



# UNIVERSAL COTTAGE PIE

SERVES 4

*Cottage pie, made with leftover roast beef or fresh minced beef, and shepherd's pie, made using leftover roast lamb or fresh minced lamb, are those nostalgic family comfort foods. Back in the day, one of the best cottage pies was served as a school dinner – I loved it. There are many recipes to choose from with each chef adding their own personal twist.*

*I have also seen many 'ready meals' enticing us to the supermarket deals with a photograph showing a delicious-looking cottage pie or shepherd's pie that can be popped straight into the oven in its single-use tray. Again, I am left wondering what unknown extras have to go into it for such a long shelf life.*

*Try this – it doesn't take long to make from scratch, can be adjusted to suit any palate, made ahead and frozen or simply chilled for up to five days. I call it my 'Universal Cottage Pie', as it can be adjusted to be gluten-free, dairy-free, vegan or vegetarian, and is very tasty.*

*Even though I eat meat, I have reduced my meat intake and will bulk out many a dish using lentils. Cooked well, in stock, they are very flavoursome and tender and very good for you. You'll never know you're not eating minced beef. The first time I made this recipe I used 200g leftover tinned corned beef that had been kicking around in the fridge for a few days but you can use any leftover finely chopped roasted meat. I realise that corned beef is considered to be an ultra-processed food nowadays, but, just like bacon and ham, I do like it from time to time. I consider myself 'flexitarian' – I enjoy most foods, though I am mindful of the pitfalls and will steer towards 'healthy'.*

160g green lentils  
or Puy lentils  
500ml vegetable  
or chicken stock  
4 tbsp oil, butter or lard  
2 large onions,  
finely chopped  
200g lean leftover  
cooked beef or lamb  
chopped up very  
small or blitzed briefly  
in a food processor  
(meat version)  
200g mushrooms, finely  
diced  
(vegan version)  
2 celery sticks,  
finely diced  
2–3 carrots, finely diced

Place the lentils into a metal sieve and rinse under the cold tap, then transfer to a saucepan, add the stock and bring to the boil. Cover and simmer for 30 minutes until the lentils are tender and have absorbed most of the stock. Set aside.

In another saucepan, heat the oil, butter or lard and fry the onions over a low heat for 10 minutes. Add your chopped meat to the pan along with the celery and carrots and add in a pinch each of salt and pepper, and the herbs and nutmeg. For the vegan version, leave out the meat and add the mushrooms instead. Give it a good stir, put the lid on and cook for 15–20 minutes on the lowest heat until the carrots are tender.

*Recipe continued overleaf*

2 tbsp dried mixed herbs,  
or 4 tbsp chopped  
fresh parsley  
1 tsp ground nutmeg  
2 tbsp flour, gluten-free  
flour or cornflour  
300ml water  
900g floury potatoes  
(peeled weight), cut  
into even-sized chunks  
Butter or vegan  
alternative  
Milk (dairy or non-dairy)  
Cheddar cheese,  
Parmesan or vegan  
alternative, grated  
(optional)  
Salt and pepper

*You will need:*

Digital weighing scales  
Measuring jug  
Metal sieve  
3 x saucepans with lids  
Chopping board  
Knife  
Food processor (optional)  
Wooden spoon  
Family-sized pie dish,  
or make 4 individual  
pies in ovenproof soup  
bowls (I prefer this – we  
eat two and freeze two)  
Colander  
Potato masher  
Fork  
Grater

Add the flour, gluten-free flour or cornflour, stir well and cook for a minute or two, then add the contents of the pan containing the lentils and any stock, stir well and simmer. As the sauce thickens, add more water, little by little, stirring between each addition until the sauce is thick but not so thick that the spoon doesn't leave a pool of gravy behind. You may or may not need all of the water. Taste and check the seasoning, then take off the heat – transfer to the pie dish or dishes and leave to cool.

Boil the potatoes in water, adding salt if preferred, and once tender, drain and mash until smooth, adding the seasoning plus a little butter and milk to taste.

Cover the cooked filling with the mashed potato, starting at the outside of the dish(es) then working inwards. Smooth with a fork then add a grating of cheese, Parmesan, or vegan alternative (if using).

Chill or freeze then bake in the oven at 200°C/180°C fan/400°F/gas 6 for 25–30 minutes until the potato is golden and the filling is bubbling. Serve with a green vegetable.