

Level: Doctorate

RECIPE 3

Lasagna with Homemade Ricotta and Roasted Vegetables

You'll need to set aside some time to prepare this multistep recipe, in which you'll learn how to make a classic tomato sauce and homemade ricotta cheese, but you don't have to do everything at once. Prepare the sauce, vegetables, and cheese a day or two ahead, and then cook the noodles and assemble the casserole when you're ready to bake it.

Homemade Ricotta

Making fresh cheese is remarkably easy. Be sure to start with a good-quality pasteurized milk and buttermilk (which lends acid to help the curds form). If you forget to buy cheesecloth at the supermarket, you can use a large clean dish towel or even a pillowcase to drain the curds. This recipe will work with lower-fat milk, but, remember, the higher the fat content, the richer and creamier the results. Leftover ricotta is tasty spread on toasted crusty bread and drizzled with honey for a simple dessert or breakfast.

Ingredients

- 1 gallon whole milk
- 1 quart buttermilk
- 1/2 teaspoon salt

Rinse a stainless-steel or other nonreactive stockpot with cold water (stainless-steel prevents the milk from scorching the pan). Combine milks and salt in the pan over medium heat. Cook 30 minutes or until mixture reaches 180 °F (tiny bubbles will form around the edge), stirring occasionally. (Use a candy thermometer or instant-read thermometer to gauge the temperature.) Reduce heat, and cook 3 minutes; do not stir the milk at this point. You'll see the curds forming and floating to the surface.

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While the milk cooks, line a colander with 5 or 6 layers of cheesecloth, allowing the cloth to extend over the edges of the colander. Place the colander over a bowl.

When the milk is done, remove from heat. Gently transfer the curds to the prepared colander, using a slotted spoon. Tie the edges of the cheesecloth together to form a bundle, which you can hang over the kitchen faucet to drain into the sink. Drain 15 minutes.

Transfer the cheese to an airtight container and refrigerate; use within 3 days. **Yield: about 4 cups ricotta.**

Shortcut

No time to make cheese? Use a 32-ounce container of store-bought ricotta. If your store sells fresh ricotta cheese, buy that—its texture and quality will match the homemade stuff.

Spicy Tomato Sauce

A traditional Italian tomato sauce using fresh tomatoes typically calls for peeling and seeding the fruit to yield smooth results. You could use a sharp vegetable peeler to remove the skin, but it's time-consuming for this many tomatoes. This method of blanching the tomatoes in boiling water is faster. The recipe calls for fresh plum (Italian) tomatoes, which can usually be found year-round. In summer, though, substitute any variety of fresh, in-season tomato you find. Use this all-purpose sauce in the lasagna or just serve it over any hot cooked pasta with a generous grating of Parmesan cheese.

Ingredients

- 2 1/2 pounds plum tomatoes
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 cup finely chopped onion
- 2 garlic cloves, minced

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- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar
- 1/4 teaspoon crushed red pepper

Bring a large saucepan of water to a boil. Use a sharp knife to score an “X” in the skin at the top of each tomato. Fill a large bowl with ice water; set aside. Use a slotted spoon to gently lower the tomatoes into the boiling water; cook 1 minute. (Do this in 2 or 3 batches so you don’t overcrowd the pan and the water stays at a boil.) Transfer tomatoes to ice water (you’ll see the skins start to loosen). Remove tomatoes from ice water and slip off the skins. Cut tomatoes in half and use a small spoon to scrape out the seeds. Coarsely chop tomatoes (skinned tomatoes are slippery, so you can use a pair of kitchen shears to cut them up).

Heat a medium saucepan over medium-high heat. Add oil to pan. Add onion; sauté 3 minutes or until softened. Add garlic; sauté 30 seconds. Add tomatoes, salt, vinegar, and pepper. Reduce heat to medium, and cook 20 minutes, stirring occasionally. **Yield: about 2 1/2 cups.**

Shortcut

Substitute a 28-ounce can peeled whole tomatoes for the fresh tomatoes. Use a pair of kitchen shears to **coarsely** cut up the tomatoes in the can. You could cheat and use a can of diced tomatoes, but it will produce a more watery sauce that you may need to cook longer.

Lasagna

As noted above, you can prepare the ricotta and sauce a day or two in advance. Same goes for the roasted vegetables in steps 1 and 2.

Ingredients

- 2 red bell peppers, seeded and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 pound zucchini, cut into 1/4-inch rounds

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- 1 pound yellow squash, cut into 1/4-inch rounds
- 1/2 pound baby carrots, cut into 1/4-inch rounds
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 tablespoon plus 3/4 teaspoon salt, divided
- 1/2 teaspoon black pepper, divided
- 8 quarts water
- 12 lasagna noodles
- 3 cups Homemade Ricotta
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh basil
- 1/4 cup chopped fresh flat-leaf (Italian) parsley
- 1/2 cup (2 ounces) shredded mozzarella
- 1/2 cup (2 ounces) shredded Parmesan cheese
- 1 recipe Spicy Tomato Sauce
- Nonstick cooking spray

Preheat oven to 475 °F.

Combine first 4 ingredients in a large bowl. Drizzle with olive oil; sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon salt and 1/4 teaspoon black pepper. Toss to combine. Spread vegetables in a single layer on 2 rimmed baking sheets lined with foil. Roast at 475 °F for 20 minutes or until vegetables are tender and browned at the edges, stirring after 10 minutes.

Reduce oven temperature to 450 °F.

Bring 8 quarts water to a boil. Add 1 tablespoon salt and pasta to pan. Cover pan briefly until water returns to a boil. Uncover, stir pasta, and cook 8 minutes or until *al dente*. Drain, and rinse with cold water; drain.

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Combine Homemade Ricotta, basil, parsley, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and 1/4 teaspoon black pepper. Combine mozzarella and Parmesan cheeses. Spread 1/2 cup Spicy Tomato Sauce in the bottom of a 13 x 9-inch pan coated with cooking spray. Top with 4 noodles. Spread 1/2 cup sauce over noodles; top with half the ricotta mixture and half the roasted vegetables. Repeat layers, ending with noodles. Spread remaining sauce over noodles; top with mozzarella mixture. Cover with foil coated with nonstick spray; bake at 450 °F for 25 minutes. Uncover, and bake an additional 5 minutes or until browned and bubbly. **Yield 6-8 servings.**

Shortcut

Cooked lasagna noodles have a substantial texture that holds up well in this casserole, but you can always substitute no-boil (sometimes labeled “oven ready”) lasagna noodles if you’re short on time.