

STRATA

When I was a kid, casseroles were all the rage. They were economical, saved time and effort, made great leftovers, and cut down on clean-up. Of course, many of these casseroles were tuna-noodle surprise made from a recipe on the back of a box that involved canned cream of mushroom soup. So the casserole fell out of favor.

However there are wonderful casseroles just waiting to be made, from French coq-au-vin to Spanish paella to Cajun jambalaya. Throughout America, chicken pot pie is a classic casserole, as is chili con carne, not to mention the iconic macaroni and cheese, which can either be tasteless glop or a sublime culinary experience. Today the casserole is now called a one-pot meal and is making a glorious comeback. There are even some decent versions of tuna noodle surprise out there.

This next dish is a quick and easy sort-of Italian casserole called strata, essentially a custard baked around layers of different ingredients, such as bread, vegetables, cheese and seasonings. It's a great way to use up leftover bread.

Preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Butter the bottom and sides of a 2-quart shallow baking dish. Take the leftover loaf of bread and cut it into about 16 slices. If you've only got fresh bread, dry the slices in a 175 degree oven for about 15 minutes before preheating the oven up to 350 degrees. Arrange the slices in a baking dish, overlapping the edges.

Sauté about six slices of bacon in a frying pan until crisp and drain the bacon on paper towels. When it's cool enough to work with, crumble the bacon into small pieces and sprinkle it over the bread slices. Sprinkle about 1 ½ cups of grated cheese over the top. Dutch Gouda, Swiss Gruyere, or Italian Fontina cheese are good choices for this, or just get a package of some pre-shredded cheese, like the Mexican or Italian blends. Sprinkle about ½ cup of baby spinach over the top—you can get the spinach in bulk in the vegetable section of your supermarket.

Then, in a mixing bowl, beat together 5 large eggs, 2 cups of milk, 2 tablespoons of tomato-based salsa, a pinch of salt and some freshly ground black pepper. Pour the mixture over the layers of bread, bacon, cheese and spinach. Using a spatula, press down on the bread slices to submerge them in the egg mixture. Let it sit for about fifteen minutes for the bread to soften.

Bake the mixture on a rack set in the middle of the oven for about 35 minutes, or until the custard is firm and lightly browned. Be careful not to overcook it. Remove the strata from the oven and serve, cutting it into squares. This yields approximately 4 to 6 servings, depending on appetites, and is great for a light supper along with a green salad and a glass of red wine or for a Sunday brunch with a fruit salad alongside.

What's fun about this savory bread pudding is that you can vary the fillings as much as you like. Use different kinds of bread. Substitute cooked hamburger or chopped ham for the bacon. Instead of the spinach, you can add some arugula, or some sautéed mushrooms, or half a cup of broccoli florets that you've precooked in the microwave, or some chopped onion, or some diced cooked asparagus, whatever you like. You can add some herbs, like a pinch of thyme or some fresh basil or some chopped parsley. Leave out the salsa and simply sprinkle one some chopped fresh tomato. The possibilities are endless.

And here you thought bread pudding was only for dessert! This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.