

MEDITERRANEAN CHICKEN PIE

Served 8.

By Dennis W. Viau; an original recipe.

I like savory pies. The inspiration for this one came from a restaurant trade journal. The pie was “Moroccan Style.” I have a Moroccan cookbook and the *style* didn’t seem right. I chose to vary the spices for a broader international flavor.



Ingredients:

For the Filling:

2 tablespoons pure (cooking) olive oil

1 large onion (about 13 ounces/370g); diced

1 teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 teaspoon ground ginger

½ teaspoon ground turmeric

⅛ teaspoon crumbled saffron threads

1 tablespoon all-purpose flour

2 cups (473ml) low-sodium chicken stock, preferably homemade (the broth sold in the store is okay)

1½ pounds (680g) boneless, skinless chicken thighs (you can substitute breast meat); cubed

¼ cup (1½ ounces/43g) chopped golden raisins

2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil (you can substitute cilantro)

2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian (flat leaf) parsley

Juice from 1 lemon

For the Pastry Shell:

½ cup (2 ounces/57g) sliced or slivered almonds

½ teaspoon salt

¼ teaspoon ground cinnamon

1 package (1 pound/454g) phyllo dough sheets; thawed

About ½ cup (120ml) extra virgin olive oil

About ½ cup (120ml) butter; melted

1 egg; mixed with 1 teaspoon of water to make an egg wash

Directions:

Heat the 2 tablespoons of oil in a large skillet over medium heat and add the chopped onion. Sauté until tender, about 6 minutes. Add the cinnamon, ginger, turmeric, and saffron. Cook about a minute. Add the flour and the chicken stock. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat, and simmer until most of the liquid has evaporated and the sauce thickens. Add the cubed chicken and sauté until the chicken is thoroughly cooked. Finally, add the raisins, basil, parsley, and lemon juice. Thicken the sauce again if necessary. Adjust for salt.

Grind most of the almonds (reserving some for garnish) with the salt and cinnamon in a small food processor.

To form the top crust, use half the phyllo sheets (the package I buy has two packets inside). Place a phyllo sheet on a clean surface and carefully brush the surface with the melted butter and oil. Brush carefully; it is brittle at this stage. Arrange a second sheet on top, at a different angle, and brush again. Lightly sprinkle some of the almond mixture over the surface. Continue to layer phyllo sheets at different angles, brushing with oil and butter and topping with a little almond mixture, until half the phyllo sheets and all the almond mixture are used. Trim to match the width of a 9-inch (23cm) pie plate and cut a few vents to release steam. Wrap in plastic and set aside. Heat oven to 375°F (190°C).

To form the bottom crust, repeat the phyllo layering procedure with the remaining half of the phyllo sheets, brushing with oil and butter, but using no almond mixture. Grease the pie plate with butter and arrange this crust in the plate, pressing it into the bottom and easing the excess around the sides.

Fill the pie shell with the chicken mixture. Brush the edges of the bottom crust with egg wash and then arrange the top crust in place, pressing around the edges to seal. Trim the excess off the bottom crust. Brush the top of the pie with egg wash and garnish with the sliced or slivered almonds that were reserved earlier.

Bake at 375°F (190°C) for 40 minutes. Allow to cool about 15 minutes before serving.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



These are the ingredients I used for the filling. Where possible, I like to use homemade chicken stock.

2



I'm not sure where "fillo" comes from. My food encyclopedia says it is "phyllo." This is usually sold frozen in the store. Let it thaw a day or two in the refrigerator before using.

3



For this pie I diced the chicken about halfway between the large pieces you might see in a stew and the small pieces you might see in chicken soup. I used all dark meat, but you can use light meat if preferred.

4



Similarly, the onion was given a medium-sized dice.

5



Here are the spices. They can all go into the same bowl, and eventually the skillet, at the same time.

6



Sauté the chopped onion over medium heat until tender and translucent, about 6 minutes.

7



Add the spices and cook for about a minute. Then add the flour and the stock. Bring to a boil, reduce the heat to medium-low, and simmer until most of the liquid has evaporated and the sauce thickens.

8



While the liquid is thickening, chop the fresh herbs.

9



Here is the sauce after simmering for about 20 minutes.

10



Add the chicken, raise the heat, and cook the chicken thoroughly. The chicken will probably release some juices that could thin the sauce, but it can be thickened again later.

11



While I was preparing this recipe a neighbor contacted me to say she had lemons on her tree and I was free to have some. I thought fresh lemon juice would be good in this dish. It is. The lemons shown here are from my neighbor's tree.

12



Finish the filling by stirring in the chopped raisins, parsley, basil, and lemon juice. Again, thicken if necessary, then remove from the heat and set aside.

13

Before assembling the top crust, grind most (about $\frac{3}{4}$) of the almond with the salt and cinnamon in a small food processor. The almond pieces should be reduced to a fairly small crumb.

14

On the left are the crushed almonds. The texture is smoother than corn meal. Reserve some of the almonds for garnish on top of the pie.

15



To form the top crust, begin by laying a sheet of parchment paper on a clean surface (I am using a piece of parchment paper to make it easier to turn the crust around while I work on it) and carefully brush the top with a mixture of melted butter and olive oil. At this stage the phyllo is very delicate and will tear easily. Arrange a second sheet on top, at a different angle, and brush again. By crossing the grains of the phyllo you will add strength. After the third layer is added, sprinkle some of the ground almond mixture onto each layer after brushing it with butter.

The phyllo can dry out easily, making it impossible to work with. If your kitchen air is dry, place a piece of damp, not wet, cloth (such as a linen napkin or piece of muslin) over the phyllo. You can see cloth covering my phyllo on the left of the picture above.

16



Continue layering phyllo until half the package of phyllo is used and all the nut mixture is used. You might need to replenish your bowl of melted butter and olive oil. Do not brush the top layer with butter. (It will be brushed with egg wash later.)

17

Trim this top crust to match the shape of your pie plate.

18

With a small knife or other implement, cut a few vents in the top release steam. I have a set of cork drills, which are sharpened metal tubes for cutting a hole through a cork. I used one of those to cut round circular vents. Wrap the top crust in plastic and set aside until needed.

19



Following the same procedure as for the top crust, assemble the bottom crust. You don't need the almond mixture for this crust. The ground almonds in the top crust will help keep the layers separated for a more flaky texture. The bottom crust just needs to be held together and be moisture proof. The fat will help contain the sauce in the filling mixture.

20



Grease the pie plate with butter and arrange the bottom crust inside, carefully pushing it down to fit snugly and pushing out any trapped air. Arrange the excess around the sides. Leave the crust untrimmed at this stage. It will be trimmed later. Pour the filling into the pie shell and distribute evenly. Brush the exposed phyllo dough around the edges with egg wash.

21

Arrange the top crust in place and press around the edges where you brushed the egg wash. Trim away the excess phyllo with a small knife, cutting close to the edges of the pie dish. Brush the top of the pie with egg wash and then garnish with the remaining almond pieces. Bake in a 375°F (190°C) oven for about 40 minutes until the filling is thoroughly heated and the top is a golden brown.

22

Here is my Mediterranean Chicken Pie, hot from the oven. Allow to rest about 15 to finish distributing the heat and then serve.



Conclusion

Although this filling looks like it contains curry, the yellow color is actually from the saffron. The flavor is delicious. I shared this pie with neighbor friends and they also enjoyed the flavor of the filling. The flaky phyllo pastry, topped with chopped almonds, gives the pie excellent eye appeal.