

Ras el Hanout Pasticcio

Serves 6-8 | 30 minutes prep + 45 minutes cook time

When the New York Times published a pastitsio recipe, lovers of traditional Greek food howled about the deviation from what they believed to be the one true version. But while the baked dish that layers pasta, ragu, and a creamy bechamel sauce may be a Greek classic, the actual concept comes from a long Italian history of baked pastas, and variations are eaten all around the Mediterranean. In a nod to its origins, I like to call it pasticcio, the original Italian word for the dish that's usually translated as "a big mess."

Ground beef is typically used in the tomato sauce, but I subbed umami-dense mushrooms. And since the Greek dish always reminded me of moussaka, I added eggplant, too. Thumb-print shaped orecchiette replace the usual elbow macaroni. The texture and shallow cup of the "little ears" holds onto the sauces. Ras el hanout, the often-secret blend that spice merchants called the "head of the shop," gives the pasticcio the flavor of the Levant and acknowledges the deep connections between Northern Africa and Southern Italy.

1 lb Pastificio dei Campi Orecchiette or similar small shaped pasta

1 lb mushrooms

1 medium eggplant, cut into roughly ¾ inch cubes

3 cloves garlic, chopped or

1 teaspoon Burlap & Barrel purple stripe garlic powder

1 can Bianco DiNapoli crushed tomatoes

NY Shuk ras el hanout spice blend

4 tablespoons, divided + ½ cup extra virgin olive oil

½ teaspoon + more to taste sea salt

½ cup Edison sifted flour (substitute AP flour)

1 ½ cups milk

4 oz pecorino romano cheese, about 1 cup grated

Step 1 Preheat the oven to 350F.

Step 2 Spread the cubed eggplant on a sheet pan or large skillet, drizzle with 2 tablespoons of olive oil, and bake for about 20 minutes or until soft and translucent.

Step 3 Cut the mushrooms into 3 or 4 slices, put them in a heavy skillet with a pinch of salt but without any olive oil, and cook over medium-high heat, stirring frequently, until any moisture has evaporated and the mushrooms are nicely browned, about 15 minutes. Add 2 tablespoons of olive oil and cook for another few minutes, then add the eggplant, tomatoes, garlic (or garlic powder), and ras el hanout. Taste and add salt if needed. Simmer for about 15 minutes.

Step 4 For the besciamella, heat the olive oil in a small saucepan over medium heat for a minute or two then stir in the flour. Let it cook for a few minutes, then add the milk and salt. Stir frequently as the mixture comes to a boil, then reduce the heat and let it bubble for a few minutes or until it thickens. Remove from the heat and stir in the cheese.

Step 5 Cook the pasta according to the directions on the package. Drain and combine with the ragu. Spread the pasta-ragu mix into the baking dish in an even layer, and top with the besciamella. Bake at 350F until the top is nicely browned, about 30-40 minutes.