

Pilaf: Balkan rice cooked with liver

One of my nicer childhood memories is that of the family reunions my Armenian great-aunt staged. My cousins and I would gather in the kitchen and watch her chop liver for her own secret version of pilaf, a sort of savory casserole based on rice. We each would beg a little piece of halvah to tide us over for a while. Our great-aunt would stay barricaded in her kitchen until about three in the afternoon.

At three or thereabouts, she would emerge from the kitchen to announce that if our hands were not spotless, there would be no vanilla shortbread or prune balls for dessert. We would rush to the bathroom to perform the needed ablutions, then file out to the tables set up under the fig and apricot trees in Uncle George's garden. The oldest of us would bring out brimming pitchers of ice water and great piles of plates. The last person out of the house would be our great-aunt, carrying two large bowls of pilaf in her arms. We would devour the pilaf in a trice, savoring the liver and tomatoes, gulping the water as if it were the sweetest liquid on earth. Our parents would eat with even more gusto than we. All too soon the meal would be over and we would be anticipating next year's reunion before the day was done.

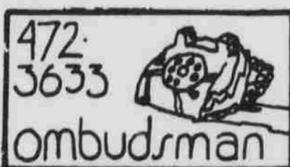
David Thomas Ware omelet

Pilaf is an all-encompassing term used to describe a wide variety of Balkan dishes based on rice. My great-aunt's pilaf recipe goes something like this:

2 Breakfast cups long-grain rice
8 oz. liver
4 oz. butter
3 fine-chopped onions
2 tsp. salt, 1 tsp. pepper
3/4 tsp. sugar
1/2 tsp. mixed spices
2 oz. currants
2 large, peeled & chopped tomatoes
4 cups boiling bouillon
chopped fresh parsley or mint

Wash the liver and chop it into small pieces. Heat the butter in a saucepan and lightly fry the liver. Remove the mixture from the pan, but keep it warm. In the same pan, fry the onions until they are soft, but not brown. Next, add the rice, which should be washed three times. Fry this for five minutes, stirring to prevent sticking or burning. Add the seasonings, sugar, spices, currants, tomatoes and very gradually the bouillon. Stir again, cover the pan with a cloth and lid and cook gently until the liquid is absorbed. When the pilaf is dry, return the liver, sprinkle with the parsley or mint, re-cover the pan and put it aside on a warm stove for 15 minutes, with no further cooking.

This method of cooking the rice assures a perfect pilaf. You can omit the liver and substitute any other meat. Change the spices, add more onions, forget the currants—just never stop with variations on the pilaf theme and you usually will end up with a dish my great-aunt would have been proud to serve.



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