

STIFATHO MYKONOS

(Greek Shepherd's Dish from Mykonos)

When I first ate Stifatho in Pireaus in 1970, I was not too impressed. Pireaus is the seaport of Athens and I was taking a little time out during a grueling six-week concert tour of Africa and the Middle East to sit around in the smoky dockside tavernas, listen to the Rebetica music, drink ouzo—and brush up on my bouzouki playing. It wasn't until my travels took me to the Greek island of Mykonos some years later that I tasted REAL Stifatho, and understood just why the very name can make an expatriot Greek go misty-eyed. Stifatho—the name means “sour”—was originally made with rabbit and, while the beef Stifatho you find in Athens and Pireaus is O.K.—it just ain't REAL Stifatho. Realizing that not everyone likes rabbit, I have suggested veal or chicken as substitutes—chicken Stifatho being my favorite. The recipe is a fairly typical Greek Island version with the exception of the pickling spice for which I am eternally grateful to Callie Englesson, from WLVT-TV in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, who is a fine Greek cook. I was talking to her one day and mentioned that, although I liked my Stifatho, I felt it did lack the “edge” that I remembered from Mykonos. She looked at my recipe and said, “Hey, you don't have any pickling spice.” “Pickling spice?” I said. “Really? How much pickling spice?” “Enough so it tastes right,” she said. She was right. Thanks, Callie!

1/3 cup olive oil

2 1/2 pounds veal or chicken, cut into 1-inch cubes

1 large yellow onion, finely chopped

2 cloves garlic, minced

2 1/2 pounds small white onions salt and pepper

1/2 cup dry red wine

1 cup canned tomato puree

2 bay leaves, tied in cheesecloth or deveined

1 teaspoon pickling spice

Heat the oil, then brown the meat, chopped onion, garlic and the whole onions, stirring to brown evenly. Season with salt and pepper, then add the wine, tomato puree, the bay leaves and the pickling spice. Cook, covered, over low heat, stirring occasionally until the meat is tender to the fork—about 2 hours. Uncover and cook until the sauce thickens. Season to taste and serve immediately.

Serves 4-6