

Spinach and cheese pie



We found ıspanaklı ve peynirli börek to be as common in Turkey as spanakotyropita is in Greece, and made a point of sampling as many as humanly possible, purely in the name of research of course. They are essentially the same dish – a savoury pie made of multiple layers of ultra-thin pastry with a spinach and cheese filling. Sometimes it's just spinach, or just cheese, but I like it with both.

They come in various shapes and sizes, depending on which country, region, town, village, bakery or home you're in, and with different fillings. The form here is nice and simple and works with the packets of filo dough we can find in shops in the UK. I have made the filling purposefully generous in quantity and moist in consistency as I don't like my börek dry. The recipe is loosely based on two very different versions I had the opportunity to make with chefs in Turkey and Greece – Engin Akin in Istanbul and Dimitris Mantsios in Naoussa.

Serves: 6-8 for lunch or as a snack

Total time: approx 1 hour 30 mins

400g (14 oz) spinach, well washed, well dried and quite finely chopped

200g (7 oz) Feta cheese, or similar, crumbled

1 small bunch spring onions, white and pale green parts only, finely sliced

2 eggs

225ml (<1 cup) thick whole plain yoghurt

approx 2 tsps sumac or lemon juice, to taste

approx ½ tsp chilli flakes, to taste

salt and pepper, to taste

approx 125g (4½ oz) butter

250g (8¾ oz) fresh filo pastry (approx 14 sheets)

1 egg yolk

1. Heat oven to 180C with a rack in the lower third.
2. Mix spinach, Feta, onions, whole eggs and yoghurt. Add sumac/lemon juice, chilli, salt and pepper to taste. I think it's nice if the mix has a hint of piquancy and a fairly acidic note. (If you want you could also add some chopped parsley and/or dill.)
3. Melt butter in a small saucepan.

4. Brush base and sides of a round, square or rectangular baking tin with a little melted butter. The tin should be approx 10" across and 1" deep.
5. Lay on a sheet of filo and gently ease it into the corners. Let its edges hang over the side – you'll deal with those later. Brush this sheet with butter, and repeat the filo layers and buttering until you've used half of your filo sheets. NB Keep the waiting sheets under a damp tea towel at all times so they do not dry out and then crack when you try to use them. NB If your tin is round lay each sheet on at a different angle to the last one, so that their corners hang over evenly all round the tin.
6. Spoon the filling mixture over and even out.
7. Repeat layers of filo and butter as before until all dough is used up. Trim off the edges by running a sharp knife around the outside edge of the tin, holding it vertically against the edge of the tin.
8. Mix the egg yolk with a few drops of water and then brush over the top of the pie.
9. Carefully cut the pie into squares or diamonds using a sharp knife. It works well if these are c.2" wide. Only go as deep as the filling, not right through.
10. Bake in lower half of the oven for approx 1 hour or until the pie has puffed right up and turned a rich golden brown all over. NB You may need to rotate the pie occasionally to ensure it browns evenly.
11. If you think the base of the pie may not be browned (and therefore potentially soggy), which may be the case if your oven does not have a heat source at the bottom, you can crisp it up by placing the tin on the stove over a medium-low heat for a few minutes, while rotating it regularly so that it cooks evenly all over.
12. Let pie cool in its tin on a rack. It is much easier to cut out the sections and serve once it is totally cold. Serve on its own or with yoghurt.

