

STUFFED PASTA SHELLS

Serves 6 to 8

By Dennis W. Viau; an original creation.

I made these per a request. All the research I'd done showed stuffings made mostly with ricotta and frozen spinach. Because I could not make the pasta from scratch, I wanted my stuffing to be above average. So I ramped it up with Italian sausage, anchovies, and artichoke hearts for a savory stuffing that benefits from depth of flavors. Delizioso!



Ingredients:

About 25 jumbo pasta shells, more or less depending on the size of the shells (allow extra for breakage)
2 to 3 tablespoons olive oil for frying
1 medium onion (about 5 ounces (142g)); chopped
½ pound (227g) Italian sausage (mild or hot)
2 to 3 anchovy fillets
6 ounces (170g) artichoke hearts; chopped
3 medium cloves garlic; minced or crushed through a garlic press
½ teaspoon dried oregano flakes
16 ounces (454g) fresh spinach; larger stems removed
1 cup (255g) ricotta cheese
1 large egg
¼ cup (28g) grated Parmesan or Romano cheese
⅛ teaspoon ground nutmeg
Optional: ¾ teaspoon red pepper flakes
3 cups (713ml) marinara sauce
8 ounces (227g) shredded mozzarella cheese
For garnish: Finely chopped fresh parsley or basil

Directions:

Heat the oil in a skillet over medium-high heat and add the onion. Sauté the onion, reducing the heat periodically as the moisture cooks off, until it is golden brown, 15 to 20 minutes.

Remove the casings from the sausages and add the meat to the onions, cooking until lightly browned, about 5 minutes. Then add the anchovies, artichokes, garlic, and oregano (and optional red pepper flakes) and cook an additional minute. Let cool a few minutes and then transfer to a large mixing bowl.

Heat about ¼ cup of water to boiling in a large skillet for which you have a cover. Add the spinach and steam over medium heat 1 minute, covered, then turn with tongs and steam for another minute. Transfer the spinach to a colander to drain and cool. When cool enough to handle comfortably, press the spinach between your hands (or use a potato ricer) to squeeze out excess moisture. Chop the spinach.

Combine the cooked spinach, sausage-onion mixture, ricotta, about ⅓ of the mozzarella and Parmesan (or Romano) cheeses, pepper, and nutmeg. Mix and adjust for salt. Add the egg and mix well.

Boil the shells according to package directions. Drain and rinse with cold water. Coat the bottom of a 9x13-inch (23x33cm) baking dish with a few tablespoons of marinara. Spoon stuffing mixture into each pasta shell and arrange in the baking dish. Spoon the remaining marinara on top and garnish with the remaining mozzarella.

Bake, uncovered, at 350°F (175°C) until thoroughly heated, 20 to 25 minutes. Serve.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



Here is my *mise en place* for this recipe. The box of jumbo shells was 12 ounces (340g) and contained 42 shells. Some recipes call for as much as 1 pound (454g). I don't know how large those shells might be. I used only 25 shells in this recipe, but I cooked up the entire package. Some of the shells broke from sticking to the bottom of the pan and then tore when I stirred the boiling shells with a wooden spoon.

2



Caramelizing the onions concentrates the natural sugars for a different flavor. I prefer to use caramelized onions in dishes that benefit from the flavor. Heat the oil in a skillet and sauté the onions until a golden color, 15 to 20 minutes. As the onions cook and moisture is boiled away, you will need to periodically reduce the heat. By the end of the cooking time the heat will be at its lowest setting

3



Remove the casings from the Italian sausages and add the meat to the skillet, breaking it up with a spatula. Sauté until lightly browned, about 5 minutes.

4



Add the anchovy fillets, artichoke hearts, minced garlic, and oregano (and optional red pepper flakes) and sauté an additional minute. Let cool a little and then transfer to a large mixing bowl.

5



Heat about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of water to boiling in a large skillet. Add the spinach and cover. Steam the spinach 1 minute and then turn with tongs. Steam an additional minute. The spinach should be thoroughly wilted.

6



Transfer the cooked spinach to a colander to drain and cool.

7



When the spinach is cool enough to handle, press it between your hand to squeeze out excess moisture. You can also use a potato ricer to do this step. Then chop the spinach coarsely.

8



Here are all my assembled ingredients for the stuffing. I don't have a large shredder; so I cut the mozzarella into small cubes. Only about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the mozzarella goes into the stuffing. The remaining mozzarella will be used to garnish the top before baking.

9



Combine all the stuffing ingredients except the egg (use only about $\frac{1}{3}$ of the mozzarella, setting aside the remainder for garnish later). You want to taste for salt at this step and you might not want to taste it with raw egg. Adjust for salt and then add the egg. Mix thoroughly.

10



Coat the bottom of a large baking dish with a few tablespoons of marinara sauce. Meanwhile, cook the pasta shells according to package directions, drain, and rinse with cold water.

11



Spoon some of the stuffing mixture into each pasta shell and arrange in the baking dish. For the size shells I purchased, 25 were enough for the stuffing I made.

12



Spoon the remaining marinara over the top of the shells and then garnish with the remaining mozzarella cheese. Bake in a 350°F (175°C) oven until thoroughly heated, 20 to 25 minutes. Note: Smaller shells might require a shorter baking time; larger shells might require longer.

13

After baking, I chose to put the dish under the broiler for a minute or two to lightly brown the cheese.

14

For garnish I chose to cut fresh basil leaves into chiffonade. Starting with a large leaf, stack several leaves on top and then roll the bunch into a little roll, like a little green cigar. Then cut very thin slices. Chiffonade is like little threads, whereas I think of julienne as little strings. You could also finely chop fresh Italian parsley for garnish.

15



Plate and serve hot. With 25 shells, I figured 3 per serving.

Conclusion

This recipe was requested by a fan of my web site. I had never made stuffed pasta shells before. Most of the research showed shells stuffed with a mixture of ricotta and spinach. A few included Italian sausage meat. I chose to ramp this recipe up a little by adding chopped artichoke hearts and a few anchovy fillets, both of which added extra depth to the flavor. Although I do not like spicy marinara sauce, which is more common in the Southern Italy, feel free to include a little cayenne or red pepper flakes in your recipe.