

CASSEROLES

A casserole describes both a serving dish and its contents. Like soup or stew it has many interpretations. Two things are somewhat consistent. The ingredients are combined, often being cooked separately, and then put into the baking dish. The baking dish is also the serving dish and this is the one convenient feature of casserole cooking. The dish is taken from oven to table.

The work, however, occurs in organizing and pre-cooking the various part of the dish. This sometimes takes several hours. Most casserole dishes only require that the ingredients be mixed together and baked. Often the start to finish time is only an hour. A convenience feature of casseroles is that they can be completely prepared in advance and later baked and served. Some casserole dishes can be assembled and frozen for later use.

TURKEY PACKS: wing, back and leg provide an excellent poultry stock as well as meat for soups, noodle casseroles and dumplings.

There are several ways to deal with the challenge of using these pieces that are usually ignored. You'll have excellent stock, a little richer than chicken and 2 or 3 cups of turkey meat. Shredded meat can be taken from the bones after making stock.

Cover the bottom of an oven proof pan for which you have tightly fitting lid. Cover the bottom of the pan with chopped onion, carrot and celery, a teaspoon of dried thyme and a bay leaf. Cover with a couple of inches of water or a combination of white wine and water. Dry the turkey pieces and lay them on the chopped vegetable. Cover and braise in a 350 degree oven for about two hours or until the meat can be easily pulled from the bone with a fork. Remove from the oven and cool. When the pieces are cool enough to handle, remove the skin from each piece and then take off the meat. When the meat has been removed use a fork to pick the remaining small pieces and put these aside from the larger pieces.

When all the meat has been removed from the bones put the meat aside and place all the bones, the vegetables and liquid from the roasting pan into a small stock pot. Add water to cover the bones by 3-4 inches. Bring to a boil and skim several times. Lower heat to medium and cook for 2-3 hours. You may have to add more water to keep the water level at least an inch above the bones. Cool and strain through a damp cloth. Refrigerate for later use. The stock and the turkey meat can be frozen in small amounts to use later.

If you prefer you can omit the oven braising process. Place the vegetables, thyme and bay leaf with the turkey pieces in the stock pot. Cover with water by 2-3 inches. Bring to the boil and skim several times. Lower the heat to medium and cook for 2-3 hour or until the meat comes off the bones easily. After the meat has been removed from the bones, return the bones to the stock pot and cook for another 1-2 hours.

Basic Béchamel Sauce

2 TBS butter
2 TBS flour
1 cups turkey or chicken stock or half milk and half stock
salt and pepper

Melt the butter in a heavy bottom sauce pan. Add the flour and cook while whisking for two or three minutes. Add the stock and/or milk. Continue to whisk and bring to the boil. Cook for two or three minutes and set aside.

You can add 2 TBS of finely miced onion to the butter before adding the flour. Dried thyme can also be added depending on the way in which the béchamel will be used and what seasoning the final dish will include.

ENJOY CORN IN THE MIDST OF WINTER

Melt 2-3 TBS butter in a non-stick sauté pan. Add 1 package of frozen corn including the liquid. Raise the heat and stir with a rubber spatula to evaporate the liquid. When the liquid has evaporated add a couple of TBS of cream or another TBS of butter. Season the corn with salt and pepper. It tastes like summer.

CORN CASSEROLE

2 TBS butter	1 whole egg and 2 egg yolks
¼ cup minced onion or shallot	1 package frozen corn
2 TBS flour	salt, pepper and nutmeg
1 cup milk	

Melt the butter in a heavy bottom pan. Add the mined onion and stir for 2-3 minutes and then add the flour and cook while whisking for 3-4 minutes. Add the milk and continue whisking. When the mixture thickens, lower the heat and cook for another 3-4 minute whisking often.

Whisk in the egg and the egg yolk one at a time. Add the corn and mix thoroughly. Season well with salt and pepper. Pour the mixture into a shallow baking dish and bake at 350 degrees for about 45 minutes.

CHICKEN POT PIE

2 leg-thigh pieces (or the wing and leg from a FFM turkey pack)	2 cups diced onions
2 cups peeled, chopped carrots ½ inch pieces	1 cup chicken stock or water
1 cup chopped celery, ½ inch pieces	2 tsp dried thyme
	1 bay leaf
	salt and pepper

Place the vegetables and chicken stock in a heavy bottom pan. Add the thyme and bay leaf. Bring to the boil and then lower heat to medium low. Put the chicken into the pan so that it rests on the bottom of the pan with the vegetables surrounding. Add enough water to cover the chicken pieces. Cover with a lid and poach in a 350 degree oven until the meat falls easily from the bone—about 1 hour.

When the chicken meat comes away from the bone easily, remove the pan from the oven. Take the chicken from the pan and put aside to cool. Strain the vegetables from the broth. Measure the broth. For each 2 cups of broth, you will use 3 TBS of flour to thicken the “sauce.” Allow the broth to cool.

Place the flour in a bowl. Slowly whisk in some broth. Whisk to eliminate any lumps. Return the broth to the pan. Add the vegetables into the broth with the flour mixture. Cook over medium high heat until the “sauce” is thickened. Season well with salt and pepper and set aside. Remove the chicken meat from the bones and cut into 1 inch pieces. Add to the vegetables and “sauce.” You can make the dish to this point the day before.

When you are ready to bake the pot pie, fill the pie dish with the chicken-vegetable mixture. Cover it with a round of your favorite pie pastry. Pinch the edges of the pastry against the rim of the pie plate.

Bake in a 450 degree oven for 10 minutes. Lower the heat to 350. Total baking time will be about 40 minutes.

Ground meat—beef, lamb or pork—can be used instead of chicken.

Prepare the vegetables:

2 cups peeled, chopped carrots ½ inch pieces	1 cup chicken stock or water
1 cup chopped celery, ½ inch pieces	2 tsp dried thyme
2 cups diced onions	1 bay leaf
	salt and pepper

Combine all ingredients in a sauce pan and cook over medium-high heat until the carrots are nearly soft. Strain and set aside. Save the broth.

Brown 1 lb. of meat in a little oil or butter. When the meat has lost its raw color remove it from the sauté pan with a slotted spoon and set aside.

Use 2 or 3 TBS of the meat drippings from sauté pan in which the meat was browned. Add 2 TBS of flour to the meat drippings. Whisk the meat drippings and the flour together over moderate heat. Add 1 cup of the stock in which the vegetables were cooked. (See above) Cook over medium heat for 4-5 minutes. Add the cooked vegetables and the browned meat. Season well with salt and pepper.

Fill the pie dish with this mixture and cover with the pie crust. Seal the edges of the crust to the pie plate and bake. Heat the oven to 450 degrees. Place the pie in the middle of the oven. Put a tray or some foil on the rack below in case the pie bubbles over.

After 10 minutes, reduce the heat to 350. Bake for an additional 30 to 40 minutes. The top should be colored and appear dry and flakey.

Lard Crust for Pies

I prefer pie crusts made with lard for these kinds of dishes. The following recipe is from Cooking From Quilt Country by Marsha Adams.

1 cup lard
½ cup hot water

3 cups flour
1 tsp salt

Measure the lard and place it in a metal bowl in a warm spot. Choose a mixing bowl that will accommodate the three cups of flour. Let the lard soften and nearly melt. When the lard has nearly melted, take ½ cup from a pan of boiling water and pour it over the lard. Let the water and lard mixture cool. Stir from time to time.

Measure the flour and add the salt to it.

Add the flour and salt to the mixing bowl with the lard and water. Stir with a fork. When the liquid has been absorbed by the flour change from a fork to a rubber spatula and continue to press the dough together. Form into a ball, wrap in plastic and refrigerate for three or four hours or preferably overnight. You will need only about a third of the dough to cover a 9 inch pie dish.

Dumplings

Every cuisine or culture makes some type of dumplings. Some are dense and heavy others are light and airy. They are served plain or stuffed, large or small. Dumplings can be sweet or savory. Ingredients include some or all of the following: flour, baking powder, yeast, eggs, milk, salt, herbs and mashed potatoes or even cream.

You can use the same chicken preparation for the [pot pie](#) in this traditional Chicken and Dumpling recipe. Do not thicken the broth with flour as directed for the pot pie. This is a traditional American style dumpling recipe:

1 cup flour	1 egg beaten
1 ½ tsp baking powder	6 TBS milk
1 tsp salt	2 TBS minced fresh parsley, fresh sage or dried thyme (optional)
1 TBS butter, cold	

Combine flour, baking powder and salt in a bowl. Cut in the butter with a pastry blender or quickly with the tips of your fingers. When this mixture resembles coarse meal add egg, milk and parsley. Blend but do not over mix. Drop tablespoon sized dumplings on the simmering stew you have prepared. Cover the pot tightly and simmer on medium low for 20 minutes. Do not lift the lid during this cooking time.

Serve the dumplings with the stew or soup in which they were poached. This recipe makes six large dumplings or ten to 12 small dumplings. Often recipes for chicken pot pie or chicken and dumplings suggest the addition of frozen green peas. I think Brussels sprouts, trimmed and quartered can be used instead of frozen peas.

Mac and Cheese

Who would have thought that this humble and inexpensive dish would find its way to restaurant menus and that such a dish would be combined with unusual and sometimes expensive ingredients. Really, lobster mac and cheese? What would those immigrant housewives, who fed their large families, with pasta and cheese?

Nancy Verde Barr wrote of these immigrant families in her book: *They Called in Macaroni*.

The quality of the final product—the dish that comes to the table—is influenced by the kinds of ingredients one uses. Good cheeses contribute most to the flavor. Folding the grated cheeses into a creamy béchamel sauce gives a smooth texture to the product. Cooking the macaroni *al dente* helps give body to the dish.

Season the dish well with salt and pepper. Add freshly grated nutmeg or some dried herbs. Pre-cooked meat or vegetables move mac and cheese from the school cafeteria style we remember to a great eating experience.

When following any recipe keep in mind that there are no absolutes. Do not hesitate to be creative. Omit ingredients or add those that are to your liking. It's your dish, your mac and cheese.

Macaroni and Cheese with Spinach

8 oz macaroni, uncooked
2 ½ cups grated or shredded cheese
¼ cup butter
2 ½ TBS flour
3 cups milk
2 ½ cups grated cheese
Salt and pepper

4 cups, packed, spinach (washed and dried)

Cook the macaroni in boiling salted water. Do not over cook. Keep it *al dente*.

Heat the butter in a heavy bottom sauce pan. Add the flour and whisk these together. Cook for 2-3 minutes. Add the milk. Raise the heat to medium high and cook while whisking for 4-5 minutes. Season with salt and pepper.

Remove the sauce from the heat and fold in the cheese.

In a bowl, combine the cooked macaroni and the cheese sauce. Fold in the chopped uncooked spinach. Pour the mixture into a baking dish. Bake for about 30 minutes in a 350 degree oven.

Optional: Mix ½ cup bread crumb with 2 TBS of very soft butter. Spread the crumbs over the casserole just before baking.