

## 1. **Mhasha** (Array of stuffed vegetable skins)

Every Arab country considers stuffed grape leaves to be part of its cuisine, as do the Turks and the Greeks (“Dolma” and “Dolmades”). The dish probably has its origins in the Ottoman culinary tradition, which explains its ubiquity in the Middle East. The Iraqi version, as with so many other dishes, is substantially more complex. First of all, the Iraqi dish involves stuffing many different kinds of vegetable skins, and not only grape leaves. Secondly, the filling itself is both complicated and delicate, making for a wonderful dish in both taste and presentation.

### *Hashwa* (Filling):

1 ¾ cups long grain, white basmati rice, washed and soaked for 30 minutes  
1 lbs. medium-lean meat, cut into very small cubes  
1 very large lemon  
4 cloves garlic, finely diced  
½ bunch mint leaves, washed and coarsely chopped  
Finely diced beet cores (see below) OR 1-2 heaping teaspoons tomato paste  
½ teaspoon salt  
½ teaspoon pepper  
¼ cayenne  
1 tablespoon corn oil

### Vegetable Skins:

2 large onions  
10 *silq* leaves (“*silq*” is the Arabic word for the leaves known as chard, Swiss chard, or silverbeet)  
10 grape leaves (Note: If *silq* is not available, use a total of 20 grape leaves)  
3 medium size beets  
2 fresh red pimento (“gamba”) peppers  
1 large, firm tomato  
1 *kusa* (zucchini or white squash), peeled

### Ingredients for cooking:

Juice from 1 large lemon  
½ cup red wine, sweetened with silan or sugar  
1 heaping teaspoon tomato paste  
2-3 tablespoons oil  
A few dashes salt

### Initial preparation:

Peel and wash beets. Put them in a pot of water, set on high flame, and cover. When

water boils, lower flame and boil for 15 minutes. Remove beets to colander. Wash the *silq* leaves very well and soak them in water. If the grape leaves are not already soaking in a jar (this is how most grape leaves are available), wash them very well and soak them in water.

*Hashwa:*

Drain rice so that little liquid remains and place in mixing bowl. Add meat, garlic, and mint. Take lemon and, rather than simply squeezing it, cut it into sections and pull out the citrus content in little bits, so that the content is shredded into fine pieces. (This method of preparation is called “*mfalas*” in Arabic.) Take care not to include the bitter rind or membranes of the fruit. Add the shredded lemon to the bowl with the other ingredients. If using tomato paste instead of beet residue, add tomato paste to the mixing bowl. If using beet residue, take the cooked beets and use a pairing knife to cut a “cap” in each. Slant the knife severely toward the center of the beet while cutting around the top. (The angle of the cut will prevent that cap from falling into the beet once it is cored.) Core the beets, but do not leave the skin too thin – there should be a thick shell of beet remaining all around it. Finely dice the removed beet cores and add it to the bowl. Add salt, pepper, cayenne, and oil. Mix everything together very well, but gently, taking care not to break the rice. (Note: Before *hashwa* is finished, begin boiling onions, see below.)

Preparation of Vegetables, Filling, and Cooking:

Prepare onions by cutting halfway into each onion, from top to bottom, but not more than half way into the body of the onion. Put the onions in a pot of water and boil. When the onions soften (after about 10 minutes), remove them from the water and place them in a colander. Drop the *silq* and grape leaves into the boiling water for a few seconds and then remove them to the colander with the onions.

Place the 2-3 tablespoons oil in a very wide, shallow saucepan. Distribute the oil evenly along the bottom of the saucepan. Begin filling the onions first. Remove a layer from one of the onions (the radius cut should allow the easy removal of a full layer) and open the layer so that it makes an onion skin of about 5 or 6 inches long. Place approximately 1 tablespoon of *hashwa* on the onion skin (depending on the size of the piece), toward one side of the skin. Tightly roll the onion skin around the *hashwa*, beginning with the end on which the *hashwa* was placed. The result should be an egg-shaped, stuffed onion skin. Squeeze the stuffed onion skin, to ensure that it is fairly dense and tightly wrapped, and place it in the center of the saucepan. Repeat this process until all the layers of skin are removed from both onions and stuffed. Array the stuffed onion skins in the middle of the pan. Take a *silq* or grape leaf and lay it out on a countertop. Place 1 tablespoon of *hashwa* on one end, and flatten it out slightly in a line perpendicular to the length of the leaf. Fold the very end of the two sides of the leaf over the *hashwa* and then roll the leaf, beginning with the *hashwa* side. This method (much like rolling a burrito) should produce an item that appears like the familiar stuffed grape leaves from Turkey or Greece. Squeeze the stuffed leaf, to ensure that it is fairly dense

and tightly wrapped, and place it in the saucepan next to the onion skins. Repeat process until all the *silq* and grape leaves are stuffed and arrayed in the saucepan surrounding the onion skins. Stuff the beets by removing the “cap”, filling the beets with *hashwa*, and replacing the cap. Set the beets in the saucepan, on the outside of the stuffed leaves. Next, cut a “cap” in the top of the red pimento peppers (see the explanation with respect to beets in the “*Hashwa*” section, above) and core the peppers. Stuff them by filling them with *hashwa* and replacing the cap. Place the pimentos in the saucepan, on the outside of the stuffed leaves. Cut a similar cap in the tomato and core it, making sure to leave a fairly thick tomato shell all around it. Chop the tomato core finely and sprinkle the core over the other stuffed vegetable skins in the saucepan. Fill the tomato with *hashwa* and place in the saucepan. Cut a slice off of the bigger end of the squash and core the squash. Fill with *hashwa*, replace the end slice (to cap the filled contents) and lay the squash gently in the saucepan. Note: It is not important for the tomato or the squash to touch the bottom of the saucepan, but ensure that the other items, especially the onion skins and leaves, are firmly touching the bottom of the pan.

Sprinkle salt over the contents of the saucepan. Mix lemon juice, sweetened red wine, tomato paste, and  $\frac{3}{4}$  cup of water, and pour the mixture over the contents of the saucepan. Use a ceramic plate that can tolerate high heat and lay the plate upside down over the contents of the saucepan – it is important to use a plate large enough to cover the contents of the pan. (The plate serves the purpose of holding down the items so that they don’t rise in the boiling liquid and unravel.) Cover saucepan and place over medium flame. When liquid boils, lower flame to low. Cook for about 45 minutes. Toward the end of the cooking time, periodically move the saucepan around the stove burner to ensure good distribution of heat and even scorching of the stuffed vegetables. Check to make sure nothing is burning.

If ready to serve, cook until done. If not ready, only cook partially, leaving some liquid in the pan. When ready to serve, add a little water, reheat, and finish cooking. When finished, gently remove each stuffed item from the pan to a serving dish, arraying everything in a nice and aesthetic arrangement. Flip over the items from the pan to the serving dish, so the scorched brown side is up.