"UN-STUFFED" EGGPLANT CASSEROLE

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Casseroles are part of my Minnesota roots so I oftentimes take more time-consuming recipes and transform them into simpler covered dishes. Filled with healthy veggies, warm spices and whole grain, this comforting dish makes it easy to enjoy the flavors and textures of stuffed eggplant without as much fuss.

It is extremely versatile, as well – use any favorite whole grain, or replace the grain with root vegetables (such as parsnip, rutabaga and turnip), add leafy greens, choose any type of ground meat or eliminate it completely.

Makes: 6 - 8 servings

INGREDIENTS
2 medium-sized eggplants, peeled and large diced (about 8 cups total)
2 cups cooked whole grain – brown rice, quinoa, bulgur, barley, freekeh, or any other
2 tablespoons olive or avocado oil
1 medium-sized onion, peeled and diced
1 bell pepper, diced – any color
3 cloves garlic, minced
1 medium-sized carrot, peeled and diced
1-pound ground beef, lamb, chicken or turkey
1 tablespoon ground cinnamon
1 tablespoon ground cumin
1 tablespoon sweet paprika
1 teaspoon Kosher salt
½ teaspoon turmeric
½ teaspoon dried oregano
½ teaspoon dried cilantro
¼ teaspoon ground mace or nutmeg
¼ teaspoon ground black pepper
1/3 cup apple juice, white wine or dry sherry
1 (14 ounce) can diced tomatoes – low / no sodium, no added sugar
1 ½ cups beef, chicken or vegetable stock – low / no sodium, no added sugar
3 – 4 ounces Feta cheese, crumbled
Fresh parsley, chopped for garnish – optional

DIRECTIONS
1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Prep all ingredients (cutting, measuring) prior to cooking. Place the diced eggplant and cooked whole grain into an extra-large mixing bowl. Place the onion, pepper and carrot into a separate medium-sized bowl. Measure the spices into a small bowl.

2. In a large Dutch oven or skillet with sides, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the onion, pepper and carrot. Sauté, stirring occasionally, until just soft and slightly brown, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté 30 seconds more. Add the ground meat, breaking up with a wooden spoon, and cook until cooked thoroughly and brown. Sprinkle the spices over top of the meat and vegetable mixture, stir to combine and cook for 1 minute.

3. Deglaze the pan by carefully adding the apple juice, wine or sherry. Allow it to bubble for a few seconds, then scrape the brown bits off the bottom of the pan with a wooden spoon. These add great flavor to the dish. Allow the juice or wine to cook almost all the way out of the pan.

4. Add the diced tomatoes and stock, and allow to simmer for 1 - 2 minutes, reducing heat slightly.

5. If using a Dutch oven:
   • Add the eggplant and cooked grain to the pot and stir to combine well.

   If using a skillet with sides:
   • Pour the hot meat mixture over the eggplant and whole grain in the extra-large mixing bowl and mix the contents well. Transfer the entire mixture to a large casserole (about 5 - 6 quart size).

6. Cover and bake for 30 minutes, then uncover and continue to bake for an additional 30 minutes, until most of the liquid is absorbed. Sprinkle the feta cheese over the top and bake an additional 10 - 15 minutes.

   NOTE: If some liquid remains, it may absorb as the dish sets and cools.

7. Remove from the oven and allow to rest about 10 minutes. Sprinkle the fresh parsley over top and serve.

ADDITIONAL NOTES:
   • For fewer servings, simply halve the recipe. But you may wish to make the larger amount and freeze remaining portions to enjoy later since it reheats quite nicely!
   • If replacing the grain with root vegetables, sauté them along with the onion, bell pepper and carrot.
   • If eliminating the ground meat, consider adding chickpeas or another protein source, or root vegetables.
   • Remember that the salt in stocks, Feta cheese and canned tomatoes will affect the final flavor of the dish. Adjust the amount of Kosher salt as needed.