

Manicotti improved by using fresh lasagna noodles

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When I first started throwing dinner parties on next-to-nothing budgets and with kitchen skills to match, spaghetti with tomato sauce was my go-to main course. Cheap and easy.

But if I'd had the courage to try new things, I'd have attempted a baked pasta — lasagna, manicotti or stuffed shells. Despite my past trepidation, I've learned these are easy to make, and look impressive on the plate.

Manicotti is my favorite, mainly because the large, long pasta tubes stuffed with a ricotta cheese-based filling are delicious and easy to eat. They also lend themselves to variations, such as meat- or vegetable-based fillings.

Manicotti can be purchased in the dry pasta aisle of the grocer, but it's not my preferred approach. Too often you get a box of broken pasta pieces. Also, filling the tubes can be a pain.

A better option is to buy fresh lasagna sheets that can be cut to size, then rolled around the filling to form tubes.

To do this, cut the pasta sheets into 4 1/2- or 5-inch squares, depending on noodle size. Add the squares to boiling water and cook until tender, about 5 minutes.

To make the manicotti, spread about 1/4 cup of filling along one edge of each pasta square. Roll the pasta tightly around the filling, then place each seam down in the pan and cover with marinara.

Since not everyone will be able to find fresh lasagna noodles, this recipe is written for dry manicotti tubes, which are widely available. If you are lucky enough to find (or are industrious enough to make) fresh lasagna, use the above method. You will need about 1 pound of fresh lasagna noodles.

The best way to get around the challenges of filling dry manicotti is to place the cheese mixture in a plastic bag, snip off one corner and inject, or pipe, it into the pasta.

Once the manicotti are filled, it's time to apply the cheese. And there's nothing worse than dense cheese globs on top of your pasta.

Use a light touch when sprinkling the cheese. Spread the cheese by moving your hand over the top of the dish as you sprinkle, creating an even layer. The goal is have a fluffy cheese topping so air can circulate through the cheese when you uncover the dish for the final minutes. This will give you a golden gratin on top instead of a burnt layer.

One of the real bonuses of baked pasta is that it reheats well. When you're ready to go for seconds, just add a light layer of sauce and cover.

Spinach and Ricotta Manicotti

Start to finish: 1 hour 20 minutes (40 minutes active)

Servings: 6

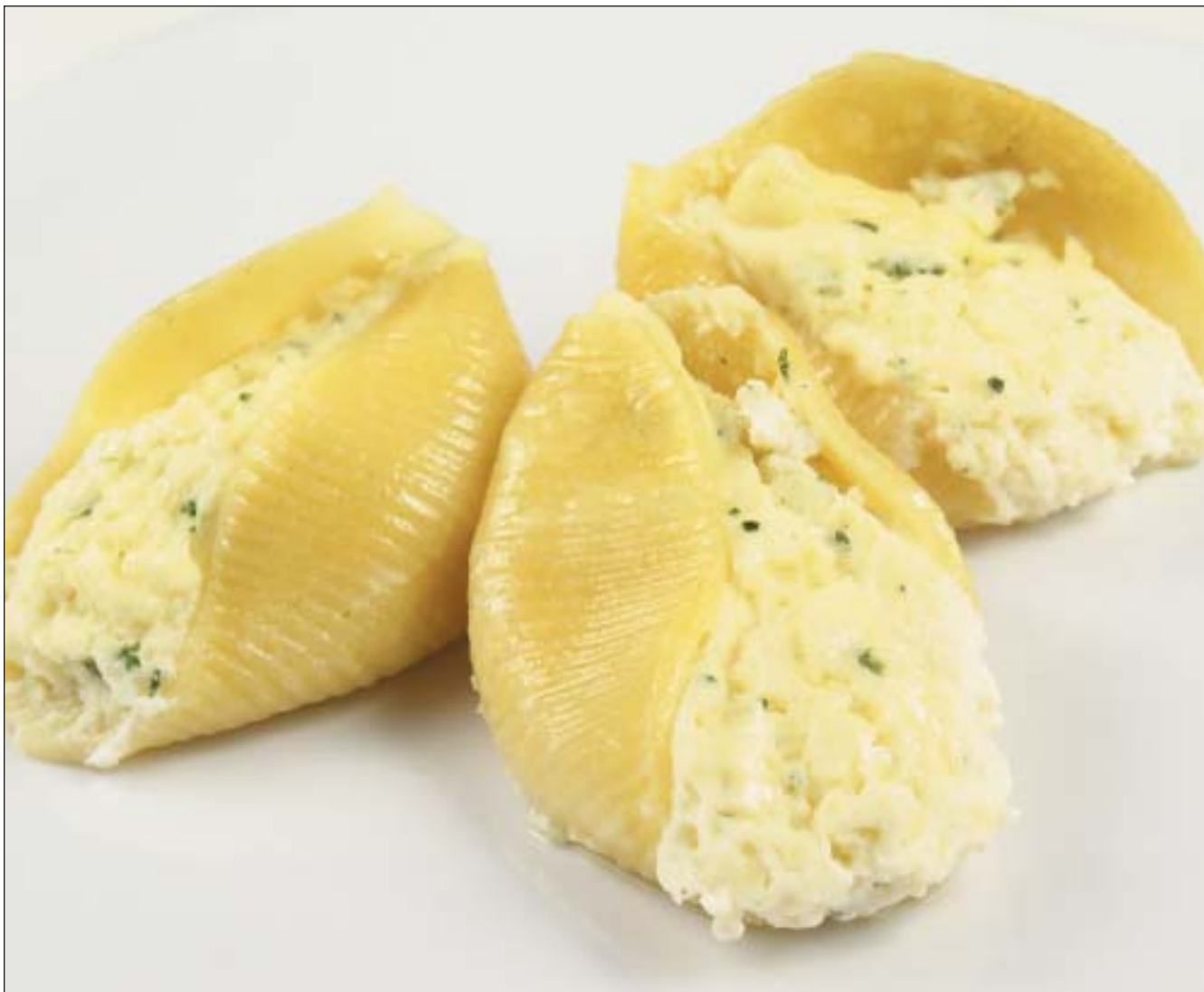
12 ounces fresh mozzarella cheese, divided

10 ounces chopped frozen spinach, thawed

2 cups part-skim ricotta cheese

2 egg yolks

1 cup grated pecorino cheese



Spinach and Ricotta Manicotti comes together quickly. The fresh filling can easily be inserted in different types of pasta like the shells pictured here.

Galley

1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh parsley
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, to taste
8-ounce box manicotti pasta tubes (about 14 tubes)
1/2 tablespoon butter
4 cups marinara

Preheat the oven to 375 F.

Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil.

Meanwhile, dice about a quarter of the mozzarella into small cubes, enough to produce about a cup. Place the diced cheese in a large bowl. Set aside. Cut the remaining mozzarella into 1/4-inch-thick slices. Set aside.

Place the thawed spinach at the center of a kitchen towel, then wrap the towel around it and squeeze it tightly over the sink to remove excess water. Continue squeezing until no more water runs out.

Unwrap the spinach and coarsely chop. Add to the

bowl of cheese, then add the ricotta cheese, egg yolks, 1/2 cup each of the pecorino and Parmesan cheeses, parsley, and salt and pepper. Mix well and set aside.

Carefully add the pasta to the boiling water and cook according to package directions, or until cooked but still firm. Drain and arrange the cooked manicotti on a moist kitchen towel to prevent sticking.

Use the butter to lightly coat the bottom and sides of a 9-by-13-inch or larger baking dish. Spread 1 cup of the marinara over the bottom.

Transfer the cheese and spinach mixture to a large zip-close plastic bag, and shut. Use scissors to snip off one corner of the bag, creating a hole about 1/2 inch around.

One at a time, hold each manicotti in one hand. Place the open corner of the plastic bag into one end of the manicotti and gently squeeze to fill the tube with cheese. Rotate the manicotti and fill the other side.

Arrange the filled manicotti in the prepared pan. They should be close, but not touching.

Spread the remaining sauce over the manicotti. Arrange the slice mozzarella over the manicotti, then

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