

Vine Leaf Rolls With Aromatic Rice - The Most Festive Dish Of My Life

Ingredients:

Difficulty: Advanced
(serves 4-6)

350 gr. vine leaves in brine, washed well*
2 cups / 4 dl + 5 tbsp + 1 tsp rice**
1/2 cup / 8 tbsp olive oil
3 medium onions, chopped finely (I make mini cubes)
2 tbsp pine nuts
2 tbsp dried mint
1.5 tsp ground black pepper
1.5 tsp cinnamon
2 sugar cubes or 2 tsp granulated white sugar
30 gr. parsley, about 3/4 cup, chopped finely
2 tbsp black currants
juice of 1 big lemon
2 tsp salt
3/4 cup / 1.8 dl boiling water

To use while cooking:

3/4 cup / 1 cup + 5 tbsp + 1 tsp olive oil
3-4 slices of lemon or a few teaspoons of lemon juice
2 cups / 4 dl + 5 tbsp + 1 tsp very hot water

*The leaves sold in brine will be very salty. You need to wash them in cold water. Just put the leaves in a bowl / big deep plate or something similar, and pour cold water over them and try to gently separate them from each other - you don't have to separate each and every one of them, just try to get rid of big chunks of leaves stuck together. Leave them in the water for a few minutes, then change the water again. Do this for about 10 times (not kidding), always with cold water. This is generally enough, but, to make sure, I actually do this the night before and leave the leaves in water overnight. So if you have time, I recommend doing that, and you will not regret.

**Try to use short-grain, high starch rice like baldo rice cultivated in Turkey and in Italy, or if you cannot find this, then arborio rice. This kind of rice is starchy and gets creamy when cooked, and they will get tender and easily stick together while rolling the leaves. Soak the rice in hot water for 1 hour at least, before starting to cook.

Instructions:

1. (You should have the leaves washed and rice soaked enough as explained above, before starting to prepare the rolls.) First we will make the stuffing. In a big pan, put olive oil and warm it on medium high heat for about a minute. Add onion and pine nuts and sauté them until onions get translucent and pine nuts brown slightly.

2. Add rice and saute for one minute.
3. Add dried mint, pepper, cinnamon and sugar and stir well.
4. Add parsley, black currants and lemon juice and stir more.
5. Add salt and boiling water, stir for a few seconds, put the heat to lowest, cover with a lid and cook until the rice absorbs the water and becomes tender. Once cooked, transfer it to a pan / container that will help it cool fast so that you can start rolling the leaves as soon as possible.
6. While the rice is cooling, prepare your assembly line. You will need: the drained leaves, a mini bowl for any leaf stalk that you will get rid of, a plate for the leaves that are not good for rolling (because they tear in pieces, are too small etc. - you will use them later), the rice stuffing, a pan / tray / shallow bowl for the ready rolls, a clean surface to make the rolls, a knife to cut the leaf stalks if there are any and a spoon to put the rice on the leaves.
7. Now let's start rolling! Take one leaf suitable for rolling (no tear, no holes, in good shape). Turn the side with veins looking upwards and put it on your rolling surface. Put about a tablespoon on the leaf. This amount can change slightly according to the size of the leaf, just use your logic. Try to stick the rice stuffing a little for better rolling (yes, your hands will get messy!). First fold the bottom on filling, then fold sides on top of that and then roll! Try to roll as tight as possible, but do not tear the leaf as you do that. Once done, put the ready roll in the pan you prepared and continue with the rest!
8. Take a medium pan. Cover the base with one layer of discarded leaves - cover a bit of the sides too. This will keep the rolls from sticking to the base of the pan and burning.
9. Put the rolls in the pan, and try to put them very tightly next to each other. You can make several layers.
10. Put another layer of discarded leaves on top of the rolls.
11. Pour 3/4 cup olive oil. Put lemon slices on top of leaves or if you don't have lemon but ready lemon juice, then pour some lemon juice over the leaves. Shake the pan a little to make sure that the oil and juice goes down in between the leaves.
12. Put a plate on top of the leaves. This will keep them tight and under control while cooking. Pour the hot water (and again, shake the pan a little to make sure the water goes down), cover with the lid and put on medium heat. Once the water starts boiling (you may not see it but you can hear it), then put the heat down to lowest and cook the rolls for 45-50 minutes. Once cooked, cool them down to room temperature in the pan, then transfer to a serving plate. If you want, eat them warm, but I personally prefer them cold so I put them in the fridge for a while before I eat / serve. Serve with lemon. Enjoy!