THE PERFECT LAMB BIRYANI

Badshah biryani

Biryani is the maharajah (king) of dishes and is believed to have been invented in the kitchens of the Mughal emperors. It’s a layered dish combining a rich and tender clove and cinnamon lamb curry, sweet caramelized onions, and saffron-scented rice. Traditionally the biryani pot is covered with a bit of dough and baked in the oven until cooked. Few experiences match the joy of cracking through the top of a freshly cooked biryani at the table and inhaling the beautiful steam which billows out. That said, you could easily use a good oven pot with a tight-fitting lid instead.

This dish is very much suited to sharing at home with family and friends, and although there may seem a lot to do, it’s really no more complicated than making a lasagna.

SERVES 8 TO 10

*For the lamb curry*

2 star anise

2 tablespoons coriander seeds

10 cloves, or 1/2 teaspoon ground cloves

50 black peppercorns

1 tablespoon cumin seeds

1/2 teaspoon cardamom seeds

1 teaspoon fennel seeds

1 3/4-inch cinnamon stick

4 large onions

2-inch piece of ginger, peeled

8 cloves of garlic

canola oil

2 1/4 pounds lamb shoulder, chopped into 1 1/4-inch cubes

1/2 teaspoon ground turmeric

1/2 teaspoon chili powder

3 tablespoons whole-milk yogurt

3 tablespoons tomato paste

salt

*For the rice*

2 3/4 cups basmati rice

1 teaspoon rose water

a large pinch of saffron, soaked in

2 tablespoons hot water

*For the dough*

3/4 cup chapati flour

1/4 cup hot water

1 teaspoon canola oil

There’s a fair bit of preparation involved in this dish, but if you tackle it up front, you will have few complaints later. First prepare all your spices. Put the star anise, coriander, cloves, peppercorns, cumin, cardamom, fennel, and cinnamon stick into a spice grinder, food processor, or mortar and pestle to grind them, and then set the spice mix to one side.

Rinse your basmati rice in at least three changes of water to wash out the starch and let it soak in a bowl of cold water until later. Next, chop your onions in half, peel them, and then slice into fine rings. Pop the ginger and garlic into a food processor, or finely grate the ginger and crush the garlic.

Put a tablespoon of oil into a large, heavy-bottomed, lidded frying pan on a high heat. When you are sure that the pan is very hot, sear the lamb in batches (so that you don’t crowd the pan), turning it until it is golden brown. Take the meat out with a slotted spoon and set aside.

Add another 2 tablespoons of oil to the same pan and fry the onions for 8 to 10 minutes, until they are soft and golden. Take out half of the onions, transfer them to a bowl and set to one side. Then put the garlic and ginger into the pan. Stir-fry for a couple of minutes and add the spices that you have ground, together with the turmeric and chili powder. Keep stirring to ensure these don’t burn on the bottom of the pan.

After a minute or so, add the lamb, yogurt, and tomato paste, stir well to ensure it is all mixed together, and add 1 1/2 cups of warm water. Bring to a boil, then turn the heat down to low, pop the lid on, and leave to simmer for around 1 1/2 hours, or until done.

Meanwhile, you’ll need to cook the rice and prepare the fried onions for layering. Drain the rice and transfer to a saucepan. Pour enough cold water over the rice so that it is covered by 1–2 inches, and bring to a boil. Boil for 8 to 10 minutes, until it’s just tender. Drain and set aside.

Transfer the onions from the bowl to a small frying pan and continue to fry for another 10 minutes, or until the onions are caramelized, then take off the heat. Check on the lamb: as soon as it is falling apart, season with salt to taste and take off the heat. If you’d like to seal your biryani lid with dough, knead together the flour, hot water, and oil to make a nice soft dough. Alternatively you could seal the pot with a tight lid or foil.

Preheat the oven to 350**°**F.

Take an ovenproof pot which will snugly accommodate the rice and lamb, such as a casserole dish. Remove half of the meat from the lamb curry using a slotted spoon (to leave the sauce behind) and place it at the bottom of the pot. Top the meat with half of the rice and half of the onions and repeat with the rest of the meat, rice, and onions. Keep the sauce from the curry aside to serve with the biryani.

Sprinkle the rice with the rose water and the saffron. Roll out the dough so that it is big enough to cover the pot, then place it on the pot and seal by pressing down on the rim all the way around (or put the lid on). Put the pot in the oven for 20 minutes.

Crack open the biryani at the table and serve with the lamb curry sauce on the side, along with some golden garlic raita and, if you like, some pomegranate seeds and cilantro leaves.