Spicy Lamb Breakfast Strata

Serves 8

For the Lamb

1 lb. ground lamb
4 cloves garlic, finely minced
1 tsp. ground cardamom
2 tsp. ground coriander
2 ½ tsp. ground cumin
2 tsp. ground anise seed or fennel seed
2 tsp. fine sea salt
1 tsp. red pepper flakes (I prefer Aleppo)
1 red onion, diced
1 tbsp. olive oil
1 - 28-oz. can fire-roasted diced tomatoes
1 tbsp. ground allspice
2 tbsp. + 2 tsp. Harissa (or Chinese chili paste if you can't find Harissa)
2 tbsp. finely chopped fresh mint
2 tbsp. cocoa powder

In a small bowl, combine the cardamom, coriander, cumin, anise seed and salt. In a medium mixing bowl, combine the lamb, 1 tablespoon of the above spice mix and the red pepper flakes. Keep the rest of the spice mix for the yogurt sauce. Mix well (this makes a good sausage all on its own if you add a little sautéed shallot, breadcrumbs, and a dash of soda water).

Heat a large sauté pan over high heat. Add the olive oil, then the diced onion. Season with a little salt and sauté until it starts to brown. Add the lamb and sauté, breaking up the meat as you go, until browned and cooked through. Add the tomatoes, allspice, and Harissa. Stir until some of the tomato liquid has reduced - a minute or so. Reduce the heat to low, stir in the cocoa powder (this will thicken it slightly). Stir in the mint and set aside to cool.

For the Yogurt Sauce

4 cups plain, unsweetened yogurt
2 tbsp. of the above spice mix
1 tbsp. chopped fresh mint

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For the Bread Layers

16 slices French bread
1/3 cup butter, melted
6 eggs
1 cup of the yogurt sauce
1 cup whole milk or half & half
1 tsp. garlic salt
a few grindings of black pepper
1 lb. yogurt cheese, or Monterey Jack, grated
½ cup grated parmesan cheese

Preheat the oven to 325° Fahrenheit. Lay out the bread slices on a baking sheet and brush evenly with the melted butter on both sides. Bake until starting to brown. Butter a large rectangular casserole dish (somewhere around 12" x 18'). Place a single layer of bread on the bottom of the baking dish, cutting, if necessary, to fit all the way to the edges.

In a mixing bowl, whisk the eggs, then add the 1 cup yogurt sauce, milk, garlic salt and pepper. Whisk until well combined. Pour half of this mixture over the bread. Turn the bread over, to make sure it is well coated with egg mixture. Let it soak in a little while, then sprinkle with 4 ounces of the grated cheese. Stir 8 ounces of the cheese into the lamb mixture, then spread this evenly over the bread. Sprinkle with the remaining 4 ounces yogurt cheese.

Place the remaining bread slices over this, then pour the rest of the egg mixture over the bread, picking up each slice to make sure that they are well coated. At this point, you can cover and refrigerate over-night, or you can proceed after the bread has absorbed all the egg mixture. (If you are waiting until the next day, don't forget to refrigerate the reserve yogurt sauce too.)

To finish, spread 1 cup of the yogurt sauce over the bread, then sprinkle with the ½ cup parmesan cheese. Bake for 1 hour, or until puffed and golden. Let sit for at least 10 minutes before cutting into squares and serving up. Serve with the remaining yogurt sauce on the side, and if you are really tricky, garnish with pomegranate seeds and a drizzle of pomegranate molasses. Whew! I hope I didn't leave anything out!

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