

Spinach and Ricotta-Stuffed Shells

Serves 8 to 10 people

Squeezing water from spinach is always a messy proposition. I learned a clever trick for draining spinach years ago when I was interning with chef and cookbook author Nathalie Dupree in Charleston, SC. You simply place the spinach to be drained on a plate and set another plate on top of it. Hold the plates on their side over a sink or bowl and press the two plates together. The water drains out and you are left with perfectly drained spinach on the plate.

I like to finish this dish with a dusting of parmesan cheese at the table. For cheese lovers, throw some grated mozzarella cheese over the sauce before baking.

6 cups Mom's Spaghetti Sauce (see recipe below) or your favorite pasta sauce
About 36 large dried pasta shells
1 lb (16 ounces) whole milk ricotta
4 ounces (about ½ cup packed) frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained
1 ounce (about 1 cup) finely grated parmesan cheese
1 large egg, lightly beaten
½ teaspoon kosher salt
¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
¼ teaspoon grated fresh nutmeg

Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease a large 9 x 13-inch casserole dish with butter.

Bring a large pot of generously salted water to a boil. Add the pasta shells and cook for about 9 minutes or until they still retain a bit of a bite. They will cook longer in the oven. Drain and rinse under cold water. Set aside.

In a large bowl, whisk together the ricotta, the spinach, parmesan, egg, salt, black pepper, and nutmeg.

Pour 2 cups of Mom's spaghetti sauce over the bottom of the greased casserole dish. Fill each shell with a heaping spoonful of the ricotta mixture and place, stuffed side up, in the casserole dish. You should be able to get about 30 shells in the casserole dish. There will be a few extra pasta shells leftover after stuffing that make good nibbles for the cook.

Ladle the remaining 4 cups of spaghetti sauce over the stuffed shells. Bake, uncovered, in the oven for 45 minutes or until hot and bubbly. Enjoy.

Mom's Spaghetti Sauce

Makes about 8 cups

This sauce actually improves in flavor when frozen. I always double the recipe, but have also quadrupled it upon occasion. I have never had a problem with not being able to eat all of it. I call for Hunt's tomato sauce and tomato paste in the recipe as that is what my mother has always used. I don't mess with perfection.

1 lb ground beef, Italian Sausage (hot or sweet), or a combination of beef/sausage
1 medium yellow onion, chopped
3 garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
1 bay leaf
Freshly ground black pepper, to taste
1 (15-ounce) can Hunt's Tomato Sauce
1 (15-ounce) can fire-roasted diced tomatoes
1 (6-ounce) can Hunt's Tomato Paste

Brown the beef and/or sausage in a large Dutch oven until no longer pink. Carefully drain the fat and add the onion and garlic to the pot. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is soft. Add the Italian seasoning, salt, pepper, and bay leaf to the pot and stir to combine.

Add the tomato sauce, fire-roasted diced tomatoes, and tomato paste. Add 1 (15-ounce) can of water. Stir everything together and bring to a boil. Once boiling, reduce the heat to a low simmer and simmer for approximately 2 hours. Serve immediately or freeze.