

Lebanese Vegetarian Grape Leaf Rolls

a recipe from www.maureenabood.com

Think of this filling like a pilaf that can be varied in all kinds of ways. Try bulghur instead of rice, or add other herbs like cilantro or mint. Toasted pine nuts are wonderful too. Chopped tomatoes and tomato paste can be added to the cooking water as well.

80-100 grape leaves, medium size
2 tablespoons olive oil
3 cups yellow onion, finely diced
2 cup red bell pepper, finely diced
1 ½ cups long grain rice
1 cup chickpeas, rinsed
2 tablespoons tomato paste
1 tablespoon plus 1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
½ cup chopped flat leaf parsley
6-10 cloves garlic, peeled
2 lemons

If using fresh leaves, soak them in hot water for 10 minutes to soften, or blanch in boiling water for 3 minutes if the leaves seem tough. If using jarred leaves, rinse the leaves thoroughly and soak in cool water for 15 minutes. Pat the leaves dry.

For the filling:

In a large sauté pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the onions and red bell pepper. Cook until softened, stirring frequently. Stir in the rice, chickpeas and tomato paste, and season with 1 tablespoon salt, pepper, cinnamon and cayenne. It will take a few minutes for the tomato paste to distribute while stirring. Remove from the heat and stir in the parsley and cilantro. Taste the filling (spitting out the uncooked rice) and adjust seasonings. Cool.

Prepare a dutch oven by lining the bottom with grape leaves to protect the rolls from scorching.

To stuff and roll the leaves:

Place grape leaves facing vein-side up on the work surface, with the wide stem-end of the leaf toward you. The amount of filling spooned onto each leaf will depend on the size of the leaf.

Drop about a heaping teaspoon of filling across the stem edge of the leaf, leaving enough leaf on either side of the filling for rolling.

Fold each side of leaf over the filling like an envelope and tuck under the filling. If this is difficult, take away some of the filling. Roll the leaf tightly away from you, tucking the right and left edges under as you go.

Arrange the rolls in tightly packed rows in the dutch oven, alternating the direction of each layer of rows. Tuck garlic cloves in here and there. Place a plate face down over the top layer to prevent the rolls from floating.

Fill pot with warm water up to the plate. Season the cooking water a teaspoon of salt. Cover and bring to a boil. After about 15 minutes, add the juice of one lemon to the cooking water. Some prefer much more lemon than this, or none at all; adjust as you please. Reduce heat to low and simmer for 10-15 minutes longer, until the rice is tender.

Remove the cover from the pot from the heat. Take the plate off the rolls and let the rolls cool off. They will be much easier to remove from the pot once they have cooled off and firmed up. Another method is to place an inverted plate or platter over the pot, then invert the pot and the plate, removing the pot and leaving the rolls on the plate. If you try this, be sure to pour off the cooking liquid first.

Serve with fresh lemon slices as a garnish, and labne as a dip.