

Lentil Mushroom Wellington – Comfort du Jour

If the idea of having a vegan at the holiday table scares you, then I hope this recipe brings some relief. It most certainly will bring some big Thanksgiving flavor, and everyone at our table—vegan or otherwise—has asked for seconds.

In the spirit of full disclosure, this dish *does* take time and effort, though none of it is difficult. If you wish to make it for Thanksgiving, perhaps for a vegan guest at your table, the good news is that almost all of it can be done in advance. You will find most of the ingredients familiar—cooked lentils, rice blend, cremini mushrooms, kale, sweet potatoes and (vegan) puff pastry—and I'll describe in more detail how I put the whole thing together and even gave it a faux “egg wash” before baking, to give it a golden crust while keeping it plant-based.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 cup uncooked lentils, rinsed and picked over* (see notes)
- 3/4 cup uncooked brown rice or rice blend
- 32 oz. carton low-sodium vegetable broth
- 1 or 2 bay leaves
- 2 large sweet potatoes, peeled and cut into bite-size cubes
- Extra virgin olive oil*
- 1 leek, cleaned and sliced (white and light green parts only)*
- 1 rib celery, strings removed and chopped
- 1 tsp. Umami seasoning blend (Trader Joe's “Mushroom & Company”)*
- A fat handful of kale leaves, washed and chopped
- 6 to 8 large whole mushrooms, cleaned*
- Liquid from a can of chickpeas (use low-sodium; reserve the chickpeas for another use)
- 1 Tbsp. milled flax seed*
- 1/3 cup pecan pieces, toasted
- 3 Tbsp. hemp hearts
- A pinch (or two) of dried thyme leaves (or a few sprigs of fresh thyme, if you have it)
- Freshly ground black pepper to taste

TO ASSEMBLE:

- 1 sheet puff pastry (choose one with plant-based ingredients, such as Wewalka or Pepperidge Farm)
- Flour to dust the countertop
- Small handful (about 1/4 cup) of panko bread crumbs
- 1 Tbsp. plant milk, such as almond or soy
- 1 Tbsp. real maple syrup
- 1 Tbsp. canola or avocado oil

*NOTES

I use a lentil blend, which includes green, red and black beluga lentils. If you choose a single type of lentil, I would recommend using the green ones.

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My go-to olive oil this time of year is the wild mushroom and sage-infused oil found in specialty olive oil and balsamic vinegar stores. But any olive oil is fine, or substitute canola oil or a favorite plant-based butter.

If using leeks, be sure to clean them properly to remove all traces of grit between layers. Drain and pat completely dry on layers of paper towel before sautéing. If preferred, substitute 1 medium sweet or yellow onion.

The umami seasoning blend is a product sold at Trader Joe's, and its ingredients are dried mushroom, onion, garlic and red pepper flakes. Can't find it? Substitute with similar flavors, and you might also want to mince up a couple of mushrooms to sauté with the kale or leeks to add earthy flavor to the lentil loaf.

You can buy flax seed already milled, but keep it fresh in a tightly sealed container in the fridge or freezer. I purchase bags of whole flax seeds and use my blade-style coffee grinder to mill it a little at a time as I need it. For this recipe, it's essential for the flax to be milled because it will be used in place of an egg as a binding agent.

I chose a combination of cremini mushrooms and shiitake mushrooms for this recipe. Use the largest ones you can find; mine were each about the size of a silver dollar. Clean the mushrooms as suggested in the slideshow before sautéing them.

There are many components to this recipe, and it is helpful to break it down into manageable tasks over two days, beginning with preparation of the lentils, rice, sweet potato and vegetable mixtures (steps 1-6). Refrigerate everything overnight and on the second day, you can relax and focus on assembling and baking the dish.

Helpful tools for this recipe: food processor or small blender, rolling pin, pastry brush.

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Cook lentils according to package instructions, using low-sodium vegetable broth in place of some or all of the water. During simmer, add a bay leaf to the pot. Drain excess liquid when lentils reach desired tenderness. Transfer to a bowl and salt to taste.
2. Cook rice according to package instructions, using low-sodium vegetable broth in place of some or all of the water. Transfer to a bowl and salt to taste.
3. Toss the cubed sweet potatoes with enough olive oil to lightly coat all sides. Spread onto a parchment-lined baking sheet and season with salt and pepper. Roast at 400° F until they can be pierced with the tip of a paring knife and are only slightly firm to the bite.
4. Sauté leeks (or onions) and chopped celery in a tablespoon of olive oil. Season with umami seasoning (or recommended substitute) and black pepper. When vegetables are tender and have given up their moisture, transfer to a bowl and cool completely.
5. Swirl another teaspoon or so of oil into the skillet and sauté the chopped kale until it has softened and reduced somewhat in volume. Resist the urge to cook the kale together with the onions; it will be used as a bed for the lentil mixture, not as part of the filling.
6. Heat a non-stick skillet over medium heat with 1 tablespoon of olive oil. Arrange the mushrooms topside down, in the skillet, and then cook until the tops are browned and tender. Turn them over and sauté the

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underside. The mushrooms should give off a good bit of their moisture, but not to the point of shriveling. Lay them on layered paper towels to cool, allowing excess moisture to drain from the underside.

7. To assemble the mixture, gather up all the prepared components from steps 1 to 6. In a small saucepan, heat the liquid drained from the chickpeas over medium low heat. Simmer until it is reduced in volume to about 1/4 cup. Transfer the liquid to a bowl and stir in the milled flax seed. Let this mixture rest for at least 20 minutes. It will thicken up into a gel-like substance.
8. Transfer 1/3 cup of the cooked lentils and 1/4 cup of the cooked rice to the bowl of a food processor or blender. Add the flax mixture and pulse until the mixture is the consistency of a loose porridge.
9. In a large mixing bowl, combine the remaining lentils, rice, sweet potatoes, leek-celery mixture, toasted pecans and hemp hearts. Toss them all together. Give this mixture a final taste and adjust salt to your liking. Sprinkle thyme leaves and give the pepper mill a few twists over the mixture. Add the full amount of flax binder and fold to combine this mixture well.
10. Preheat oven to the temperature recommended on your specific puff pastry package. For mine, the temperature is 400° F. Oven rack should be slightly lower than center position so that the wellington will rest squarely in the center of the heat.
11. Thaw puff pastry (if using frozen) according to package instructions. Sprinkle flour onto the counter and use a rolling pin to smooth out wrinkles and slightly enlarge the rectangle.
12. Spread panko crumbs over the center of the puff pastry, and then layer the cooked kale on top of it. This will be a bed for the lentil mixture, and the crumbs will help absorb excess moisture so the puff pastry doesn't become soggy on the bottom.
13. Scoop about half of the lentil mixture onto the kale, shaping it into an oblong mound like a meatloaf. Arrange the mushrooms in a tight line down the center, pressing them slightly into the lentil mixture. Shape the remaining lentil mixture over the mushrooms.
14. Use a paring knife to trim off the square corners of the puff pastry, leaving them rounded to match the shape of the lentil loaf. Use a cookie cutter to make embellishments from the scraps for the top of the wellington. Score the long sides of the puff pastry into strips, about 1 ½ inches apart. Turn up both ends of puff pastry and wrap the ends of the lentil loaf, then carefully fold the strips in alternating order across the top. It should look similar to the top of a laced sneaker. Tuck in any loose edges. Embellish with leftover shapes, if desired.
15. Transfer the wellington to a parchment-lined, heavy cookie sheet. In a small bowl, whisk together plant milk, maple syrup and oil. Brush this mixture evenly over all exposed puff pastry, including down the sides. This will produce a beautiful golden color on the baked wellington.
16. Bake for 45-50 minutes, turning pan once after 25 minutes. It is done when the pastry is flaky and golden brown all over. Cool on the baking sheet for about 5 minutes before transferring to a serving platter. Cut into thick slices and serve on individual plates.