

EGGPLANT DIP (Kashk 'e Badamjun, Americaie')

1 lg. eggplant (OR 2 small light-purple Italian eggplants are my favorite!)
1 lg. Onion (2.5 cups fine-diced)
2-3 Tbs. Olive Oil + 1-2 Tsp. more if needed
1 lg. clove garlic, minced
1 tsp crushed dry mint (or 5-6 leaves fresh mint minced)
½ carton whole milk yogurt (2# carton, I use Organic Stonyfield)
Salt, Pepper, Turmeric to taste

PREPARE EGGPLANT:

Burn a couple of sections of the skin on all sides of the fresh eggplant (I run the eggplant over the element in my toaster oven).

Bake the eggplant until it is totally soft, usually juices will begin to form on the baking dish. (I use the toaster oven)
Cool and peel the eggplant, reserve the juice under it unless it is burned.

PREPARE SEASONINGS:

Sweat the onions in a heavy skillet on high heat, stirring often. When the bottom of the pan begins to turn golden, stir several more times then add a couple of teaspoons of water and quickly stir around to loosen the caramelization from the bottom of the pan. Add a bit more water if needed stirring the onion over the browned areas just enough to incorporate the flavors stuck to the pan. When the water has totally absorbed, add the oil, stirring well from time to time as the onion caramelize. Onion volume will reduce by about half and the bottom of the skillet will be golden and lightly crusted. Sprinkle a bit of black pepper and turmeric over the onions and stir quickly, then remove the skillet from heat to prevent it from burning while you transfer the onion to a small dish to rest; it will continue to dry out, intensifying the flavor.

Add a few drops of olive oil to the skillet, if needed, to help the garlic brown and the mint to sizzle. Don't mix the mint with the garlic to brown as they take different amounts of time to sauté. Quickly add the minced garlic to one corner of the skillet. Garlic will turn golden in less than a minute, and at that stage it's ready to move to the onion dish. Add the crushed mint to another corner of the skillet; mint gets ready much faster and if it stays over heat will turn bitter so once it sizzles it's ready to move to the onion dish. The flavor of the garlic and mint will mingle well if you mix them just before you take them out of the skillet; you may also want to add a dash of turmeric and black pepper when you mix them as heat and oil release and marry the flavors. . Do not let the bottom of the skillet darken beyond a deep gold.

Reserve a small portion of the garlic/mint mix as well as a small spoon of the finest, most caramelized onions to decorate the top of the serving dish.

FINISH EGGPLANT:

Pour a small amount of water in the very hot skillet so you can scrape up the browned onion/garlic/mint crust. Some of it will stay attached to the skillet, but that's OK. Add the eggplant, chopping and mashing until it is almost a paste. It will be wet, and this will also help loosen the flavor stuck to the bottom of the pan. Add about ½ of the caramelized onion, a small amount of the garlic and mint, a dash of black pepper and dash of turmeric plus about ½ tsp salt at this stage to flavor the eggplant paste as it reduces. Stir frequently, allowing it to stick slightly to the pan, then scrape it up as you fold and mash the pulp. This takes about 10 minutes, and at the end, the eggplant has darkened, is a very thick paste with about half its original volume and the bottom of the pan is almost clean from the constant scraping and incorporating the caramelized ingredients.

Ideally at this point you will remove the pan from the heat and allow the mix to cool in the pan. This will help release any of the tasty crust still on the pan when it's time to mix the dip.

MIX:

After the eggplant has cooled, transfer it to a mixing bowl. I use a spatula to remove the eggplant to assure I get all the flavors from the pan. Add and the yogurt and all the onion/garlic/mint mix and stir well. Adjust salt and pepper. The dip will taste even better if it has time to marry the flavors, so it can be made ahead and served later that day or for up to 3 days later.

SERVE:

When serving, place the dip in a small bowl or flat serving dish. Decorate the top with the reserved garlic/mint/caramelized onions and sprinkle with a few drops of olive oil to finish. Serve with pita chips. Home-made pita toasts or other crunchy side.

Nushe June!