



# Crisp and Fragrant Chicken *Bastila*

A sweet and savory filling  
is wrapped in phyllo for  
this classic Moroccan dish

BY KITTY MORSE

I was born and raised in Morocco. I still have a home there and visit regularly, sometimes leading a culinary tour. I like the fact that people view Morocco as a romantic, exotic place because that's just what this North African country is. But I don't want people to think that Moroccan food is so exotic that they could never make the dishes in their own kitchens. While the food is absolutely wonderful, it is also very straightforward.

The *bastila* is a perfect example of what I mean. A wonderfully fragrant stew that's wrapped in a delicate dough, it's one of the most refined of Moroccan dishes, but it is really quite easy to make.

The traditional filling for *bastila* (pronounced bahs-TEE-lah) was pigeon, but chicken is now more likely. The chicken is simmered in a fragrant sauce flavored



"*Bastila* is elegant yet easy to make," says author Kitty Morse.

with saffron, ginger, cilantro, and other herbs and spices.

The cooked chicken is removed from the pan and boned. The remaining sauce is lightly sweetened with confectioners' sugar. Other Moroccan main dishes can be sweet, made so with prunes or figs, for example, but the addition of confectioners' sugar is unique to *bastila*. The sweetness complements the dish's savory flavor without overwhelming it.

The use of softly scrambled eggs to bind and thicken the filling is also unique to the *bastila*. The beaten eggs, which are mixed in the hot liquid until softly scrambled, add texture but just a subtle flavor to the filling. The filling is nestled between sheets of a paper-thin dough,

Photos: left, Matthew Klein; right, Boyd Hagen.

which is sprinkled with a mixture of ground almonds, cinnamon, and confectioners' sugar. The result is a pastry that's savory yet slightly sweet.

#### PHYLLO MAKES A FLAKY CRUST

The traditional dough is called *ouarka* (pronounced WAR-kah), which is paper-thin and has a texture somewhere between Greek phyllo and Chinese egg-roll skins. Making *ouarka* is an art that requires years of experience. In Morocco, the task is generally delegated to freelance *ouarka* specialists. Seated before their charcoal braziers, they perform their culinary wizardry, creating sheets of dough as thin and light as onion skins. Though

*ouarka* is sold in some markets in Morocco, it isn't commercially available in the United States.

Prepared phyllo makes an excellent substitute for the *bastila's* traditional dough. Phyllo, thin sheets of dough used in Mideastern cooking and available frozen in supermarkets, is pliable enough to shape around the filling and has a texture when baked that's similar to *ouarka*. Phyllo (sometimes spelled *filo* or *fillo*) makes an easy substitute for *ouarka*, but you do need to take some care when working with the thin sheets of dough.

Defrost phyllo in the refrigerator; thawing it at room temperature creates moisture that may cause the sheets to stick to-

Bastila owes much to the exquisite, flaky texture of its paper-thin dough.



A light coating of butter gives the dough its crisp texture and great flavor. Paint on the melted butter with a pastry brush.

gether. When working with phyllo, keep the sheets you're not using covered with plastic wrap and topped with a clean, slightly damp towel to keep the phyllo from drying out. Each time you pull a sheet from the stack, cover the remaining sheets with the towel.

Though phyllo has a tendency to turn brittle when exposed to air, don't be intimidated when working with it. As you layer it to create the *bastila's* crust, you'll be brushing melted butter onto it. This not only crisps the phyllo while it bakes, but it also keeps the sheets pliable as you work with them. If your phyllo does tear, simply use small, buttered pieces to patch the rip. No one will be able to tell the difference once the pastry is baked.

Shape the *bastila* into its traditional round shape by cutting the rectangular sheets of phyllo into rounds. The layers of pastry are assembled so that the final dish looks like a puffy, round pillow.

#### SAVOR THE SCENT BEFORE SERVING

Because *bastila* is traditionally a special-occasion dish, I often serve it at the start of a celebratory meal. The arrival of a plump, beautiful *bastila* to the table never fails to elicit murmurs of appreciation from guests attending a *diffa*, a feast celebrating a special occasion. As soon as the *bastila* is served, the host quickly pierces the crust in several places to allow the fragrant steam to escape, tantalizing the senses of those guests seated nearby.

*Bastila* is also hearty enough to serve as a main course, but I suggest that you serve it on its own with a salad either before or after. The varied and complex

## Making the traditional Moroccan dough called *ouarka*



In Moroccan cities, it isn't unusual to see *ouarka*, the paper-thin dough traditionally used in making *bastila*, being prepared by freelance *ouarka* makers. A large, round copper pan, called a *t'bsil dial ouarka*, is set upside down over hot coals on a brazier and dabbed with a thin, wheat-flour dough to create small, overlapping circles. The *ouarka* is then deftly peeled from the pan.



Layers of phyllo create the sides of *bastila*. Turn up the edges of the phyllo so that they partially cover the filling.



A few tucks keep the *bastila* together. Fold the top sheets of phyllo under the bottom ones as if you were tucking in bedsheets.

flavors don't need to be muddled with other foods on the same plate.

*Bastila* freezes well. I often make several at a time, baking and serving one and freezing the others, uncooked, for later use. They'll keep for up to two months when frozen and can go straight from the freezer into the oven.

### Classic Chicken Bastila

Though the filling should be thick, use a slotted spoon to transfer it to the phyllo, leaving any excess liquid behind. *Yields one 10-inch bastila; serves six.*

#### FOR THE FILLING:

- 2 Tbs. vegetable oil
- 1 medium onion, chopped fine
- 6 skinless chicken thighs (about 2 lb. total)
- 3 skinless chicken breast halves (about 1 lb. total)
- ½ cup finely chopped flat-leaf parsley
- ⅓ cup finely chopped fresh cilantro
- ¼ tsp. turmeric
- 8 threads saffron, preferably Spanish
- 1 cup water
- 1 tsp. ground ginger
- 1¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp. salt
- ½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
- ½ cup confectioners' sugar
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten

#### FOR ASSEMBLING THE BASTILA:

- 3 oz. (about ½ cup) whole blanched almonds
- ¼ cup confectioners' sugar
- 1 tsp. ground cinnamon

- 12 sheets phyllo dough
- 4 oz. (8 Tbs.) butter, melted
- Confectioners' sugar and cinnamon for dusting

Heat the oven to 425°F. In a large, heavy-based saucepan, heat the oil over medium heat. Cook the onion until translucent, stirring occasionally, about 8-min. Add the chicken, parsley, cilantro, turmeric, saffron, water, ginger, and cinnamon. Cover and cook over medium-low heat until the chicken is tender, 20-to 25-min. With a slotted spoon, transfer the chicken to a bowl and set it aside. Simmer the sauce that's left in the pan until it is reduced by half, about 12-min. Mix in the salt, pepper, sugar, and eggs. Stir continuously until the eggs are softly scrambled, about 5-min.

When the chicken is cool enough to handle, pull the meat off the bones and cut it into ½-inch chunks. Return the meat to the pan with the sauce and stir to mix.

In a blender or food processor, grind the almonds coarse. Transfer the almonds to a small bowl and mix them with the sugar and cinnamon. Set the mixture aside.

Put 12-sheets of phyllo on a cutting board. Using a 12-inch round pizza pan or similar sized circle as a template, cut the stack of phyllo sheets into rounds by tracing the outside of the pan with a sharp knife. Discard the phyllo scraps. Keep the phyllo rounds covered with plastic wrap and a slightly dampened towel when not using.

Using a pastry brush, paint the pizza pan or baking sheet with some melted butter. Put one-of the phyllo rounds on the pan and brush it with butter. Repeat with two more rounds, buttering each. Sprinkle the top round lightly and evenly with half of the almond mixture. Layer and butter three more rounds on top of the first three. Spread the chicken mixture evenly over the top of the sixth layer, leaving 1½-inches of phyllo uncovered around the perimeter. Fold the edge of the phyllo rounds up and partially over the chicken mixture.

Layer and butter three more rounds of phyllo over the chicken mixture, sprinkling the remaining almond mixture evenly over the top of the third layer. Layer and butter the remaining three rounds of phyllo and tuck the edges of all six rounds under the first six rounds. Generously butter the top layer.

Bake the *bastila* until it turns a deep golden brown, 30-to 35-min. Sprinkle evenly and lightly with confectioners' sugar. Sprinkle the cinnamon over the top of the *bastila*. Serve immediately.

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*Kitty Morse lives in a casbah her husband built in southern California. She has written five cookbooks, including The California Farm Cookbook (Pelican, 1994) and the forthcoming The Vegetarian Table: North Africa (Chronicle, 1996). ♦*



## Wine Choices

For *bastila*'s sweetness and spice, look to off-dry whites or bubbles

Rich and fragrant, Moroccan *bastila* works well with an off-dry Gewürztraminer because of the sweetness and spice they share. Try Thomas Fogarty from California or anything German.

If you prefer Chardonnay,

choose carefully. Chardonnay often has flavors of fruit, butter, and nuts—good partners all for *bastila*. Louis M. Martini of Napa and Hogue Cellars in Washington make fine examples.

But too dry a Chardonnay can be thrown out of balance

by *bastila*'s sweetness. A good sparkling wine delivers Chardonnay flavors, but with a touch of sweetness. And sparklers have pleasing yeasty flavors that connect well with phyllo. From California, I like Wente Vineyards' Brut: it's well balanced and priced

right. Roederer Estate or Maison Deutz, and their French counterparts, Louis Roederer or Champagne Deutz, have more depth. They're pricier, sure—but you'll feel as if you're dining in a casbah. *Rosina Tinari Wilson, a food and wine writer and teacher, is a con-*