sprinkle the top of each unbaked toast generously with the dried summer savory.

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

Depending on the aggression of your broiler, this will take anywhere from 4 to 8 minutes. You are looking for the egg to puff up slightly and for the cheese to develop deep, blistered, golden-brown spots.

2. Remove from the oven and let the toasts rest for exactly one minute before serving.

The topping will be molten hot. Dust with a tiny pinch of sharena sol if you have it, and serve alongside fresh tomatoes or a cold glass of ayran for the full authentic after-school experience.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The bread matters.**

Do not use crusty, hole-filled artisanal sourdough. The liquid egg will just seep through the crumb holes and glue your sandwich to the pan. Stick to standard, tight-crumb sandwich loaves like a Pullman loaf or dense rustic white.

● **Sourcing the scent of home.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is the definitive olfactory signature of Bulgarian home cooking. If absolutely unavailable, substitute a pinch of dried oregano mixed with a trace of dried thyme, but the savory is strictly required for the authentic experience.



Krenvirshi "Lodki" s Kashkaval

Кренвирши "Лодки" с кашкавал

kren-veer-shee lod-kee s kash-kah-vahl

At 4:15 p.m., backpacks drop, the oven cranks to 400 degrees, a split supermarket frankfurter lands on a hot half-sheet pan, and the kitchen fills with rendering sausage mingling with melting cheese and toasted summer savory. Slicing the hot dog into a makeshift canoe to hold a rich, feta-laced custard is exactly how grandmothers transformed a cheap pantry staple. Pull the pan at the first sign of blistered kashkaval. Hit it with dried chubritsa the second it leaves the oven.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|---|
| 4 large | high-quality hot dogs or mild frankfurters <i>slit lengthwise down the center to form a trench</i> | 1 large | eggs <i>lightly beaten</i> |
| 1 tbsp | unsalted butter <i>melted</i> | 1 cup | Kashkaval or low-moisture mozzarella <i>freshly grated</i> |
| 2 tbsp | plain cream cheese <i>softened</i> | 1 tsp | dried summer savory |
| 1/4 cup | feta or Bulgarian Sirene <i>crumbled</i> | 1/4 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| | | 1/2 med | tomato <i>cut into very thin half-moons</i> |

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 400°F and prepare the baking sheet.**
Line a rimmed baking sheet with foil or parchment paper and brush it lightly with the melted butter.
- 2. Carve the hot dog boats.**
Gently pry open the slits in your hot dogs to form a trench, carving out a very thin V-shape of meat from the top if they are too stiff to stay open naturally.
- 3. Mix the cheese custard filling.**
In a small bowl, mash the softened cream cheese and crumbled feta with a fork until it forms a chunky paste, then beat in the egg and black pepper.
- 4. Stuff and assemble the boats.**
Divide the feta mixture evenly into the trenches of the hot dogs, top generously with the grated Kashkaval, and place the thin tomato half-moons over the cheese.
- 5. Bake until blistered and browned.**
Roast for 15 to 20 minutes. You want the edges of the hot dogs to curl and crisp, and the cheese to fully melt with bubbling, golden-brown spots.

1. Hit them with the savory immediately.

The second the pan comes out of the oven, generously sprinkle the dried summer savory over the molten cheese so the residual heat blooms the essential oils.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Improvise the Kashkaval if necessary.**

If you cannot find authentic Balkan Kashkaval at a European market, a 50/50 blend of low-moisture mozzarella and mild provolone perfectly mimics the salty, semi-hard melt that defines this dish.

● **Substitute for summer savory if needed.**

Dried summer savory (chubritsa) is the defining aromatic signature here. If it is absolutely unavailable, substitute a half teaspoon of dried oregano mixed with a tiny pinch of dried thyme.



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

Four-fifteen PM demands an immediate kitchen inventory: a hot burner, a sack of russets, and a block of sheep's milk feta waiting for the grater. Real magic happens in a wide cast-iron skillet. The trick is pragmatic brilliance—a pinch of salt in the hot oil to stop the violent splatter, and the unbreakable rule to never cover the fries once they are done. Dusted with a savory blend of Sharena Sol and showered in feta while still blistering hot, the directive is simple: hit them heavily while the oil pops, and eat them standing over the stove.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|------------------|---|
| 2 tbsp | dried summer savory | 1 1/2 lb | Russet potatoes <i>peeled and cut into medium-thick sticks</i> |
| 1 tbsp | sweet paprika | | |
| 1/2 tbsp | dried fenugreek leaves | 1 1/2 cup | sunflower oil |
| 1 tbsp | fine yellow cornmeal <i>toasted in a dry pan until fragrant</i> | 1 pinch | salt |
| 1 tsp | fine sea salt | 1 cup | feta cheese in brine |

PREPARATION

- **Blend the Sharena Sol.**

Pulse the summer savory, paprika, fenugreek, toasted cornmeal, and sea salt in a spice grinder, or mix vigorously in a small jar.

- **Dry the potatoes completely.**

If you rinsed the cut potatoes, dry them aggressively with paper towels; leaving them wet or soaking them will harden the cellular structure and invite a soggy disaster instead of a golden fry.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring the oil to a shimmering heat in a wide, heavy-bottomed pan over medium-high heat.**

You want about a half-inch depth of oil to shallow-fry the potatoes evenly.

- 2. Sprinkle a generous pinch of salt directly into the bare, hot oil.**

This brilliant grandmother's trick prevents the residual water in the potatoes from violently popping and splattering fat all over your stove.

- 3. Add the potatoes in a single, uncrowded layer so the escaping steam does not boil them.**

They need room to breathe. Let them fry entirely undisturbed for a few minutes until the bottom layer develops a deep golden-brown crust before giving them a moderate stir with a slotted spoon.

- 1. Transfer the golden potatoes to a paper towel-lined plate to drain for thirty seconds.**

Crucial rule: never place a lid or foil over them, or the trapped steam will instantly destroy the crisp exterior and render them unpleasantly soft.

- 2. Immediately shower the hot fries with a mountain of freshly grated feta and a heavy dusting of Sharena Sol.**

Do this while they are still blistering hot so the residual heat coaxes the creamy, brined cheese into a slight, irresistible melt.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Procure the right cheese.**

The magic requires moisture. Never buy pre-crumbed dry feta; look for French feta in brine, or the highest-quality block of Greek feta in brine you can find at your local supermarket.

- **Respect the Chubritsa.**

Summer savory is the undisputed heart of Sharena Sol. Find it in the spice aisle or online. If desperate, winter savory or a thyme-oregano mix will do, but it won't carry the true scent of the homeland.



Pileshki Hapki s Kornfleyks

Пилешки хапки с корнфлейкс

pee-lesh-kee hap-kee s korn-fleyks

Crush supermarket cornflakes inside a gallon zip-top bag, leaving the pieces deliberately jagged to recreate what your parents ordered for you at the neighborhood *kruchma* while they drank cold beer and caught up with friends. Ensuring the crust shatters without the brutal mess of deep-frying on a Tuesday night takes a yogurt-based marinade that tenderizes the chicken to an impossible juiciness, and a high-heat oven bake to mimic the fryer's crunch. Dunk them in cold garlic yogurt so the sharp bite of raw garlic cuts through the cooling tang.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Whisk together the half-cup of yogurt, soy sauce, sunflower oil, garlic powder, paprika, black pepper, and summer savory, then toss the chicken strips until fully coated.**

Cover and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes. The lactic acid gently denatures the proteins, meaning the meat will actually hold onto its moisture under the high heat of the oven.

- 2. Combine the remaining cup of yogurt, mayonnaise, minced garlic, dill, quarter-teaspoon of salt, and lemon juice in a jar and shake vigorously until completely smooth.**

Stash this in the fridge while the chicken cooks. Letting it rest allows the sharp bite of the raw garlic to mellow and permeate the fats, mirroring the exact flavor profile of a bustling Sofia tavern.

- 1. Preheat your oven to 400°F and line a large rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper.**

Do not use your oven's convection fan setting if it blows too hard, as it will dry out the meat before the crust develops.

- 2. Set up a breading station with three shallow dishes: one with the flour mixed with the teaspoon of salt, one with the beaten eggs, and one with the crushed cornflakes.**

Make sure your cornflakes look like jagged gravel, not powder. If you pulverize them into dust, you destroy the signature crunch of the dish.

- 3. Dredge each piece of chicken in the flour, dip into the egg, and press firmly into the crushed cornflakes.**

Use your hands to actively pack the cornflakes onto the meat so there are no bald spots. Arrange the breaded bites on the baking sheet, leaving a small gap between each piece so the hot air can circulate.

- 4. Generously mist the top of the breaded chicken with cooking spray and bake for 15 to 20 minutes.**

This microscopic layer of fat is the absolute key to achieving a deep-fried golden color in a dry oven environment. Pull them when the chicken is cooked through and the crust is beautifully rigid.

- 5. Serve the chicken bites immediately alongside a generous bowl of the cold garlic-yogurt sauce for plunging.**

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Track down some dried summer savory (chubritsa) if you possibly can.**

It is the quintessential scent of the Bulgarian homeland. If you absolutely can't find it at a local international market or online, a pinch of dried oregano and thyme will get you close enough.

- **Buy plain, unsweetened cornflakes.**

American supermarkets are saturated with frosted and honey-nut varieties.

Double-check your box, because sweetened cereal will completely ruin the savory profile and burn rapidly in the oven.



Mish-Mash & The 15-Minute Skillet

The workhorse weeknight dinners. Fast, affordable, and resourceful pan preparations of abundant vegetables, eggs, and ground meats.

Mish-mash doesn't ask for your patience or delicate plating; this is survival cooking born of long shifts, hungry kids, and jarred roasted peppers buried under crumbled sirene. These are the pan preparations that get the job done, built on the sharp hiss of sweet peppers and tomatoes collapsing in hot oil before the eggs go in, and the moment the beef hisses hitting a cast-iron skillet to fake a proper grill for kyufta. Turn the burner high, grab a wooden spoon, and forge a Bulgarian kitchen in fifteen flat minutes.





Kyufte & Kebapche

Кюфте и Кебапче

kyuf-TEH e keh-BAP-cheh

Roll equal parts beef and pork into tight cylinders and drop them into a cast-iron skillet so the fat hisses against the metal, leaving you fifteen minutes away from a perfectly blistered kebabche. To achieve that springy bite and the intoxicating smell of cumin and pork rendering in a hot pan, hand-knead the meat and rest it overnight: The 1958 standard didn't care about your schedule; it cared about the biochemical reality of meat, salt, and time. Keep the heat high, flip them once, and slice the bread.

INGREDIENTS

1 1/2 lb ground pork
80/20 ratio

1 lb ground beef
80/20 ratio

1 tbsp kosher salt

1/3 cup carbonated water
ice-cold

1 tbsp ground cumin

1 tbsp black pepper
freshly ground

1/2 med yellow onion
very finely minced or grated

1/2 tsp dried summer savory
or substitute dried thyme

1 pinch baking soda

1/4 cup white vinegar

1/4 cup cold water

PREPARATION

- **The 24-hour secret.**

The 15-minute active cooking time on Tuesday night assumes you invested 10 minutes on Monday night. Do not rush the resting phase; it is the fundamental secret to the meat's legendary texture.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Get your hands dirty and aggressively knead the base meats.**

In a large bowl, combine the pork, beef, salt, cumin, pepper, and carbonated water. Do not mix gently. Knead the meat vigorously for 5 to 8 minutes until it transforms from loose strands into a cohesive, sticky paste that absorbs all the liquid.

- 2. Split the mixture to respect the morphological differences between the two.**

Divide the meat in half. Leave one half exactly as is for the purist kebabcheta. Into the other half, rigorously work the grated onion, summer savory, and baking soda to create the herbaceous kyufteta base.

1. Press the meat flat and banish it to the refrigerator.

Press both mixtures into a container no thicker than two inches, covering tightly with plastic wrap directly touching the surface. Let it rest for 12 to 24 hours. This is how the proteins lock in moisture and the cumin permeates the fat.

2. Combine the cold water and white vinegar in a small dipping bowl.

This old-world trick is essential; the vinegar lightly denatures the exterior proteins of the meat on contact, creating a microscopic casing that locks the juices inside while preventing the highly hydrated meat from sticking to your skin.

3. Dip your hands in the vinegar solution before forming each piece.

Roll the kebabche mixture into elongated, six-inch cylinders about an inch thick. For the kyufteta, form golf-ball-sized spheres, flatten them into half-inch thick patties, and press a small dimple into the center of each so they don't puff up into meatballs on the heat.

4. Hit them with high heat in a cast-iron skillet.

Cook over medium-high heat. Roll the kebabcheta exactly three times, cooking them on four sides for about 3 to 4 minutes per side. Flip the kyufteta only once, cooking for 5 to 6 minutes per side until deeply browned, charred, and springy to the touch.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The rule of onions.**

Putting an onion in a kebabche is a culinary crime in Bulgaria; keep the onions strictly relegated to the kyufte.

● **How to serve it.**

To truly replicate the neighborhood kruchma experience, serve these strictly with a side of French fries dusted heavily in feta cheese, a slice of good bread, and a massive dollop of lutenitsa.

- **The shake test.**

Grab a finished kebabche with tongs and gently shake it. If it bounces and flexes without breaking in half, you successfully established the protein matrix during kneading.



20-Minute Pileshka Kavarma

Пилешка кавърма в тиган

pi-lesh-ka ka-var-ma v ti-gan

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, the smell of onions, peppers, and summer savory hitting a hot pan is the smell of home. Traditional kavarma is a beautiful labor of love baked in a clay pot for hours, but when it is six o'clock on a Tuesday, practicality wins out. This native skillet adaptation swaps heavy pork for quick-cooking chicken thighs and forces those exact same rich, nostalgic flavors to develop in a fraction of the time, provided you respect the chubritsa.

INGREDIENTS

2 tbsp sunflower oil

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|----------------|--|
| 1 1/2 lb | boneless skinless chicken thighs <i>cut into bite-sized 1-inch chunks</i> | 1/2 cup | dry white wine |
| 2 large | yellow onions <i>chopped into large coarse pieces</i> | 2 tbsp | tomato paste |
| 8 oz | white button mushrooms <i>thickly sliced</i> | 1/2 cup | canned crushed tomatoes |
| 1 large | red bell pepper <i>chopped</i> | 1 tbsp | dried summer savory |
| 1 large | green bell pepper <i>chopped</i> | 1 tsp | sweet paprika |
| 1/2 cup | roasted red peppers <i>chopped</i> | 1/2 tsp | sugar |
| | | 1 tsp | kosher salt |
| | | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| | | 1/4 cup | fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Chop all meat and vegetables before you begin cooking.**

This is a fast, high-heat recipe that requires your ingredients to be ready to drop into the pan immediately.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Heat the sunflower oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat and sear the chicken chunks without moving them for one minute.**
Stir just until the outside turns opaque and white. You are not trying to cook the meat through yet, but rather sealing the surface to lock the juices inside.
- 2. Toss the coarsely chopped onions straight into the pan with the chicken and cook for about five minutes.**
Stir occasionally until the onions soften and turn translucent, soaking up the chicken fat.
- 3. Add the mushrooms, fresh bell peppers, and a pinch of salt, then cover the skillet.**
Turn the heat down to medium and let it cook undisturbed for five minutes. The trapped moisture will rapidly steam and soften the vegetables.

1. **Remove the lid and pour in the white wine to deglaze the pan, scraping up any browned bits on the bottom.**

Stir in the tomato paste, crushed tomatoes, roasted red peppers, summer savory, sweet paprika, sugar, and black pepper until it forms a rich red sauce.

2. **Reduce the heat to medium-low, cover, and gently simmer for ten minutes.**

The sauce will thicken and marry the flavors perfectly. Remove from the heat, adjust the salt if necessary, and scatter the fresh parsley over the top.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **The secret to the homeland flavor is summer savory.**

Known as chubritsa in Bulgaria, this is entirely non-negotiable. It is sold as summer savory in the American spice aisle; do not substitute winter savory, which is far too bitter, or basic thyme.

- **Do not crowd the chicken.**

If you scale this recipe up, sear the chicken in batches. Overcrowding the pan will cause the meat to steam in its own juices instead of searing, resulting in tough chicken.



Selska Parzhenitsa with Pancetta

Селска пърженица

sel-skah par-zheh-nee-tsah

A village skillet isn't a slow Sunday braise. Since you probably don't have a baba curing pork in your suburban garage, diced pancetta is your secret weapon; hitting a cast-iron skillet until the fat renders into a pool of clear, sputtering oil, it delivers the unadulterated, salty pork flavor. In fifteen minutes, you build a fast base of sweet leeks, blistering peppers, and jammy tomatoes bound with soft eggs and sharp sheep's milk feta; let the tomatoes sizzle and reduce before the eggs hit the pan, then eat it straight out of the skillet with a heel of crusty bread.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Render the pork fat.

Place a heavy skillet over medium heat and add the diced pancetta. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the fat renders out and the meat turns golden and slightly crisp, about 4 minutes. Do not drain the fat; it is the soul of the dish.

2. Blister the peppers and leeks.

Toss the sliced leeks and chopped peppers directly into the sizzling pancetta fat. Sauté until the leeks soften and turn translucent, and the peppers begin to blister and sweeten, about 4 to 5 minutes.

3. Reduce the tomatoes into a jam.

Pour in the diced tomatoes with all their juices and sprinkle in the summer savory. Turn the heat up slightly to medium-high and cook, stirring frequently, until the water evaporates. You want a thick, jammy vegetable ragout where the pork fat begins to separate at the edges.

4. Bind with eggs and feta.

Lightly beat the eggs in a small bowl and pour them evenly over the vegetable mixture. Scatter the crumbled feta across the top of the pan and reduce the heat to medium-low.

1. Soft scramble and serve immediately.

Using a wooden spoon, gently fold the mixture for 1 to 2 minutes until the eggs are just set but still soft and glistening. Pull the pan from the heat immediately so the eggs don't rubberize, and serve straight from the skillet with torn bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the pork fat.**

American bacon is heavily smoked, which overpowers the subtle sweetness of the leeks and peppers. Stick to unsmoked pancetta to accurately replicate the flavor of authentic Bulgarian slanina.

● **Sourcing your savory.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is the defining herbaceous note of Bulgarian cooking. If you absolutely can't find it dried, a 50/50 blend of dried oregano and thyme will functionally mimic its flavor profile.



Skillet Pryasno Zele s Kaima

Прясно зеле с кайма

pryas-no ze-le s kay-ma

Fifteen minutes. That is the entire window between tossing supermarket ground pork into a 12-inch cast-iron skillet and unleashing the smell of Pryasno Zele s Kaima simmering on a Tuesday night. This ultimate, pragmatic comfort food is built on rendered pork, earthy paprika, and sweet cabbage, demanding an uncompromised ratio of pork to beef, and the heavy, hands-on mechanical breakdown of the cabbage before it ever hits the pan. Keep the burner cranked until the cabbage blisters. Track down some summer savory, let the fat do the work, and listen for the sizzle.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|--|
| 1 med | green cabbage <i>cored and finely shredded</i> | 1 tbsp | sweet paprika |
| 1 tsp | kosher salt | 1 tsp | ground cumin |
| 2 tbsp | neutral oil | 1 tbsp | dried summer savory |
| 1 large | yellow onion <i>finely diced</i> | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| 1 med | carrot <i>grated</i> | 2 med | bay leaves |
| 1/2 lb | ground pork | 1 cup | crushed tomatoes |
| 1/2 lb | lean ground beef | 1/4 cup | fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Aggressively massage the shredded cabbage and salt with your hands.**
Place the cabbage in a large bowl, sprinkle with the salt, and scrunch it for a few minutes until it yields, releasing its water and shrinking to half its original volume.
- 2. Render the ground pork and beef with the onion and carrot.**
Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Soften the onion and carrot for a few minutes, then add the meats, breaking them down into fine crumbles. Cook until the liquid evaporates and the meat browns in its own fat.
- 3. Bloom the spices.**
Lower the heat slightly and stir the sweet paprika, cumin, and black pepper directly into the hot fat for thirty seconds to awaken their essential oils.
- 4. Incorporate the massaged cabbage and aromatics.**
Fold the cabbage and any residual juices into the skillet. Pour in the crushed tomatoes, add the bay leaves, and sprinkle in the summer savory.

- 1. Simmer covered, then cook uncovered until the dish remains entirely on its fat.**
Cover and cook on medium-low for 15 minutes. Remove the lid, turn the heat up, and cook until the watery broth completely evaporates. You will hear the wet boil transition to a gentle, frying sizzle—what Bulgarians call *ostane na maznina*.
- 2. Garnish and serve.**
Remove from the heat, fish out the bay leaves, and stir in the fresh parsley.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing summer savory.**
Known locally as *chubritsa*, this piney, peppery herb is the undisputed king of Bulgarian spices. Track it down online or at a Balkan market; it is the defining flavor of the homeland.
- **The Kaima ratio.**
Authentic Bulgarian minced meat is almost exclusively a 60/40 mix of pork and beef. Using pure ground beef will result in a dry dish that lacks the necessary rendered fat to carry the sauce.



Sirene po Shopski

Сирене по шопски

sih-reh-neh poh shop-skee

It's the late-night comfort food of the Balkans, a bubbling, molten crock of salty sheep's milk cheese, sweet tomatoes, and a perfectly runny egg. Usually baked in a traditional clay gyuveche, an everyday ramekin or small cast-iron skillet does the job just as well on a Tuesday night in Ohio. It's unapologetically rich, brutally simple, and demands nothing more than a good hunk of crusty bread to drag through the yolk.

INGREDIENTS

1 tbsp unsalted butter
softened to room temp

2 med tomatoes
cored and diced

6 oz sheep's milk feta
drained and cut into 1/2-inch thick slabs

| | | | |
|--------------|---|----------------|---------------|
| 1 med | cubanelle pepper <i>stemmed, seeded, and sliced into rings</i> | 1/2 tsp | sweet paprika |
| 1 tsp | dried summer savory | 2 large | eggs |

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat the oven and prepare the baking vessels.

Preheat your oven to 400°F and heavily grease two small, oven-safe ramekins or cast-iron skillet with the softened butter.

2. Layer the vegetables and cheese.

Divide the diced tomatoes evenly between the dishes, lay the thick slabs of feta directly on top, and scatter the pepper rings over the cheese.

3. Season and bake the base.

Dust each portion with the summer savory and sweet paprika, then bake uncovered for 15 to 20 minutes until the tomatoes break down and the cheese softens.

4. Add the eggs.

Remove the dishes from the oven, create a small divot in the center of the molten cheese, and carefully crack one egg into each dish.

5. Finish the bake.

Return to the oven for 5 to 8 minutes, just until the egg whites are set but the yolks remain runny, then serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Sourcing the right cheese makes or breaks the dish.**

Seek out Bulgarian feta or a high-quality sheep's milk feta stored in brine; pre-crumbled cow's milk feta will dry out and turn chalky in the oven.

- **Summer savory is the defining flavor of Bulgaria.**

Known locally as chubritsa, this herb is non-negotiable for true authenticity. If you absolutely cannot find it, a blend of dried oregano and thyme will get you close, but it won't be quite the same.



Rhodope-Style Patatnik

Пататник

pah-TAHN-neek

Shred a pound of Russet potatoes against the rough side of a box grater, because fifteen minutes is the entire window between staring blankly at a raw potato and dropping a blistered crust onto the plate. This isn't a phyllo-wrapped pastry; this is honest shepherd's food, defined by the aroma of potatoes frying in butter with the distinct, sweet punch of dried spearmint. You must wring every drop of water from the grated potatoes. Press the mash flat into a cast-iron skillet, wait for the oil to hiss, and leave it the hell alone.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 1/2 lb | Russet potatoes <i>peeled</i> | 4 oz | feta cheese <i>crumbled</i> |
| 1 med | yellow onion <i>peeled</i> | 1 tbsp | dried spearmint |
| 1 tsp | kosher salt | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| 2 large | large eggs | 2 tbsp | neutral oil |
| | | 2 tbsp | unsalted butter |

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Grate and salt the vegetables.

Use the large holes of a box grater to shred the potatoes and onion directly into a large bowl. Toss the mixture with the kosher salt and let it sit for five minutes to draw out the cellular moisture.

2. Ruthlessly squeeze out the water.

This is the single most important secret of the dish. Take handfuls of the salted mixture and squeeze it over the sink as hard as you can, discarding all the extracted liquid. If the potatoes aren't completely dry, the patatnik will steam instead of crisping.

3. Bind the batter.

Return the dry potato mixture to the bowl. Crack in the eggs, crumble in the feta, and add the dried spearmint and black pepper. Mix aggressively with your hands or a fork until the potatoes are thoroughly coated.

4. Fry low and slow.

Place a 10-inch non-stick skillet over medium heat and melt half of the oil and butter. Dump the potato mixture in, pressing it down firmly with a spatula to form a compact, even layer. Cover with a tight-fitting lid, drop the heat to medium-low, and leave it alone for 12 to 15 minutes until the bottom forms a deep, golden-brown crust.

1. Execute the plate flip.

Remove the skillet from the heat. Place a large flat plate upside down over the pan, grip them tightly together using oven mitts, and confidently flip. The patatnik will drop onto the plate, crispy side up.

2. Crisp the bottom and serve.

Return the pan to the stove, adding the remaining oil and butter. Gently slide the pie off the plate and back into the skillet. Cook uncovered for another 10 to 12 minutes to crisp the bottom, then slide onto a cutting board, rest briefly, and slice into wedges.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing authentic spearmint.**

Spearmint (dzhodzhen) is the non-negotiable hallmark of Rhodope cooking. If your grocery store lacks dried spearmint in the spice aisle, simply buy a box of high-quality pure spearmint tea and cut open a couple of bags. Under no circumstances should you use peppermint.

● **Feta considerations.**

Avoid pre-crumbled feta sold in plastic tubs. It is coated in anti-caking agents that prevent it from melting correctly into the potato matrix. Always buy a block packed in brine.



Yaytsa s Patladzhan

Яйца с патладжан

yay-tsa s pat-la-jan

Tear a blistered eggplant into a 10-inch cast-iron skillet and let the egg whites hiss against the hot metal—great food doesn't always come from a multi-day ordeal; sometimes it's just a hot skillet, a few humble agrarian staples, and knowing what the hell to do with them. Once you learn how to properly scorch an eggplant directly over the gas grate, you master this rustic scramble: earthy eggplant caramelized in rich butter, hit with fresh garlic, a heavy fistful of fresh dill, and the unexpected warmth of nutmeg. Salt the eggplant the moment you walk through the door, and fifteen minutes later, you're eating the real thing straight from the pan.

INGREDIENTS

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

PREPARATION

- **Start the eggplant immediately.**

Salt the diced eggplant the minute you walk into the kitchen. Use the 10-minute resting period to chop your garlic, whisk the eggs, and set the table so you can fire it quickly.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sweat the eggplant to draw out the bitter juices.**

Toss the cubed eggplant with the kosher salt in a colander in the sink. Let it sit for 10 to 15 minutes. This breaks down the spongy cell structure so the vegetable fries beautifully instead of soaking up all your butter.

- 2. Dry the eggplant and brown it in butter.**

Rinse the eggplant quickly under cold water to remove excess salt, then rigorously pat the cubes completely dry with paper towels. Heat the butter in a large skillet over medium. Once foaming, add the eggplant and sauté until deeply golden and tender, about 8 to 10 minutes.

1. Bloom the aromatics off the heat.

Reduce the heat to medium-low. Add the minced garlic and sauté for one minute until fragrant. Pull the skillet off the heat entirely and stir in the nutmeg, black pepper, and half of the fresh dill, letting the residual heat of the pan toast the spices.

2. Scramble the eggs just until set.

Return the skillet to medium-low heat and pour in the beaten eggs. Fold gently and continuously with a spatula until the eggs form soft, creamy curds, about 2 to 3 minutes. Do not overcook; the eggs should remain tender and slightly glossy.

3. Garnish and serve immediately.

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

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Don't skip the nutmeg.**

It might seem out of place for an American breakfast, but a pinch of nutmeg is the traditional grandmother's hallmark here. It perfectly bridges the flavor gap between the rich butter, eggs, and earthy eggplant.

● **Choose the right fat.**

For the strictly authentic homeland flavor profile, use good European-style butter or sunflower oil. Avoid olive oil, which will yank the dish away from the Balkans and pull it toward Italy or Greece.



The Tuesday Pot: Bob Chorba & Stews

Translating the slow-cooked clay pots of the homeland into manageable, deeply flavored weeknight Dutch oven meals for the modern clock.

At six o'clock on a Tuesday evening, nobody has time to tend a fading wood fire or wait through hours of slow, steady bubbling in an earthenware gyuvech to coax out a proper stew. A heavy enameled Dutch oven bridges the gap between the village hearth and the American weeknight; it is where the white beans soften, a heavy pinch of dried mint blooms, and a blistering skillet kavarma or an honest, steaming bowl of supa topcheta comes together in thirty minutes flat. Leave the fragile clay pots for Sunday, crank the heat, and cook this unpretentious, working-class food for survival and warmth.





30-Minute Bob Chorba

Боб чорба

bob chor-ba

This bob chorba isn't a precious Sunday endeavor requiring heirloom pulses and endless patience. When a heavy Dutch oven hits the burner to transform supermarket canned white beans and sweet Bulgarian paprika in thirty minutes, the secret isn't an all-night soak, but the uncompromising marriage of dried spearmint and summer savory bloomed directly in hot oil. The hot oil hisses; dunk crusty bread and eat.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Sauté the aromatic vegetable base in oil until softened.

Heat the sunflower oil in a heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat, add the diced onion, carrot, and bell pepper, and cook for 5 to 7 minutes before tossing in the minced garlic for one final minute.

2. Execute the soft zaprushka by blooming the spices.

Lower the heat slightly and stir in the sweet paprika, spearmint, summer savory, and smoked paprika for exactly 30 seconds until the oil turns a deep, fiery red and releases a potent aroma.

3. Arrest the cooking process and build the broth.

Immediately pour in the tomato sauce to stop the paprika from turning bitter and scorching, then add the drained beans and the broth.

1. Simmer the soup and mechanically thicken the broth.

Bring the pot to a gentle boil, reduce to low, and simmer partially covered for 15 minutes. Use a potato masher to crush a portion of the beans directly against the side of the pot, achieving that traditional velvety texture without a heavy flour roux.

2. Season to taste off the heat and serve immediately.

Remove the pot from the stove and season generously with salt and black pepper; holding the salt until the very end ensures the bean skins remain perfectly tender.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Accept no substitutes for the spearmint.**

The authentic organoleptic signature of this dish relies entirely on spearmint (dzhodzhen). Never substitute peppermint, or the soup will end up tasting harshly medicinal.

● **Finding summer savory.**

If dried summer savory (chubritsa) is absent from your local spice aisle, substitute a fifty-fifty mix of dried thyme and dried oregano.

● **Adding meat.**

While the classic Tuesday version is strictly plant-based, rendering a handful of diced pancetta or smoked sausage in the oil before adding the vegetables imparts a magnificent richness.



Supa Topcheta

Супа топчета

soo-pah tohp-cheh-tah

Tuesday at six p.m., a heavy Dutch oven on the burner, the pork fat hisses, the peppery scent of summer savory steeping in a rich broth filling the kitchen. Supa Topcheta is an Eastern European masterclass in making something profound out of nothing but root vegetables, tiny pork and beef meatballs, and the legendary *zastroika*—a luxurious yogurt and egg temper that turns the broth incredibly velvety without heavy cream. Drop the meatballs into the liquid, turn down the heat, and let the pot do the rest.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|--|
| 1/2 lb | ground pork | 2 large | carrots <i>finely diced or coarsely grated</i> |
| 1/2 lb | ground beef | 2 med | celery stalks <i>finely diced</i> |
| 1/4 cup | white rice <i>rinsed</i> | 2 med | Yukon Gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i> |
| 1 large | egg white <i>reserve the yolk for the temper</i> | 6 cup | water |
| 1 small | onion <i>grated or very finely minced</i> | 1 tbsp | dried summer savory |
| 1 tsp | salt | 1.5 oz | vermicelli noodles <i>crushed into small pieces</i> |
| 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> | 2 large | egg yolks |
| 1 tsp | sweet paprika | 3/4 cup | plain whole milk Greek yogurt |
| 1/2 tsp | dried summer savory | 1 tbsp | fresh lemon juice |
| 1/4 cup | all-purpose flour | 2 tbsp | water <i>cold</i> |
| 2 tbsp | sunflower oil | 1/4 cup | fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |
| 1 med | yellow onion <i>finely diced</i> | | |

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Combine the pork, beef, rice, egg white, grated onion, salt, pepper, paprika, and summer savory, forming the mixture into hazelnut-sized meatballs.**
Roll each tiny meatball in the flour until lightly coated, shaking off the excess. This seals the meat and will gently give the broth body later.
- 2. Sauté the diced onion, carrots, and celery in the oil over medium-high heat until the carrots release a vibrant, golden-orange hue.**
This carotene extraction is a grandmother's secret for an appetizing, beautifully colored broth. Stir in the potatoes and cook for one minute more.

- 1. Pour in the water and the remaining tablespoon of summer savory, bringing the pot to a boil before carefully dropping in the meatballs.**

Reduce the heat to medium-low, cover partially, and let the soup simmer undisturbed for 20 minutes.

- 2. Stir in the crushed vermicelli noodles and simmer for an additional 8 to 10 minutes, then remove the pot entirely from the heat.**

Let the soup rest for 10 minutes off the stove. The violent boiling must completely cease before the next step, or your temper will curdle.

- 3. Vigorously whisk the egg yolks, Greek yogurt, lemon juice, and cold water together in a medium heat-proof bowl.**

Adding a splash of cold water is the ultimate homeland trick to stabilize the proteins, foolproof-ing the temper against the hot liquid.

- 4. Ladle hot broth into the yogurt mixture in a slow, steady stream while whisking constantly, then gently stir the warmed mixture back into the soup pot.**

The clear broth will instantly transform into a luxurious, opaque liquid. Do not return the pot to the heat. Garnish with the fresh parsley and serve immediately with crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Do not substitute the summer savory.**

Known as chubritsa in Bulgaria, this earthy, peppery herb is the absolute, non-negotiable soul of the dish. Without it, you're just making generic soup.

- **Keep the meatballs incredibly small.**

Aim for the size of a hazelnut. They cook faster, stay delightfully tender, and allow for the perfect distribution of meat, broth, and veg on a soup spoon.



Svinsko s Praz

Свинско с праз

svin-sko s praz

When the winter air turns sharp, this isn't some all-day weekend project demanding hours of slow simmering and a sink full of dirty pans; it is a straightforward meal perfectly adapted to a heavy Dutch oven for a busy Tuesday night. Forty-five minutes is all that stands between searing cubed pork shoulder and simply letting the leeks collapse and melt down into the pork fat until they create a velvety, naturally sweet gravy. Slice a thick piece of crusty bread and wipe the bowl clean.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|-----------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1 1/2 lb | boneless pork shoulder <i>cut into 1-inch cubes</i> | 1/2 tsp | ground cumin |
| 2 tbsp | neutral vegetable oil | 1/2 cup | dry red or white wine |
| 1 tbsp | bacon fat or butter | 1 cup | low-sodium chicken broth |
| 4 large | leeks <i>white and light green parts only, halved lengthwise, washed thoroughly to remove grit, and sliced into 1/2-inch half-moons</i> | 1 med | bay leaf |
| 1 tbsp | sweet paprika | to taste | kosher salt |
| | | to taste | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Wash the leeks aggressively.**

American supermarket leeks are notoriously sandy. Slice them first, then dunk them in a large bowl of cold water. Swish them around and let the grit sink to the bottom before lifting the leeks out.

- **Process the leeks ahead of time.**

You can wash and chop the leeks up to two days in advance. Keep them in a zip-top bag in the fridge with a damp paper towel to save prep time on a Tuesday night.

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 to 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 all the browned bits of pork from the bottom. Cook the leeks 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 in the hot fat.

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—do not walk away, as paprika burns easily and will turn bitterly ruinous if scorched.

3. Deglaze the pot and begin the braise.

Pour in the wine, stirring vigorously to lift any remaining fond from the bottom. Let the wine bubble and reduce by half, which should take about 2 minutes. Pour in the chicken broth, tuck the bay leaf into the liquid, and bring the pot to a gentle simmer.

4. Simmer until meltingly tender.

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. You are waiting for the pork to become fork-tender and the leeks to melt into a rich, luscious sauce. Remove the bay leaf, adjust the salt and pepper to your liking, and serve hot with an unreasonable amount of crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Lean pork has no business here.**

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

- **Use standard sweet paprika, not smoked.**

Spanish smoked paprika (pimentón) will mask the delicate sweetness of the leeks and make the stew taste Iberian rather than Balkan. Stick to standard domestic sweet paprika.



Leshtha Chorba

Лешта Чорба

lesh-tah chor-bah

This isn't a grand Sunday feast; Tuesday at 6:30 p.m. just wants a heavy Dutch oven and forty-five minutes of heat to break hard brown lentils into a thick, starchy stew. The secret isn't expensive bone broth or hours of simmering, it's a quick hit of toasted paprika called a zaprazhka—where sweet paprika blooms in hot oil—and an herb called chubritsa. Leave the bacon in the fridge, skip the shortcuts, and ladle the thick brown broth over a heel of bread.

INGREDIENTS

1 cup brown or green lentils
rinsed well and picked over

3 tbsp sunflower oil

| | | | |
|----------------|---|----------------|---|
| 1 med | yellow onion <i>finely diced</i> | 6 cup | water |
| 1 large | carrot <i>finely diced</i> | 1 tbsp | dried summer savory |
| 1/2 med | red or green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i> | 1 cup | crushed tomatoes |
| 6 med | garlic cloves <i>peeled, divided</i> | 1 tsp | kosher salt |
| 1 tbsp | all-purpose flour | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| 1 tbsp | sweet paprika | 2 tbsp | red wine vinegar |
| | | 1/4 cup | fresh parsley <i>roughly chopped</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Give the lentils a quick boil to ensure a clear, easily digestible broth.**

Place the rinsed lentils in a small pot, cover with cold water, and bring to a rapid boil for exactly two minutes. Drain and discard the murky water, then set the lentils aside. This grandmother's trick removes bitterness and excess starch.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sauté the foundational aromatics until softened and sweet.**

In a large, heavy-bottomed Dutch oven, heat the sunflower oil over medium heat. Toss in the onion, carrot, and bell pepper, cooking for 5 to 7 minutes until the onions go translucent. Mince two of the garlic cloves, add them to the pot, and cook for one more minute until fragrant.

- 2. Execute the weeknight zaprazhka.**

Sprinkle the flour directly over the softened vegetables and stir vigorously for 1 minute to cook off the raw taste. Pull the pot completely off the heat—paprika burns in seconds and turns bitterly unforgiving—and stir in the sweet paprika until it blooms.

1. Build the broth and let the lentils simmer until tender.

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. Cover partially and cook for 25 to 30 minutes, or until the lentils are completely soft.

2. Introduce the acid and herbs only after the lentils are fully cooked.

Never add tomatoes early, or the acid will permanently harden the lentil skins. Once tender, stir in the crushed tomatoes, the summer savory, salt, and black pepper. Simmer gently for another 10 to 15 minutes to let the flavors marry and the broth thicken into a true chorba.

3. Finish the pot off the heat with raw garlic and fresh herbs.

Turn off the heat entirely. Press or finely mince three cloves of garlic directly into the hot soup along with the fresh parsley. To serve, mix the red wine vinegar with the final pressed clove of garlic in a small bowl for the table, allowing everyone to add a sharp, acidic splash to their bowl exactly as they do in the villages.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Summer savory is non-negotiable.**

Known as chubritsa in Bulgaria, this herb is the soul of the dish. Don't substitute it with oregano or thyme, and absolutely keep spearmint away from lentils—that herb is reserved strictly for beans.

● **Respect the delayed acid.**

Adding tomatoes too early halts the gelatinization of the starches, resulting in tough, crunchy lentils no matter how long they simmer. Always wait until the legumes are fully tender before introducing tomatoes.



The "Fake" Shkembe Chorba

Фалшива шкембе чорба

fal-shee-vah shkem-beh chor-bah

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know the weekend smell of a boiling pot of tripe meant to cure an uncle's hangover. But nobody has four hours to boil stomach lining on a Tuesday night in Ohio. Enter the "fake" shkembe. A brilliant hack used by modern Bulgarian home cooks, it relies on torn oyster mushrooms to mimic the exact bouncy texture of tripe. The true magic was never the meat anyway—it's the velvety milk broth, the sweet paprika butter, and the aggressive punch of raw garlic and vinegar mixed in at the table. This is pure, unadulterated comfort in under thirty minutes.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|---------------|---|----------------|---|
| 1 lb | oyster mushrooms <i>wiped clean, torn by hand into bite-sized strips along the gills</i> | 2 cup | whole milk <i>slightly warmed</i> |
| 4 tbsp | unsalted butter | 1 tsp | kosher salt |
| 1 tbsp | neutral oil | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| 2 tbsp | all-purpose flour | 5 large | cloves garlic <i>pounded or pressed into a paste</i> |
| 1 tbsp | sweet paprika | 1/3 cup | apple cider vinegar |
| 2 cup | warm water | 1 tbsp | crushed red pepper flakes |

PREPARATION

- **Tear the mushrooms by hand.**

Do not use a knife. Tearing the mushroom caps and stems into irregular strips along their natural gills is the visual and textural secret to tricking the brain into thinking it is eating tripe.

- **Mix the garlic and vinegar for the table.**

Smash the garlic into a paste and mix it vigorously with the vinegar in a small serving bowl. Set it aside for the table alongside the red pepper flakes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Sauté the mushrooms until beautifully browned.**

In a heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven, melt the butter and neutral oil over medium-high heat. Add the torn mushrooms and a generous pinch of salt. They will release a lot of water; let this cook completely off until the mushrooms are sizzling and frying in the fat, which should take about 10 to 12 minutes.

- 2. Cook the flour into a quick roux.**

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

1. Bloom the paprika for exactly ten seconds.

Sprinkle in the sweet paprika and stir rapidly for exactly 10 to 15 seconds to toast the spice. Do not let it sit any longer or the paprika will burn, turn irreversibly bitter, and ruin the pot.

2. Whisk in the warm water and milk.

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

3. Simmer gently to bring the broth together.

Bring the pot to a gentle bubble, taking care not to let it furiously boil so the milk doesn't curdle. Lower the heat, add the black pepper, and let it simmer uncovered for 10 to 15 minutes. Taste and adjust the salt—it should be quite savory.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The table condiment is strictly non-negotiable.**

Never dump the garlic and vinegar into the main pot while it cooks, as boiling destroys the sharp, volatile oils of the raw garlic. The interactive ritual of doctoring your own bowl at the table is the true cultural hallmark of the dish.

● **Mind your paprika.**

Use standard sweet paprika, not smoked. Smoked paprika will completely override the delicate balance of the broth and make it taste like barbecue sauce.



Pileshka Supa

Пилешка супа

pee-lesh-ka soo-pa

You pull the dark meat thighs, you snap a handful of broken vermicelli into the six-quart Dutch oven, and you catch the herbaceous hit of lovage wafting from a pot of Pileshka Supa on a cold Tuesday night. The egg yolk whisked in a bowl makes it tangier, creamier, and infinitely more restorative, thanks to an ancient finishing trick called *zastroika* that turns the broth into liquid velvet. Your grandmother spent hours skimming foam for this, but you don't have hours. Start with good bone broth to finish in forty minutes. Stir the temper in off the heat, squeeze the lemon, and eat.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|-----------------|--|------------------|--|
| 2 tbsp | sunflower oil | 1/2 cup | thin vermicelli <i>broken into short pieces</i> |
| 1 med | yellow onion <i>very finely diced</i> | 1 tsp | dried lovage |
| 2 med | carrots <i>finely diced</i> | 1 tsp | salt |
| 1 med | red or green bell pepper <i>finely diced</i> | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| 1 1/2 lb | boneless skinless chicken thighs | 3/4 cup | plain whole milk yogurt |
| 6 cup | low-sodium chicken bone broth | 1 large | egg |
| 2 med | Yukon gold potatoes <i>peeled and cut into 1/2-inch cubes</i> | 1 tbsp | all-purpose flour |
| | | 1 tbsp | fresh lemon juice |
| | | 1/2 bunch | fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Room temperature dairy.**

Take your yogurt and egg out of the fridge at least 30 minutes before you start cooking. Attempting a zastroika with cold dairy is a guaranteed way to split your soup.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the aromatic foundation.**

Heat the sunflower oil in a large Dutch oven over medium heat, then add the onion, carrots, and bell pepper. Sauté for 5 to 7 minutes until softened; we finely dice them here so they melt seamlessly into the broth.

- 2. Poach the chicken thighs.**

Pour in the bone broth and bring to a gentle simmer. Drop in the whole chicken thighs, letting them poach for 15 to 20 minutes until cooked through, skimming off any foam that rises to the surface to keep the broth clean.

1. Shred the meat.

Use tongs to transfer the cooked chicken to a cutting board. Shred it into bite-sized pieces with two forks, then immediately return the meat to the pot.

2. Boil the potatoes and noodles.

Add the diced potatoes and cook for 10 minutes until they just begin to yield. Stir in the vermicelli, dried lovage, salt, and pepper, and simmer for 5 more minutes until the noodles are soft.

3. Rest the soup off the heat.

This is entirely non-negotiable. Turn off the burner and pull the pot completely off the heat, letting it sit for 3 to 5 minutes so it is no longer at a rolling boil before you attempt to temper the dairy.

4. Whisk the zastroika.

In a medium bowl, vigorously whisk together the room-temperature yogurt, egg, flour, and lemon juice until entirely smooth. The flour is your grandmother's insurance policy—it prevents the egg proteins from splitting when you reheat the leftovers tomorrow.

5. Temper the yogurt mixture.

While whisking the yogurt rapidly, slowly drizzle in a ladle of the hot broth.

Repeat this with two or three more ladles of broth until the yogurt mixture in the bowl is warm to the touch.

6. Execute the final merge.

Slowly pour the tempered zastroika back into the main pot in a thin, continuous stream while stirring gently in one direction. The broth will instantly transform into opaque, golden velvet. Stir in the parsley and serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing the lovage.**

Devesil (lovage) is the absolute soul of this soup. It tastes like celery's deeper, muskier cousin. Order dried lovage online. If you are desperate, substitute with finely minced inner celery leaves, but you'll be missing the real magic.

- **The right yogurt.**

Do not use thick, strained Greek yogurt unless you thin it out with a little water first. A standard whole milk European-style yogurt is closest to the delicate texture of Bulgarian kiselo mlyako.



Spanachena Supa sas Sirene

Спаначена супа със сирене

spa-NAH-cheh-nah SOO-pah suhs SEE-reh-neh

Six-thirty on a Tuesday, the five-quart Dutch oven hits the heat, the spinach wilts into the dark broth, and a resourceful supper is suddenly only minutes away. We aren't pureeing this or loading it with heavy cream. We're relying on the rustic bite of rice, the distinct cool earthiness of spearmint, and zastroika—a yogurt and egg temper that turns a humble broth into liquid velvet. Crumble a block of sheep's milk sirene into the hot bowl at the end.

INGREDIENTS

3 tbsp

sunflower oil

1 med

yellow onion
finely diced

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

INSTRUCTIONS

1. **Sweat the aromatics.**

Heat the oil in a heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat, then sauté the diced onion and grated carrot for 5 to 7 minutes until softened and translucent.

2. **Bloom the paprika.**

Sprinkle in the flour and stir constantly for 1 minute to cook off the raw taste, then pull the pot off the heat and stir in the sweet paprika for exactly 10 seconds so it doesn't burn.

3. **Simmer the starch.**

Return the pot to the heat, immediately pour in the water, and stir well to dissolve the flour and paprika before adding the rinsed rice, salt, and black pepper.

4. **Cook the rice.**

Bring the liquid to a gentle boil, reduce the heat to a simmer, cover, and cook for 12 to 15 minutes until the rice is tender.

5. **Wilt the greens.**

Stir in the spinach and spearmint, simmering for just 3 to 5 minutes more so the greens are cooked but remain vibrant, 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, then slowly drizzle in 2 to 3 ladles of hot broth while whisking constantly to warm the mixture.

2. Unite the soup.

Slowly pour the warm yogurt mixture back into the main soup pot off the heat, stirring gently to combine into a silky, opaque broth.

3. Finish with feta.

Ladle the hot soup into bowls and generously crumble the brined feta cheese directly over each serving to soften.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Respect the Zastroika.**

The secret to the silky texture is taking the soup completely off the heat before stirring in the tempered yogurt and egg. Boiling it will curdle the eggs into ugly rags.

● **The cheese is the salt.**

Bulgarian sirene is intensely salty. We under-salt the broth intentionally so the generous handful of cheese at the end perfectly balances the dish.

● **Mind the mint.**

The defining herbaceous backbone of this soup relies on spearmint (dzhodzhen). Standard peppermint extract or generic dry mint is too harsh; seek out actual dried spearmint.

● **Sourcing the cheese.**

Pre-crumbed American feta is coated in anti-caking agents and lacks the required tang. Buy blocks of sheep's milk feta sold floating in brine to replicate authentic sirene.



Gyuveche

Гювече

gyoo-veh-cheh

If you ask any first-generation Bulgarian-American what their kitchen smelled like on a busy weeknight, they won't tell you about a complicated, multi-hour roast. They will tell you about gyuveche. Built in personal clay pots, it relies on deliberate layers that steam and bake simultaneously in their own juices, finishing with a perfectly runny egg. It is the ultimate Tuesday night dinner, born from village grandmothers stretching the last bits of cheese, a leftover sausage, and a few tomatoes into a bubbling, comforting feast.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|---------------|--|----------------|--|
| 2 tbsp | unsalted butter <i>divided into 4 small pieces</i> | 4 oz | mild provolone cheese <i>shredded</i> |
| 1 med | yellow onion <i>thinly sliced</i> | 1 tbsp | dried summer savory |
| 2 med | tomatoes <i>diced</i> | 1/4 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly cracked</i> |
| 1 cup | roasted red peppers <i>chopped</i> | 4 small | small spicy peppers <i>left whole</i> |
| 8 oz | smoked sausage <i>sliced into bite-sized coins</i> | 4 large | eggs |
| 6 oz | sheep milk feta in brine <i>broken into large rustic chunks</i> | 2 tbsp | fresh parsley <i>chopped</i> |

PREPARATION

- **Ensure your oven is completely cold.**

Do not preheat the oven under any circumstances before baking the clay pots.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Build the foundation without stirring.**

Drop a small piece of butter into the bottom of four individual clay pots or oven-safe ramekins, then evenly divide the sliced onions, diced tomatoes, and roasted red peppers to create a moisture-rich base.

- 2. Layer the heart of the dish.**

Divide the sliced sausage over the vegetables, then gently press the large chunks of feta directly into the meat and vegetable base.

- 3. Season and seal the pots.**

Sprinkle the summer savory and black pepper generously over the feta, top with the shredded provolone, and stand one whole hot pepper upright in the center before covering the pots tightly with their lids or foil.

1. Bake from a cold oven.

Place the covered pots on a baking sheet and put them into a completely cold oven to prevent the clay from shattering, then turn the heat to 400°F and set a timer for 35 minutes.

2. Finish with the egg.

Carefully remove the pots from the oven, take off the lids, and use a spoon to make a small indentation in the bubbling cheese before cracking one egg into each and baking uncovered for 7 to 10 minutes.

3. Rest and garnish before serving.

Let the pots rest on a wooden cutting board for 5 minutes as the clay continues to hold tremendous heat, then garnish with fresh parsley and serve with crusty bread.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The cold oven rule is non-negotiable if using traditional clay.**

Traditional Bulgarian clay pots, or *gyuvecheta*, will undergo thermal shock and shatter if placed into a pre-heated oven; they must come up to temperature gradually.

● **Source real summer savory for authentic flavor.**

Known as *chubritsa*, dried summer savory is the defining aroma of the Bulgarian kitchen, offering an earthy, peppery resonance that a thyme and oregano blend can only approximate.

● **Do not stir the ingredients.**

The magic of a *gyuveche* lies in its strata—the bottom boils into a rich tomato sauce while the top layer of cheese browns and crisps.



Sunday Moussaka & Stuffed Comforts

The heavy-hitting weekend centerpieces that require a little more therapeutic prep time, perfectly designed to yield the ultimate Monday leftovers.

It isn't Greek, and there isn't a single slice of eggplant in the baking dish. A three-hour Sunday afternoon is given over to the slow, deliberate work of hollowing out summer bell peppers and trusting the alchemy of ground pork, a layer of potatoes, and a blistered yogurt-egg wash. Seasoned with imported chubritsa, these heavy-hitting centerpieces sit perfectly at peace in an American oven, built to anchor a loud, lingering table and miraculously taste even better straight from Monday's cold Tupperware.





Bulgarian Moussaka

Българска мусака

buhl-gar-ska moo-sah-kah

Forty-five minutes. That is the window between hitting the skillet with a pound of ground pork and pulling a 9x13 Pyrex of Bulgarian moussaka from the oven, trading the dense, béchamel-heavy Greek casseroles you might know for a thick cap of baked yogurt. The secret is chubritsa—summer savory—and a pinch of baking soda to aerate the crust; brown the pork, stack the potatoes, and let the broiler do the heavy lifting so you can pull it off in an Ohio suburb on a Tuesday night.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Sauté the aromatics to build your base.

Preheat your oven to 400°F. In a large skillet or Dutch oven, heat the sunflower oil over medium-high heat. Add the onion, carrot, and red pepper, cooking for 5 to 7 minutes until soft and translucent.

2. Brown the meat deeply until it fries in its own fat.

Add the ground meat to the skillet, breaking it into very fine crumbles. Don't rush this step—cook it until all the water evaporates and it starts frying in its own rendered fat. This Maillard reaction is essential for the authentic homeland flavor.

3. Bloom the spices and incorporate the tomatoes.

Reduce the heat to medium. Stir in the chubritsa, sweet paprika, black pepper, and salt. Toast the spices in the hot fat for 30 seconds until highly fragrant, then immediately stir in the crushed tomatoes and simmer for 2 minutes before removing from the heat.

1. Assemble the meat and potatoes for the first bake.

Spread the raw, diced potatoes in a 9x13 inch baking dish. Pour the hot meat mixture over the top and toss gently until the potatoes are evenly coated. Pour the warm beef broth over the mixture—it should come halfway up the potatoes, not submerge them. Bake uncovered for 40 minutes, until the liquid is mostly absorbed and the potatoes are fork-tender.

2. Engineer the fluffy yogurt topping.

While the moussaka finishes its first bake, place the yogurt in a medium bowl and stir in the baking soda. Let it sit for 1 minute so the acid reacts, bubbling and expanding slightly. Whisk in the eggs, flour, and a pinch of salt until completely smooth and airy.

3. Crown the moussaka and bake until golden.

Remove the baking dish from the oven and pour the yogurt topping evenly over the meat and potatoes, spreading it edge to edge. Return to the oven for 10 to 15 minutes, until the topping puffs up into a thick, golden-brown crust.

4. Let the moussaka rest before slicing.

You will want to eat this immediately, but don't. 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 you get perfect, beautiful squares.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Sourcing Chubritsa is non-negotiable.**

Summer savory (chubritsa) is the soul of Bulgarian cooking. Do not use Italian seasoning, or you will accidentally transport the dish to the wrong country. If you are truly desperate, a mix of dried oregano and thyme will suffice until you can find the real thing online or at an Eastern European market.

● **Avoid russet potatoes at all costs.**

Russets will disintegrate into mush during the bake. Stick to Yukon Gold or standard white potatoes so they hold their shape beautifully.



Winter Pulneni Chushki

Пълнени чушки

pul-neh-nee choosh-kee

Stuffed peppers aren't some precious weekend project, even if the traditional method required sun-drying red peppers to transform them into wrinkled vessels for pork and rice. On a Tuesday night, dried California chiles from the local supermarket replicate that deep flavor perfectly when packed tight in a 9x13 Pyrex, dipped in flour to lock in the filling, and smothered in broth-tempered yogurt sauce. Leave them in the heat until the pepper skins blister.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Submerge the dried chiles in boiling water and steep for 30 minutes.**
Place a plate on top to keep them submerged. Once they are soft and plump, drain them and gently shake out any remaining seeds.
- 2. Cook the onion and carrot in sunflower oil until softened.**
Heat the oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Sauté the vegetables for about 5 minutes until the onion is translucent.
- 3. Brown the pork and beef, then bloom the spices.**
Add the ground meats, breaking them apart with a spoon until no longer pink. Stir in the tomato paste, savory, paprika, salt, and pepper, letting the spices toast in the hot fat for 30 seconds.
- 4. Toast the rice and simmer with water until absorbed.**
Add the rinsed rice to the skillet, stirring for a minute or two until glossy. Pour in 1/2 cup of warm water, drop the heat to low, and let it simmer until the liquid vanishes. This grandmother trick ensures the rice is halfway cooked, keeping it from expanding violently and tearing your peppers in the oven.

1. Stuff the peppers and dip the open ends in flour.

Spoon the meat and rice mixture into each pepper, leaving a little room at the top for expansion. Press the exposed filling directly into the shallow dish of flour to create a seal that locks the filling inside while baking.

2. Bake covered in a shallow bath of water, then uncover to blister.

Snuggle the peppers into a 9x13 inch baking dish. Pour enough warm water to come up half an inch. Cover tightly with foil and bake at 375°F for 40 minutes, then remove the foil and bake 10 to 15 minutes more until the tops caramelize.

3. Whisk the yogurt, eggs, and flour in a saucepan off the heat.

Make sure the mixture is perfectly smooth and lump-free.

4. Temper the yogurt mixture with the hot roasting broth, then thicken on the stove.

Carefully ladle out about 1 cup of the hot, savory liquid from the bottom of the baking dish. Slowly stream it into the yogurt while whisking constantly. Set over medium-low heat and stir continuously for 3 to 5 minutes until it becomes a rich gravy. Do not let it boil. Smother the warm peppers in the sauce and serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **If using fresh bell peppers instead of dried, skip the rehydration step entirely.**

Just core 6 medium fresh bell peppers, prick them 2 or 3 times with a fork so they do not split from steam, and stuff them directly. They might need an extra 10 minutes in the oven.

● **If you cannot find summer savory, you can approximate it.**

Mix 2 teaspoons of dried oregano with 1 teaspoon of dried mint, though finding true Bulgarian chubritsa is highly recommended for the authentic flavor.



Summer Chushki Byurek

Чушки бюрек

choosh-kee byoo-rek

Chushki Byurek—roasted peppers crammed with a rich, herbaceous cheese mixture and crusted until golden—delivers the smoky char of red peppers roasting over open fires straight to the cutting board. To avoid leaving the stove slick with oil, smash a block of sheep's milk feta, pack the peppers tight, and drop them into a twelve-inch cast-iron skillet for a high-heat oven bake. The breading shatters. Pull the pan at six-thirty on a Tuesday, taste the lingering smoke, and eat them before the cheese sets.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|--|----------------|---|
| 2 med | whole roasted red peppers <i>drained, gently slit open, and seeds removed</i> | 1/4 cup | fresh flat-leaf parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |
| 7 oz | feta cheese <i>crumbled</i> | 1 med | garlic <i>mashed to a paste or microplaned</i> |
| 3 oz | whole-milk ricotta or shredded low-moisture mozzarella | 1/4 tsp | black pepper |
| | | 1/2 cup | all-purpose flour |
| 4 large | eggs <i>1 reserved for filling, 3 lightly beaten for breading</i> | 1 cup | plain unseasoned breadcrumbs |
| | | 3 tbsp | neutral oil spray or melted butter |

PREPARATION

- **Respect the moisture extraction.**

American jarred peppers carry far more water than traditional Bulgarian kapia peppers. Skipping the 15-minute paper towel pressing means your breading will slide right off in the oven.

INSTRUCTIONS

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

Lay the opened, deseeded peppers flat on a baking sheet lined with a triple layer of paper towels, press another layer firmly on top, and let them sit for 15 minutes. A wet pepper will reject the breading and lead to a soggy disaster.

- 2. Mix the thick cheese filling.**

In a medium bowl, vigorously mash the crumbled feta, ricotta, 1 egg, parsley, garlic, and black pepper with a fork until it forms a cohesive, thick paste. If it feels loose or runny, stir in a tablespoon of breadcrumbs to absorb the moisture. It must be very thick to prevent leaking in the oven.

1. Stuff the peppers.

Spoon one to two heaping tablespoons of the cheese mixture into the center of a dried pepper. Gently fold the sides back over the filling to recreate its original shape. Do not overstuff; the pepper should close comfortably around the cheese.

2. Set up the breading station.

Preheat the oven to 400°F. Line a heavy baking sheet with parchment paper and generously spray or brush it with oil. Set up three shallow bowls: one with the flour, one with the 3 beaten eggs and a pinch of salt, and one with the breadcrumbs.

3. Bread the stuffed peppers.

Working one by one, gently dredge a pepper in the flour, shaking off the excess. Submerge it in the egg wash until fully coated, then lay it in the breadcrumbs, gently pressing the crumbs onto the pepper to form a solid crust. Transfer to the oiled baking sheet.

4. Bake until golden and crisp.

Spray the tops of the breaded peppers generously with cooking spray or drizzle lightly with oil. Bake on the middle rack for 15 to 20 minutes until the bottoms are deep golden brown. Carefully flip each pepper with a thin spatula and bake for an additional 10 minutes.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Resist the urge to over-spice.**

The authenticity of this dish relies entirely on the quality of the dairy, the smokiness of the pepper, and the herbaceous brightness of the parsley. Leave the smoked paprika, cumin, and oregano in the pantry.

● **Serve with acidic contrast.**

This is a profoundly rich dish. Serve alongside a classic Shopska salad (tomatoes, cucumbers, onions, and grated feta) and a cold sauce made of whole-milk Greek yogurt whisked with minced garlic, dill, and a splash of lemon juice to cut the fat.



Tikvichki s Oriz

Тиквички с ориз на фурна

teek-veech-kee s oh-reez nah foor-nah

If you grew up in a Bulgarian household, you know this smell. It's the scent of late June, when gardens overflow with zucchini and dill. Tikvichki s Oriz is a masterclass in making something profound out of almost nothing. The grandmotherly secret lies in two unskippable techniques: salting the squash so it doesn't turn the casserole into soup, and toasting the rice in oil until it shines like glass before adding liquid. Baked until the top forms a golden crust and hit with a mountain of fresh dill off the heat, it demands a massive, unapologetic dollop of plain yogurt right in the center of the plate.

INGREDIENTS

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

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Salt the zucchini and let it drain.

Place the cubed zucchini in a colander in the sink, toss with the kosher salt, and let it sit for 15 minutes. This draws out the excess water so the squash holds its shape and doesn't drown the rice.

2. Build the aromatic base.

Preheat your oven to 400°F. In a large, deep oven-proof skillet or Dutch oven, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Add the onion and carrot, sautéing for 5 to 7 minutes until soft, then stir in the garlic and cook for 1 minute more.

3. Glass the rice.

Add the rinsed rice to the skillet, stirring continuously for 2 to 3 minutes. You want the hot oil to coat the grains until their edges turn translucent. This crucial 'glassing' step prevents the rice from turning into mush later on.

1. Toast the paprika and marry the flavors.

Stir in the sweet paprika, letting it toast for just 15 seconds to wake up the oils.

Immediately pour in the crushed tomatoes to stop the paprika from burning. Give the drained zucchini a gentle squeeze to remove any pooled water and fold it into the skillet.

2. Add the hot broth and bake.

Pour the hot broth into the skillet, season with the black pepper, and stir exactly once to level the top. Transfer uncovered to the middle rack of the oven and bake for 30 to 35 minutes, until the liquid is entirely absorbed and the top layer looks dry, golden, and slightly crispy.

3. Hit it with dill and serve with yogurt.

Remove the dish from the oven and, while it's still piping hot, immediately fold in the freshly chopped dill so it retains its bright, herbaceous flavor. Let it rest for 10 minutes to set the starches, then serve warm with a generous dollop of plain yogurt over every portion.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Don't skip the yogurt.**

Bulgarian cooking leans heavily on the lactic tang of yogurt to cut through starches and sweet vegetables. Use a plain, whole-milk yogurt, not a super thick Greek style, to properly sauce the plate.



Drob Sarma

Дроб сарма

drohb sar-mah

Toss the chicken livers into a twelve-inch skillet, folding in handfuls of scallions and spearmint as you stir until the rice hisses. While tradition dictates the massive, caul-fat-wrapped lamb pluck of a village Easter, this get-it-done weeknight casserole relies on searing the rice until glassy and utilizing a grandmother's baking soda trick for the topping to lift the yogurt crust. Slide the pan into the oven, set the timer for forty-five minutes, and walk away.

INGREDIENTS

1 lb

chicken livers
cleaned, dried, and roughly chopped

3 tbsp

neutral cooking oil

| | | | |
|----------------------|---|------------------|--|
| 2 tbsp | unsalted butter | 1 tsp | kosher salt |
| 1 large | yellow onion <i>finely chopped</i> | 1 tbsp | dried spearmint |
| 1 large bunch | scallions <i>finely sliced</i> | 1/2 cup | fresh parsley <i>finely chopped</i> |
| 3 med | garlic clove <i>minced</i> | 1 tbsp | fresh celery leaves <i>chopped</i> |
| 1 cup | medium-grain white rice <i>rinsed well and drained</i> | 3 cup | chicken broth <i>heated</i> |
| 1 tbsp | sweet paprika | 3 large | eggs |
| 1 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> | 1 1/2 cup | plain whole milk yogurt |
| | | 2 tbsp | all-purpose flour |
| | | 1/2 tsp | baking soda |

PREPARATION

- **Dry the livers thoroughly before searing.**

Moisture is the enemy of a proper sear. After inspecting and chopping the chicken livers, pat them exceptionally dry with paper towels so they brown in the pan rather than steam.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven to 375°F.**

- 2. Sear the livers fast and hot.**

In a wide, deep oven-safe skillet or Dutch oven, heat the oil and butter over medium-high. Add the yellow onion and sauté until softened, about 4 minutes. Toss in the chicken livers and sear them quickly, just until the outside loses its raw pink color—about 3 to 4 minutes. Do not cook them all the way through, or they will turn to chalk in the oven.

1. Toast the rice until glassy.

Add the scallions and garlic, cooking for 1 minute until fragrant. Pour in the rinsed, drained rice and stir continuously for 3 to 4 minutes. You are looking for the rice grains to absorb the fats and turn translucent at the edges, an old-world technique that prevents the grains from turning into mush during the bake.

2. Season and bake the base.

Remove the pan from the heat and stir in the paprika, black pepper, salt, mint, parsley, and celery leaves. Pour the hot chicken broth over the mixture and stir gently to distribute. Bake uncovered for 30 to 35 minutes, or until the rice has absorbed almost all the liquid and is tender.

3. Whip the fluffy topping.

While the rice bakes, prepare the zalivka. In a medium mixing bowl, whisk the yogurt and baking soda together until you notice the yogurt become aerated and slightly bubbly. Whisk in the eggs, flour, and a pinch of salt until perfectly smooth.

4. Bake the final crust.

Once the rice has absorbed the liquid, remove the dish from the oven and pour the yogurt-egg topping evenly over the surface. Return the dish to the oven—cranking the heat to 400°F if you want a better crust—and bake for an additional 15 to 20 minutes, until the custard is set and deeply golden brown.

5. Rest and serve.

Allow the casserole to rest for 10 minutes before slicing. Serve warm, accompanied by an extra dollop of cold, plain yogurt on the side.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **Do not skip the spearmint.**

Spearmint (dzhodzhen) is the absolute non-negotiable secret to authentic Drob Sarma. Without it, the dish is simply meat and rice; with it, you are instantly transported to the Balkans.

- **The hydration math is non-negotiable.**

Bulgarian home cooks swear by exactly three parts liquid to one part rice. This ensures the rice absorbs the broth fully just as the pan finishes its time in the oven.



Mini Rulo

Мини руло

mee-nee roo-lo

A weeknight Rulo Stefani demands zero ancestral magic or sacrificed Sunday afternoons, pressing three hard-boiled eggs straight into a flat sheet of supermarket ground chuck. Scaling it down to mini rolls is the ultimate first-generation hack, slashing the bake time and eliminating the risk of structural collapse; beyond the classic cross-section of egg, carrot, and pickle, the binding relies on a wet bread panade and a heavy hand with the chubritsa. Bake the rolls on a standard half-sheet pan, slice thick, and eat.

INGREDIENTS

| | | | |
|----------------|--|----------------|--|
| 1 lb | ground pork | 1 tsp | kosher salt |
| 1 lb | ground beef <i>80/20 blend</i> | 1/2 tsp | black pepper <i>freshly ground</i> |
| 1 large | stale white bread <i>crusts removed</i> | 3 large | eggs <i>hard-boiled, peeled, and quartered lengthwise</i> |
| 3 tbsp | whole milk | 1 large | carrot <i>peeled and cut into 2-inch batons</i> |
| 1 large | egg | 3 med | kosher dill pickles <i>cut lengthwise into spears</i> |
| 1 small | yellow onion <i>grated</i> | 1 cup | kashkaval cheese <i>freshly grated</i> |
| 1 tbsp | summer savory | 1 tbsp | olive oil |
| 1 tsp | ground cumin | | |

PREPARATION

- **Parboil the carrot batons in boiling salted water for exactly five minutes.**
Since the mini rolls bake quickly, raw root vegetables won't tenderize in the oven; drain and rinse them under cold water before proceeding to prevent an unpleasant raw crunch in the final dish.
- **Soak the slice of stale bread in the milk for thirty seconds, then squeeze it hard in your fist to wring out excess liquid.**
This creates a damp paste that traps moisture inside the meat, a crucial grandmother's trick that dry breadcrumbs cannot replicate.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Knead the ground pork, ground beef, bread paste, raw egg, grated onion, summer savory, cumin, salt, and pepper in a large bowl until the mixture feels slightly tacky.**
Cover the bowl and let it sit in the fridge for twenty minutes. This resting period gives the salt time to bind the meat proteins and lets the fat-soluble spices bloom.

- 1. Flatten a generous half-cup of the rested meat mixture into a half-inch thick rectangle on a piece of plastic wrap or lightly oiled parchment paper.**
- 2. Lay two pieces of hard-boiled egg, two strips of pickle, and two strips of parboiled carrot straight down the center of the meat rectangle.**
- 3. Use the edges of the plastic wrap to lift the sides of the meat up and over the filling so they meet in the middle.**
Pinch the seam tightly to seal it, and pinch the ends shut to ensure the filling stays completely encased during the bake.
- 4. Unroll the sealed mini-loaf from the plastic wrap, place it seam-side down on a parchment-lined baking sheet, and repeat until all the meat is used.**
You should yield roughly 6 to 8 mini rolls.
- 5. Lightly brush the tops of the mini rolls with olive oil and bake in a preheated 400°F oven for twenty-five minutes.**
- 6. Pull the tray from the oven, top each mini roll generously with the grated kashkaval, and return to the oven for five to seven minutes.**
Bake just until the cheese is bubbling and melted into a golden crust. Let the rolls rest for five minutes before slicing on a bias to reveal the mosaic inside.

CHEF'S NOTES

- If you absolutely cannot source authentic chubritsa (summer savory), substitute two teaspoons of dried oregano mixed with one teaspoon of dried thyme.**
The authentic herb is highly recommended, as it imparts the defining aromatic signature of Bulgarian cooking.
- If kashkaval is unavailable at your local market, an equal mix of low-moisture mozzarella and provolone or Monterey Jack provides an excellent substitute.**
- Check your pickle labels carefully and ensure you are using unsweetened kosher dill pickles.**
Using sweet or bread-and-butter pickles will completely ruin the savory, acidic contrast intended for the filling.



Sweet Makaroni na Furna

Сладки макарони на фурна

slad-kee mah-kah-roh-nee nah foor-nah

This isn't a delicate, multi-step pastry. The kitchen fills with the smell of scorching butter and baking sugar as a box of supermarket elbows bakes into a bubbling custard inside a buttered 9x13 Pyrex dish—a generous crumble of salty sheep's milk feta hidden among sweet vanilla noodles delivers a sharp sweet-and-salty contrast. Scoop it straight from the pan, cracking the caramelized crust where the edges blister, or slice the dense squares straight from the fridge for a late-night kitchen-counter raid.

INGREDIENTS

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

PREPARATION

- **Preheat your oven to 375°F.**

Heavily butter a deep 9x13-inch baking dish; ensure there is at least an inch of space at the top to prevent bubbling over.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add the salt and oil, and cook the pasta for two to three minutes less than the package directions for al dente.**
The pasta will continue cooking in the oven, so you want it underdone here.
- 2. Drain the pasta immediately and rinse it thoroughly under cold running water.**
This grandmother's secret halts the cooking and washes away surface starch, ensuring the noodles stay distinct and don't turn into a mushy block in the custard.
- 3. Transfer the well-drained pasta to the prepared baking dish and toss with four tablespoons of the butter until melted.**
Fold in the crumbled feta cheese so it is evenly distributed among the noodles.
- 4. In a large bowl, whisk the eggs, whole milk, one cup of the sugar, and vanilla extract until the sugar dissolves and the mixture is pale.**

1. Pour the liquid custard directly over the pasta and cheese.

The liquid should come up to the top layer of the pasta, flowing into all the hollow tubes. Use a spoon to gently press any stray noodles down.

2. Dot the remaining two tablespoons of butter across the surface and sprinkle the remaining quarter cup of sugar evenly over the top.

This creates the caramel crust—the crackling, caramelized top that elevates the dish from ordinary to brilliant.

3. Bake uncovered on the center rack for 40 to 45 minutes.

You are looking for the custard to be just set with a slight jiggle in the center, and the top deeply golden brown.

4. Remove from the oven and let rest for at least 15 to 20 minutes before slicing.

Serve warm as a deeply comforting dessert or Sunday brunch, or eat it cold straight from the fridge the next morning.

CHEF'S NOTES

- **Seek out authentic Bulgarian sirene if you can, but a high-quality sheep's milk feta is a perfect weeknight stand-in.**

The salty, sharp bite of the cheese is what makes this dish work, so avoid the overly mild, soft cow's milk fetas from standard supermarkets.



Express Tikvenik

Тиквеник

tik-veh-nik

Forget babysitting grated squash on the stove. Modern cooks yank a box of supermarket phyllo from the fridge, unrolling the sheets across a half-sheet pan before the oven even hits 400°F. Their secret to a weeknight tikvenik is beautifully simple: blitz butternut squash in a food processor and toss the raw shreds with a little semolina to soak up the juices as it bakes. No stove, no soggy pastry. Fold in crushed walnuts for a lazy masterpiece that shatters perfectly on the first bite, smelling of toasted butter and hot cinnamon. Slice the pastry hot.

INGREDIENTS

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

PREPARATION

- **Thaw the phyllo overnight.**

Phyllo dough must be thawed in the refrigerator, never on the counter, to prevent the fragile sheets from condensing and turning into a gummy, unusable block.

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Preheat the oven and prepare your pan.**

Preheat the oven to 375°F. Whisk the melted butter and neutral oil together in a small bowl, then brush a 10-inch or 12-inch round baking dish or cast-iron skillet with the mixture.

- 2. Grate the squash.**

Run the butternut squash chunks through a food processor fitted with the grating attachment. If you don't have a food processor, a box grater and some elbow grease work just as well.

- 3. Mix the filling right before rolling.**

Toss the grated squash, sugar, walnuts, cinnamon, and semolina in a large bowl until evenly coated. Do not let this sit too long, or the sugar will pull excess water from the squash.

1. Layer and grease the phyllo.

Unroll the phyllo dough and cover it with a slightly damp kitchen towel to keep it from drying out. Lay one sheet on your work surface, lightly brush or splatter it with the butter mixture, and place a second sheet directly on top, greasing it again.

2. Fill and roll the cylinders.

Scatter about 3/4 cup of the pumpkin mixture evenly across the phyllo, leaving a 1-inch border at the edges. Starting from the long edge closest to you, roll the sheets tightly into a long cigar shape.

3. Coil the pastry.

Place the first cylinder in the center of the baking dish and coil it into a tight spiral. Repeat the filling and rolling with the remaining phyllo, attaching each new cylinder to the end of the last to continue the spiral outward until the pan is full.

4. Bake to a shatter.

Generously brush the entire coiled pastry with the remaining butter mixture.

Bake on the middle rack for 45 to 55 minutes until deeply golden brown, tenting loosely with foil after 30 minutes if the top is browning too rapidly.

5. Rest, dust, and serve.

Let the tikvenik cool in the pan for at least 30 minutes so the semolina can finish absorbing the internal steam. Shower it heavily with powdered sugar before serving warm or at room temperature.

CHEF'S NOTES

● **The Grandma Secret.**

The semolina is non-negotiable here. It acts as a sponge for the raw pumpkin juices, giving you a tender filling and a crisp shell without having to pre-cook the squash on the stove.

● **Do not use canned pumpkin.**

The texture of this dish relies entirely on the structural integrity of fibrous, freshly grated squash. Canned puree will result in a wet, dense paste and ruin the phyllo.