

Not
Your Mother's®
Casseroles

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To my husband, Mike,
who so graciously washed a parade of casserole dishes,
and who so ably performed the duties of
first (and best) taste-tester.

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Thanks so much to each and every one of you. As I hope you know, I couldn't have written this book without you.

WHY CASSEROLES?

On any given weeknight, in any given city in the United States (and probably throughout the world) you will find mothers and fathers, grandmothers and young professionals, single college students and newly married couples staring blankly into the refrigerator as they ponder the age-old question: *What should we eat for dinner?*

These days, the answer to this question isn't simple. On the one hand, we *need* to eat quickly—that appointment, soccer practice, or late-night study session won't wait. On the other hand, we *want* to eat fresh food that has some connection to the current season, is grown not too far away from us, and is likely to be good for our bodies.

Old ways of growing and gathering food, as well as eating in rhythm with the seasons (ripe tomatoes from the vine, young chickens from the farm, new eggs and smoked ham, spring peas and summer zucchini), are becoming popular again as urban gardening gains new footing and families look for fresher sources of good food. These are old ways of eating, and we celebrate them.

And yet the old ways are slow ways, and our modern lives have sped up. How do we cook sensible and reasonably fresh food in simple and delicious dishes that still allow us time for other things? How do we nourish our families and find balance in the modern conflict of freshness versus convenience?

One way to resolve this conflict is with a return to the casserole.

Casserole! Like turkey Tetrazzini?

Casserole! That much-maligned word carries connotations of four-day-old turkey, paired unfortunately with mayonnaise and mushy vegetables. Perhaps visions of cream-of-whatever-soups dumped over canned peas and tuna flash in front of your eyes. *Casserole* should signify easy comfort food, but let's face it: It's come to be a bad word in many households.

Let's talk about mine, for instance. I grew up in a huge family, one of eight children. Life was busy and noisy in such a full household, and getting dinner on the table every night was not an easy task for my mother. She often turned to baked dishes that could be mixed up quickly and put in the oven to stew, letting her turn her attention to more pressing things (like arbitrating disagreements among her many children).

And yet my five brothers and two sisters wouldn't have been happy to hear that casserole was on the menu. My mother, being a wise cook, didn't often call her baked dishes *casseroles*. Many favorite dishes at our table were actually casseroles in disguise—Creamy Cheesy Potatoes, for instance, which makes an appearance later in this book.

As I grew up and learned to cook for myself, I rejected the casserole and my mother's baked dishes, too—so old-fashioned and bland! so full of fat and canned ingredients! No thanks.

Life became full. I got a job, got married, got a house, got really busy. Even though cooking was part of my job, I often found myself turning to easy baked pastas and quick one-pot dishes. If I could squeeze my starch, meat, and vegetable into one dish, I was a happy cook.

Then one day I had an epiphany: I had been making casseroles all along!

But I had tools and a range of ingredients that weren't available to my mother 20 years ago. Canned soups were off the ingredient list, and I wanted to bring my favorite flavors and preference for the freshest foods to the one-dish meals I enjoyed so much.

Casseroles had the potential to be easy, delicious, and quick—but I didn't want to make the recipes I grew up with. I also had friends with vegan, vegetarian, and gluten-free eating preferences, and I wondered if casseroles could stretch to accommodate their eating needs as well.

What Is a Casserole?

For the purposes of this book, a casserole is a baked dish. Historically, the category includes classics from around the world like Italian lasagna, Indian rice biryani, French bread panade, American macaroni and cheese, and breakfast favorites such as cherry clafoutis and egg-and-ham bake.

The casserole has its roots in humble peasant meals made by cooks who were using what was near to hand in frugal, thrifty recipes that let nothing go to waste. Constraints of time and money often yield the best kinds of creative cooking, so the wide range of dishes that could be called *casserole* are part of a long history of hearty deliciousness.

The latter half of the twentieth century marred this history with years of too-prepackaged recipes involving chemical-laden canned soups, unearthly combinations of ingredients, and unfortunate preservatives, all in the name of supposed convenience. I wanted to take the casserole back to its roots: a humble baked dish using fresh, readily available ingredients. Casseroles should be among the most welcome and delicious dishes in your repertoire, and they should use what is available to you without giving in to manufacturers' insistence that their products will make your cooking easier.

The casserole is also *easy*. Yes, there are complicated dishes like the French cassoulet and proper Italian lasagna, and these are wonderful indulgences of time and ingredients for special occasions. Putting together an entire lasagna from scratch is incredibly rewarding—not to mention delicious—but it's not something that we all have time for every week.

Most casseroles by their very nature should be frugal dishes you can throw together with minimal advance notice and slide away into the oven to cook. The everyday casserole is a dish that makes you look like a hero when you take out a bubbling pan filled with hot pasta and cheese or sweet cherries and eggy custard.

What Kind of Casseroles Are in This Book?

This book has more than 200 recipes that are designed to extract the maximum goodness from your oven and that also give starchy, too-fatty casseroles the boot. You won't find any canned soups or strange combinations of fake cheese and noodles. Instead, I depend on simple, fresh ingredients and wisely chosen preserved foods to give us easy baked meals.

What you will find are down-to-earth dishes that take advantage of seasonal vegetables, like Summer Vegetable and Fresh Mozzarella Gratin ([\[>\]](#)). There are also super-quick one-dish dinners like Smoked Sausage and Sage Pasta Casserole (page [\[>\]](#)) and vegan recipes like Baked Quinoa with Sweet Potatoes and Almonds (page [\[>\]](#)). The casserole is king of make-ahead breakfasts, so you'll find plenty of breakfast dishes, such as Basic Baked Steel-Cut Oats ([\[>\]](#)) and Savory Bread Pudding with Bacon and Mushrooms (page [\[>\]](#)). You'll also find many updated classics, because I am still secretly fond of that old green bean casserole—although in the version here, the ingredient list is revamped to be friendlier to our bodies. (But it's still delicious, I assure you.)

I've created several fresh interpretations of old-fashioned casseroles, such as an updated tuna casserole with artichoke hearts and capers (and again, no canned soup!), but there's also a healthy selection of recipes here that will teach you that certain dishes and ingredients are, surprisingly, easier and more hands-off in the oven. Even if you bake regularly, you may not realize that your oven holds

hidden potential for cooking many, many things. Did you know, for instance, that rice is foolproof when cooked in the oven? Or dried beans? The modern casserole can be a revelation, not just an easy delicious way to put meals on the table.

Tradition and Improvisation

Classic casseroles, as I mentioned earlier, are often very time- and work-intensive. The traditions of French, British, and Italian cooking have produced some amazing recipes freighted with the weight of hundreds of interpretations and culinary significance. Contrast this with the three-ingredient, canned-mushroom-soup-with-noodles school of American casseroles, and you have two extremes.

My own style tries to strike a balance between these two extremes, in a very improvisational way: You take your own likes and dislikes and the food you have readily available to you, and you bake it into something fresh and delicious. I like cooking that keeps me alert, always testing and changing things. This isn't exclusive to casseroles; I improvise in all my home cooking. And in that improvisation I always hope to find a balance between the solid advice and weight of historic recipes and the quick, corner-cutting recipes of modern convenience.

The writer and cook John Thorne talks about this balance in his deliciously crotchety and entertaining book *Mouth Wide Open* (North Point Press, 2007), where he reviews another casserole cookbook, James Villas's *Crazy for Casseroles* (The Harvard Common Press, 2003).

Villas's book is a deep collection of classic casseroles. He gives us everything from shroups to pandowdies, and it's a great look back at historic American cooking, especially that of the South.

Thorne first talks about his pleasure in the idea of casseroles as a communal sharing, which Villas expresses beautifully in his well-researched book. This sense of communal sharing is also something that convenience foods brought to the table. They made any recipe seem accessible and immediately doable by any new cook; recipes were suddenly able to be shared and disseminated widely without too much personal idiosyncrasy, thanks to standardized ingredients such as canned soups and the test kitchens of big American food corporations.

But while sharing of recipes is, of course, a good thing, Thorne then goes on to talk about his discomfort with the resulting attitude of "convenience food cookery." He writes that "just as the invention of the personal deodorant transformed body odor, until then a mere fact of life, into a universal embarrassment, so could casserole cookery, which impressed cooks with its unthreatening easiness, make the uncertain work of preparing something pleasing from scratch seem rife with potential discomfort. Convenience food cookery frees the cook of responsibility of the dish, and freedom from responsibility is such a delicious experience that it becomes part of the dish itself.... These dishes are not what makes me want to cook."

What does make him want to cook? It's the same thing that makes me want to cook: recipes that get reinvented every time I make them, with a pinch of this or a new way of cooking that. It's dishes, as Thorne puts it, that "demand more from us than to be just thrown together."

It seems to me that an over-slavishness to the historic recipes of the past, as well as to "convenience cookery," loses sight of the real pleasure in cooking: the cook's own responsibility for a dish. This is where the fun lies in cooking the recipes in this book. You try a dish, test, and taste. Maybe you fiddle with the herbs I specify; maybe you want more salt, or no onion, or another type of pasta altogether. Maybe your cupboard is bare of one ingredient so you substitute something else.

This is what these recipes are designed for. They have been tested and tried in my kitchen, but

they are still blank slates for you. You have to take responsibility for your own cooking, which seems a matter of course to most cooks, but it is indeed something that "convenience cookery" takes away.

This book is not a historical treatise on the casserole and its evolution throughout history. You won't find a traditional three-day cassoulet or the most old-fashioned of American hot dishes. The weight of all that history is beautiful, but it's too much for me and my kitchen, and there are several other well-written casserole cookbooks that focus on this sort of recipe. The aforementioned book by James Villas is one, and another is *Bake Until Bubbly*, by Clifford A. Wright (Wiley, 2008). I highly recommend both.

This book, on the other hand, is one that is sometimes inspired by those traditional dishes but also calls for convenience ingredients from time to time. It's primarily a list of dishes that I like to cook and eat, made with ingredients that I enjoy putting together. They come from my improvisation with what is available to me, and I hope they stimulate the same sort of improvisation and creativity in your own kitchen.

My hope is that you discover fresh ways of cooking in your own kitchen and even progress to making up new dishes through cooking some of these recipes. They're not blueprints to be followed to the letter. They are, I hope, inspiration for fresh cooking on your own and templates for recipes that will be re-created in your own kitchen.

Casseroles and Convenience

It's easy to mock those not-so-appealing mixes of canned soup and mushy vegetables, but honestly, they were, and are, very convenient—hence their continuing popularity. I often find labor-intensive casserole recipes to be somewhat beside the point. If you have to slave for two hours creating multiple components for a dish before you even slide it into the oven, then why not just make something quicker on top of the stove?

I have gone out of my way in this book to develop recipes that are truly "mix and bake." Not every recipe is this way; many call for a little sautéed onion and garlic or a pound of cooked pasta. But I have tried to cut out unnecessary or fussy steps wherever possible and to find combinations of ingredients that bake together well. Take the Harvest Mixed-Grain Pilaf with Mushrooms on page [12](#) for instance. It's a mix of mushrooms, wild rice, barley, millet, lentils, and a few other things. And yet they aren't cooked before you put them in the oven; you toss it all together with some hot broth and bake, and, like magic, an hour later you have a healthy, hearty dinner.

I also call for many different kinds of packaged ingredients, but I've strived to do this in a judicious way. Frozen vegetables (I prefer organic ones) are flash-frozen in a way that preserves their freshness well. There's nothing wrong with using frozen peas, spinach, or corn—especially in winter, when finding high-quality fresh vegetables is more difficult and expensive.

Canned low-sodium chicken broth, canned beans and olives, and frozen potato cubes all make appearances, too. But these are still whole foods; they aren't too processed or cooked. For me, they are good compromises between the (sometimes) opposite poles of fresh and quick. By all means, if you have homemade chicken stock, use it! But if you don't, don't let that stop you from cooking a homemade meal. It's fine to substitute a packaged ingredient.

How This Book Is Organized

The recipes are organized by course; you'll find breakfast and dinner recipes, along with plenty of side dishes. But these groupings are fluid; many of the meat dishes can be made in vegetarian versions, and many of the vegetable dishes can accommodate a little meat or double as a main dish. There are recipes in the breakfast chapter that would easily do for a supper main dish, and others that could serve as dessert.

The casserole is often meant to be a one-dish meal, and these recipes reflect that in their flexibility. I encourage you to tweak and improvise! For times when you want something in addition to your casserole, there is also a chapter of quick breads and salads that can be made either ahead of time or while your casserole bakes, so you should be able to put together many meal combinations with these recipes.

Your Cooking Equipment

In my day job as managing editor of a large website on food and cooking, I hear a certain question over and over: What equipment do I need to cook, and what are the essentials for setting up a kitchen? Now, I love fun kitchen gadgets and shiny new tools as much as the next cook. But in the end, I always return to the basics.

Following are the items that I use constantly. You probably have all of the essential tools and baking pans already. If so, great! They are all you really need. I've also included a couple of extremely helpful but not quite as common tools that I use just as often as the recommended essentials.

Your Oven

Obviously, when it comes to casseroles, your oven is the most important piece of equipment in your kitchen. Whether you have a gas or electric oven, and whether you have one with a convection setting or not, the most important accessory for your oven is an oven thermometer.

You can buy an oven thermometer for less than \$5 at the grocery store. Pick one up, hang it in your oven, and always double-check it. Even new ovens are rarely compliant with their thermostats all times. If you install an oven thermometer you can always be sure that your temperature is right. It's cheap and easy, and there's no reason not to do it.

A note on convection cooking: I did not test any of the recipes in this book in a convection oven. If you are so lucky as to have a convection setting on your oven, you can cut down the baking time for some of the recipes. But experimentation in this area is up to you! Let me know it goes.

Essential Tools

These are the basic tools for cooking casseroles, or any other everyday meal, for that matter.

Chef's knife: ~~You really need only one or two good knives. I use a couple of chef's knives, and I have them professionally sharpened at least once a year. A chef's knife, paring knife, and high-quality peeler are the main pieces of cutlery I use.~~

Large wooden cutting board: You'll do a lot of chopping for these recipes, so at least one big cutting board is useful. I prefer wood, especially bamboo for its strength and beauty. A nice wooden cutting board can also double as a cheese platter or serving dish for bread. Plastic cutting boards can go in the dishwasher, so they are convenient in this respect. But a plastic cutting board tends to hold on to germs more tenaciously, and it isn't as aesthetically pleasing as wood.

Metal or Pyrex mixing bowls: I have a few large mixing bowls, and I use them frequently for tossing pasta casseroles and mixing up grain pilafs.

Colander or mesh strainer: Draining pasta and rinsing rice is best done in a large colander or strainer.

Wooden spoons: Where would our kitchens be without a few good wooden spoons for stirring and tasting?

Spatula: Make sure you have at least one spatula for swiping raw ingredients out of bowls into pans.

Whisks: Whisks are good for so many things: beating eggs (although a fork can do this, too) and whisking white sauces smooth, to name just two. I admit to a bit of a whisk addiction; I have many of them, but you really need only one large stiff wire whisk.

Deep sauté pan: Many of the recipes in this book call for cooking a little onion or garlic, then stirring in the rest of the ingredients before pouring it all into a baking dish. It's helpful to have a sauté pan with a flat bottom and high sides for this step. I use a 3-quart pan (about 10 inches across) or, on occasion, a huge 6-quart pan (about 14 inches across). But a 3-quart sauté pan should be sufficient for everything in this book.

Cast-iron skillet: A cast-iron skillet is a great tool for browning meat and caramelizing onions.

Extremely Helpful Tools

Here are two more tools that I highly recommend for everyday use in making casseroles.

Microplane: A basic Microplane is a long, handheld zester and grater that produces fine zest and grated cheese very quickly. I adore my Microplane. It's one of the most-used tools in my kitchen. The book calls for a lot of grated cheese and quite a lot of lemon zest, too. A Microplane is the best tool for both of these.

Benriner mandoline: A mandoline looks like a fussy tool, something you'd see in a Japanese restaurant or French cooking school. Well, you might find this inexpensive slicer in both places, but it should have a spot in your cupboard, too. This razor-sharp slicer slices up potatoes, fennel, onions, carrots, and more in a tiny fraction of the time it would take to do it by hand. It also makes very even and consistent slices, which is important for many of the dishes in the vegetable chapter. The Benriner slicer can be had for less than \$30 online, and I highly recommend it.

Essential Baking Pans

The word *casserole* probably originated from the actual pan used to cook these hot baked dishes, and ~~casserole may still be defined as much by the dish it's baked in as by anything else.~~

Here's a look at the baking pans (casseroles!) that are called for throughout this book. There is a wide array of beautiful casseroles and cooking pots out there, but this list focuses on the basics. Also many recipes mention the approximate liquid capacity of the dishes they call for, to help you substitute other sizes if necessary.

Metal or glass 9 × 13-inch baking dish (3 quarts): The ultimate baking dish, right? It's practically synonymous with the casserole itself, and it's great to have at least two of these. Don't buy flimsy or thin metal pans; they're not worth it. Even heavy, commercial-grade aluminum or stainless steel pans can be found for less than \$20 at cookware shops and restaurant supply stores. Pyrex and ceramic versions are fine, too. It's helpful if they have lids that can be snapped on after baking for easy storage of leftovers.

Glass 8 × 8-inch baking dish (1½ quarts): This is another very common size of baking dish. Pyrex glass dishes in this size often come in a set with a 9 × 13-inch pan.

Metal 9 × 9-inch baking dish (1 quarts):

For some reason, the square glass baking dishes are usually 8 inches square, while commercially available square metal pans are usually slightly larger, at 9 inches square. For the purposes of this cookbook, these two pans are practically interchangeable. Yes, there is a volume difference between the two, so casseroles baked in the smaller pan will be slightly thicker and may take a little longer to bake. If the recipe calls for one size and you have only the other, don't worry about it.

Metal 9-inch round cake pan (2 quarts):

A 9-inch round cake pan can be substituted for an 8-inch or 9-inch square baking dish. I like baking some egg dishes in a round pan, then serving them in wedges. Some tortilla casseroles are also good baked in a round cake or pie pan.

3-quart Dutch oven or other stovetop-to-oven pot with lid: The 3-quart Dutch oven is perhaps my second-most-used pan, after the 9 × 13 workhorse. A good 3-quart Dutch oven with a lid can be used for nearly any casserole in this book, and it's essential for some of the rice and braised meat dishes, where keeping in moisture and heat during cooking is important. I use a Le Creuset Dutch oven, but any enameled cast-iron Dutch oven will do. And of course you can use a regular 3-quart ovenproof stainless-steel pot, too.

5- to 7-quart Dutch oven or other stovetop-to-oven pot with lid: A larger Dutch oven is good for bigger batches of oven stews, baked curries, and a few other dishes. And of course, smaller recipes can be made in here as well. A large Dutch oven can also be used as a pasta pot or to sauté vegetables and onions.

Those are the basics! Are there many, many more pans, pots, and casserole dishes made out of earthenware, cast iron, ceramic, glazed and unglazed porcelain, and stainless steel? Yes. Do you have to assemble a big collection just for these recipes? No. Most will work in a 9 × 13-inch pan or another 3-quart dish.

You can adjust most of these recipes to fit into any dish that is approximately the size called for. Just keep the proportions in mind; a tall, narrow pot will change how the food cooks (that is, more slowly than in a very wide and shallow dish). This is common sense, though; don't be afraid to make changes and use your ingenuity and whatever baking dishes you have on hand. One favorite trick of mine is to mix up everything I need for a casserole in my 3-quart ovenproof sauté pan, then clap the lid on and put the whole thing in the oven.

Having said all those sensible and practical things, I do need to add one note. The casserole dish has always been something intended to go from oven to table. (And sometimes from fridge to stove to oven to table, then back to the fridge, the microwave, and the table again.) So the dishes I reach for

first are often the most beautiful ones I own. Clay and earthenware have the edge here; clay pots such as those found at the clay cookware shop Bram in Sonoma, California (bramcookware.com), are really beautiful, with organic shapes and a porous material that some say helps the food taste even better.

So, I do believe that aesthetics can be important in casserole dishes. When you can, buy things that you feel are beautiful. I have one heavy stoneware lasagna pan decorated with delicate curls and swoops; it was made by hand in South Africa, and I treasure it. Everything I bake in it seems just a little extra-special.

Your Pantry

Chefs and cookbook authors can exhort us to eat fresh, local, and seasonal foods, but it all starts to sound a little wearying after a while—especially in the dead of winter in the Midwest, where I live. I do garden, I love finding local farmers, and I have a favorite local dairy that I adore. But in the end, in the real world, my daily cooking is made up of a mix of compromises.

There are the eggs from a small farm in a suburb of my city, and then there is the frozen corn from a big agricultural conglomerate. There's the meat from the butcher up the street, who raises his own goats and beef cattle, and then there are the cans of diced tomatoes from Mexico.

Our pantries are all made up of such decisions and compromises formed around our own priorities and budgets. The ingredients that I recommend in these recipes reflect that. I try not to be overly controlling about ingredients (use this brand of chicken stock or that specific sort of cinnamon), but there are a few things that I think will really strengthen your cooking, and this book's recipes depend upon those things.

Here's a look at some of the most common ingredients in these recipes and my thoughts about each of them.

Pantry Essentials and Helpers

Salt: What's more essential than salt? Unless otherwise specified, I mean fine table salt. Chunky kosher salt and flaky sea salt are best for finishing dishes, not seasoning them directly before cooking.

Pepper: Freshly ground pepper gives great flavor, so make sure you have a pepper grinder filled with whole peppercorns. I assume, in these recipes, that you can eyeball pepper quantities; I generally direct you to add pepper to taste. If you are uncomfortable with this, or do not use a pepper grinder, then start with teaspoon of ground pepper and work up from there. You can always add more seasoning to a finished dish.

Olive oil: When I specify olive oil in this book, I generally mean extra-virgin olive oil. But honestly, if you have another sort of olive oil and don't have any extra-virgin around, use what you've got.

Butter: I do not call for great amounts of butter, but when I do, I mean unsalted butter.

Nonstick cooking spray: I use a basic cooking spray to grease many of my casserole dishes. It's even better to get a small spray bottle, fill it with your olive oil or canola oil of choice, and use it for lightly greasing pots and pans.

Onions and garlic: The holy duo of the kitchen! There are many, many onions in these recipes,

and you can use any sort you like. I use inexpensive white onions and small Spanish onions, which are quite pungent, although sometimes I call for yellow or red. With fresh garlic, I usually use fresh cloves from whole heads. But one of my own private compromises is peeled garlic cloves, which you can buy in tubs at the grocery store. I love these, and I find that in stews and oven-baked dishes, the difference in flavor between these and freshly peeled garlic is minimal.

Spices: It's always helpful to check and make sure your spices are fresh, as they really do lose their flavor quickly. One spice that you may not be familiar with and that I call for frequently is smoked paprika. Smoked paprika isn't any spicier than its more familiar sweet cousin, but it does have an incredible depth of smokiness that permeates anything you add it to. It's not too assertive but still very important in many of the dishes in this book. It's worth seeking out!

Fresh herbs: Many of the casseroles in this book call for fresh herbs. Using fresh herbs is one of the single most effective (and inexpensive) ways to make your cooking more bright and flavorful. I do not recommend substituting dried herbs for fresh, although, as I've said elsewhere, these recipes are just templates for you to experiment with, and if all you have available are dried herbs, go for it.

Eggs: Unless otherwise specified, use large eggs. But once again (sense a theme?), if you have small eggs, medium eggs, or extra-large eggs, put them in. Try them. It will all probably turn out just fine.

Meat: Meat is the one ingredient I am very picky about. If you can find a good local source of meat that's been raised and butchered humanely, then buy that; it's worth the higher price tag. I prefer using a smaller quantity of better quality meat.

Frozen vegetables: Frozen peas, spinach, corn, potatoes, and artichoke hearts all make appearances here.

Canned low-sodium broth: Many recipes in this book call for chicken, vegetable, or beef broth. Of course it would be wonderful if we all had freezers full of homemade broth and stock, but good-quality canned or aseptically packaged broth is a perfectly acceptable convenience in baked casseroles. Look for organic broth, though; it does make a difference in taste here. Also, always choose low-sodium broth; the alternatives are far too salty and are often inferior in taste and quality to their lower-sodium counterparts.

Make-Ahead: Preparing and Storing Unbaked Casseroles

Many of the casseroles in this book can be prepared up to the baking stage, then refrigerated until you are ready to bake them. I prefer to let a refrigerated, unbaked casserole come to room temperature before baking. A chilled casserole may still require up to 15 additional minutes to bake, though. When I note that a casserole can be refrigerated before baking, assume that you need to pay a little extra attention to the bake time. If you have refrigerated a casserole, then be prepared to let it cook a little longer and to check it carefully before you take it out of the oven. But keep in mind, too, that a refrigerated casserole will not always take too much longer to bake, and some will still bake up in the usual amount of time, especially if they're brought to room temperature before baking.

You can always double-check a casserole's status by inserting a table knife in the center near the end of the bake time. If the knife comes out feeling lukewarm or cold, then the casserole is definitely not ready yet.

Some casseroles are particularly well suited to this make-ahead, bake-later treatment. I've tried to note those in the instructions where appropriate.

Some casseroles can be prepared and then frozen before baking. The more moisture a casserole has, the better it will freeze. ~~The rule of thumb says to avoid freezing potatoes, rice, and pasta,~~ although I have frozen and then baked some pasta dishes (especially lasagna) with particular success. Other things to avoid freezing are milk, tofu, and all-vegetable dishes. The best casseroles to freeze are stews and meat dishes, as well as some fruit desserts. To bake, thaw an unbaked casserole in the refrigerator overnight, let it come to room temperature, then bake as directed in the recipe.

Overall, it's best to freeze unbaked casseroles rather than cooked ones, although I do freeze some baked leftovers, especially stews and braised meats. To reheat leftovers, frozen or not, bake covered at a slightly lower temperature than the original recipe called for until heated through.

Happy Casseroles!

Whether you call it a tian, a biryani, an oven stew, a gratin, or a casserole, these baked dishes are a return to classic, thrifty cooking, while at the same time recognizing that we still want to eat fresh, contemporary foods. This is not your mother's casserole book, but I bet she'd find a lot to like in here.

My goal is to help you cook fresher, cook more often, and discover that nourishing your family and yourself through the classic dish called the casserole is easier than you ever imagined.

BAKED FOR BREAKFAST

- Plum Spice Clafouti • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Buttermilk Pancakes • [\[>\]](#)
- German Apple Pancake • [\[>\]](#)
- Prune and Ricotta Oatmeal Breakfast Pudding • [\[>\]](#)
- Oat and Raisin Breakfast Bars • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Oatmeal with Raisins and Pecans • [\[>\]](#)
- Basic Baked Steel-Cut Oats • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Steel-Cut Oats with Dried Fruit, Coconut, and Spices • [\[>\]](#)
- Savory Baked Oats with Scallions and Turkey Bacon • [\[>\]](#)
- Breakfast Barley with Pistachios and Dried Apricots • [\[>\]](#)
- Basic Baked Polenta with Maple Syrup • [\[>\]](#)
- Polenta Bake with Ham, Tomatoes, and Eggs • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Cheesy Chile Grits • [\[>\]](#)
- Breakfast Brown Rice with Blueberries and Almonds • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Basmati Rice with Saffron, Cashews, and Raisins • [\[>\]](#)
- Breakfast Fruit with Granola Streusel • [\[>\]](#)
- Savory Bread Pudding with Bacon and Mushrooms • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Croque Madame with Ham and Cheese • [\[>\]](#)
- Flaky Almond Croissant Bake • [\[>\]](#)
- Lemon Brioche French Toast • [\[>\]](#)
- Autumn Fruit Strata with Apples, Pears, and Raisins • [\[>\]](#)
- Whole-Grain Almond-Apricot Bread Pudding • [\[>\]](#)
- Cinnamon Roll Breakfast Bake • [\[>\]](#)
- Summer Egg and Potato Breakfast Bake • [\[>\]](#)
- Gruyère and Spinach Egg Puff • [\[>\]](#)
- Smoky Baked Hash Browns • [\[>\]](#)
- Herbed Egg White, Zucchini, and Potato Skillet • [\[>\]](#)
- Basic Oven Omelet • [\[>\]](#)
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- Eggs en Cocotte with Cream, Thyme, and Prosciutto • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Scrambled Eggs for a Crowd • [\[>\]](#)
- Bacon and Lentils with Egg • [\[>\]](#)
- Sweet Potato Hash with Eggs, Turkey Bacon, and Red Peppers • [\[>\]](#)
- Herbed Egg and Bacon Quiche • [\[>\]](#)
- Egg and Tortilla Casserole • [\[>\]](#)
- Baked Huevos Rancheros • [\[>\]](#)
- Oven Breakfast Burritos with Chorizo and Beans • [\[>\]](#)

In my household, breakfast is essential. We never skip breakfast; it fuels the whole day! This chapter gives you lots of options for starting your day well. Nearly every recipe can be prepared the night

before and baked in the morning. Many of these dishes make great leftovers and reheat well, too, so breakfast the next day is even easier.

The oven is surprisingly effective at making extra-delicious hot cereal—it's easy to make pearly chewy, steel-cut oatmeal with dried fruit and spices (see [Baked Steel-Cut Oats with Dried Fruit, Coconut, and Spices](#), [\[>\]](#)) or hearty barley with Persian flavors ([Breakfast Barley with Pistachios and Dried Apricots](#), page [\[>\]](#)). These baked cereals also reheat beautifully! I often make a big pan and refrigerate the leftovers.

The oven is also my favorite tool for making easy eggs that please everyone. Try the [Summer Egg and Potato Breakfast Bake](#) ([\[>\]](#)) for a delicious vegetarian casserole that comes together in less than an hour, or the [Herbed Egg and Bacon Quiche](#) (page [\[>\]](#)) for a rich pie that just gets better the next day.

And then there are bread, fruit, and sweet casseroles layered and baked with milk and eggs. Some of these are special-occasion treats, like the sweet and nutty [Flaky Almond Croissant Bake](#) ([\[>\]](#)) or the incredibly delicious [Cinnamon Roll Breakfast Bake](#) ([\[>\]](#)). Others are simpler and more suited to a weekday breakfast, like the [Whole-Grain Almond-Apricot Bread Pudding](#) (page [\[>\]](#)).

Plum Spice Clafouti

HAVE YOU EVER HAD A CLAFOUTI? Sometimes it's called a German pancake, or a *flognarde*, or a Dutch baby. It's an eggy pancake batter poured over fruit, usually in a hot skillet with a little butter, and then baked until golden and puffy—deliciously crispy on top and custard-soft underneath. It's a very easy oven breakfast, and it's even better with a dusting of confectioners' sugar. This recipe is particularly good with the small Italian prune plums that appear in late summer and early fall, although you can make it with any sort of plum. Cherries are another traditional choice. • *Serves 4 to 6*

CASSEROLE DISH: 10-inch cast-iron skillet

BAKE TIME: About 1 hour

¼ cup (½ stick) unsalted butter, softened
1 pound prune plums (or regular red or black plums)
1½ cups milk
4 large eggs
¾ cup all-purpose flour
¼ cup sugar
1 teaspoon Chinese five-spice powder
½ teaspoon ground nutmeg
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1 teaspoon salt
Zest of ½ orange
Confectioners' sugar, for serving

1. Preheat the oven to 350°F. Smear the butter in the cast-iron skillet, buttering it all the way up the sides.
2. Cut each prune plum in half and remove the pit. (If you are using red or black plums, which are larger, cut each pitted plum into quarters.) Set aside.
3. Beat the milk and eggs thoroughly in a large bowl. Sift the flour, sugar, five-spice powder, nutmeg, cinnamon, and salt into another bowl, and beat the mixture with a whisk or beaters into the milk and eggs until smooth, without any lumps. Beat in the orange zest. Pour about one-third of the batter into the buttered cast-iron pan. Cook over a medium-hot burner just until set, about 10 minutes. Remove from the heat.
4. Arrange the sliced plums on the cooked batter in a spiral pattern. Pour the remaining two-thirds of the batter over the top and bake until puffed and firm, about 1 hour.
5. Let cool on a rack for at least 15 minutes before serving. Dust with confectioners' sugar just before serving.

Variation: Prunes are also very good in this clafouti. If you want to plump them up a little, soak them in hot water or orange juice, draining the liquid before adding them to the batter.

Baked Buttermilk Pancakes

THIS IS A TRUE AMERICAN PANCAKE. A true American pancake, that is, without all the hassle of pouring, flipping, and griddles. It's just a pancake batter baked in the oven, and it's much easier than flipping pancakes for a crowd! But you don't have to forego the maple syrup; serve this in long strips with real maple syrup, warmed up in the microwave. • *Serves 4*

CASSEROLE DISH: 10½ × 15½-inch jelly-roll pan

BAKE TIME: 15 minutes

1 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon baking powder
½ teaspoon baking soda
½ teaspoon salt
2 tablespoons sugar
1 large egg, beaten
1½ cups buttermilk
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
3 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted
Pure maple syrup, for serving

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Lightly spray the pan with nonstick cooking spray.
2. Whisk together the flour, baking powder, baking soda, salt, and sugar in a medium-size bowl. Add the egg, buttermilk, vanilla, and butter. Whisk to combine. Do not overmix; the batter will have small lumps.
3. Pour into the prepared pan. Bake for 15 minutes, or until light golden brown and firmly set.
4. Slice into long strips and serve hot, with warm maple syrup.

Variations: Mix a handful of fresh blueberries into the batter, or sprinkle the top of the unbaked pancake with sugar mixed with cinnamon. Or delight the kids by using cookie cutters to cut fun shapes out of the hot baked pancake.

Use the Good Stuff

Pure maple syrup is an essential at the breakfast table. A little goes a long way, since it has much more flavor than the imitation stuff. Yes, it's more expensive, but it tastes so much better. A small bottle will last longer than a larger quantity of the imitation, too-sweet syrups. You can also look for the new combinations of agave and maple syrups, which are still all-natural but a little less expensive.

German Apple Pancake

THE SUBLIME AND DELICIOUS German apple pancake recipe comes from my friend Jennie and her family. It's a classic breakfast dish for them, and it was even instrumental in her parents' courtship. You'll fall in love, too, when you try it. It's similar to the plum clafouti on [\[>\]](#), but the tender apples and sweet cinnamon sugar give this its own irresistible quality. • Serves 4

CASSEROLE DISH: 9-inch square baking dish

BAKE TIME: About 20 minutes

2
or
3
4
1
½
⅓
½
5
⅓
¼
1
½
tart apples
tablespoons granulated sugar
teaspoon ground cinnamon
teaspoon ground ginger
cup unsalted butter
cup brown sugar
large eggs
cup all-purpose flour
teaspoon salt
cup milk
teaspoon vanilla extract

FOR THE CINNAMON SUGAR:

⅓
1
cup granulated sugar
tablespoon ground cinnamon

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F. Peel and slice the apples; you should have about 3 cups. Mix 3 tablespoons of the granulated sugar, the cinnamon, and the ginger in a small bowl and set aside.
2. Put the butter in the baking dish and put it in the oven for 2 minutes to melt. Take it out and tilt the pan to coat the bottom and sides with melted butter. Add the brown sugar to the butter in the bottom of the pan. Spread the apples on top of the sugar and sprinkle the spice-sugar mixture over the apples. Put the pan back in the oven so the apples will start cooking.
3. In a large bowl, beat the eggs with a whisk until foamy. Add the flour, salt, and remaining 1 tablespoon of granulated sugar, whisking constantly, and then add the milk and vanilla. Beat just until smooth. There may still be a few small lumps of flour; this is okay.
4. Carefully take the pan out of the oven and pour the batter over the apples. Bake for about 20 minutes, or until the center is set and the sides are lightly browned. If the top browns before the center sets, tent with foil for the duration of the baking. The pancake will puff up dramatically but fall after you take it out of the oven.
5. Let cool for at least 15 minutes before serving. Whisk together the sugar and ground cinnamon, and sprinkle over the dish just before serving.

Variation: You can easily double this recipe for a bigger breakfast crowd or to have leftovers.

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