

Meat and Rice-filled Pies *Pastelikos*

The *pièce de resistance* of Sephardic pies are the small meat and rice-filled pies shaped like little pots with straight sides and decoratively crimped lids to seal in the filling. You can also substitute with an aubergine, onion and tomato filling which, besides being vegetarian, is so tasty. Although it takes patience and practice to shape the pies, the technique is soon mastered. Enlist the help of a family member or friend for a faster assembly line. For best results I like to make two batches of dough for this amount of filling. I prepare the second batch of dough once the first batch of meat and rice pies have been filled and shaped as the dough tends to dry out fairly quickly.

For the meat filling (konducho):

¼ cup olive oil
1 cup finely chopped onion
500g (1lb 2oz) minced (ground) beef
1 tsp salt
a pinch finely ground white pepper
2½ cups hot chicken stock
1 cup canned chopped tomatoes, puréed
¾ cup basmati rice, soaked for 5 minutes in boiling water, rinsed and drained
¾ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley (*use leaves and tender stems*)

For the dough:

1 cup vegetable oil
2 cups hot water
1 tsp salt
4½ cups cake flour

For the topping:

½ cup sesame seeds

For brushing:

½ cup vegetable oil

Prepare the meat filling: Heat the oil in a large, heavy-based pan over a medium-high heat. Add the onion and cook for 3 minutes, stirring frequently, until softened. Add the meat and stir for 5 minutes, crushing the meat with a fork and stirring until it changes to a light brown colour. Season with salt and pepper. Add ½ cup of the hot stock and the tomatoes. Bring to a boil. Reduce the heat and simmer, uncovered, until the liquid is reduced. Taste and adjust the seasoning.

Make a well in the centre of the meat, add the rice and the remaining 2 cups hot stock. Return to a high heat and bring to a boil. Cover, reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer for 15–20 minutes until the liquid is absorbed and the rice is soft. Remove from the heat and let cool. Stir in the parsley and mix well. Transfer to a bowl and cover with plastic wrap until required. This amount of filling will require two batches of dough.

Prepare the dough: Combine the oil, water and salt in a medium-sized pan and bring to a boil. Remove the pan from the heat and place on a dampened tea towel on a work surface. Add the flour, 1 cup at a time, into the pan and stir vigorously with a wooden spoon until well blended. Do not overwork the dough. Transfer the dough onto a work surface.

Shape and fill the pies: While the dough is still hot, take two-thirds and shape into 3cm (1¼in) walnut-sized balls for the pots. Shape the remainder of the dough into 1.75cm (¾in) smaller balls for the lids. Cover the dough that is not being worked with a tea towel so it does not dry out. Hollow the larger balls with your thumbs and fingers and shape into little pots with straight-sides 3.5cm (1½in) deep and 3.5cm (1½in) wide, making the walls as thin as possible, about 3mm (¼in). Fill the pots to the top with a heaped teaspoon of filling.

To cover the filled pots: Take one of the smaller balls, lightly dip into the sesame seeds and then flatten between both palms. Fit the lid over the filled pot. Pinch the edges of the dough together all around to seal the pies. Using a small sharp knife, at a 45° angle, serrate the top circumference of the closed pie edges into a crisscross fringe. Finally lift up the sides of the finished pastry to a uniform height and then rotate the pie between the palms of your hands (like a potter's wheel).

At this point prepare the second batch of dough to complete using the entire filling.

Preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F). Generously brush two baking trays with oil.

Brush the tops of the pies with oil. Place on the baking trays and bake for 30–40 minutes or until they are crisp and a deep golden colour. Transfer to a wire rack. Serve at once or at room temperature with warm hard-boiled eggs.

Twists on Tradition:

- To crimp aubergine, tomato and onion filling, firmly pinch the dough around the edges into a thin flat hem. Then, using your thumb and index finger, twist, giving the border a quarter turn inwards and creating diagonal pleats resembling a twisted cord, sealing the pie.
- For a quick and easy version to assemble: Shape the dough into walnut-sized balls and roll into about 8cm (3¼in) discs. Spoon a heaped teaspoon of your chosen filling into an oval and place into the middle of each disc. Fold up the sides of the pastry, bringing them together to make a raised pastry, pinching with your fingertips along the length of the crest to seal the pastry completely. Brush with oil and dab the sides with sesame seeds. Bake as above.

Stella's Hints:

- The filling can be prepared ahead and refrigerated. Bring back to room temperature before using.
- To freeze unbaked *pastelikos*: Open-freeze on a plastic wrap-lined tray. Store in a single layer in an airtight container and freeze for up to 1 month. To serve, preheat the oven to 200°C (400°F) and generously brush the tops of the frozen pastries with oil. Bake the pies on oiled baking trays for 40–45 minutes or until crisp and golden brown.