

## THE HUMBLE CASSEROLE!

Step away from the sous-vide machine and microwave. It's time to embrace the casserole, that oven-baked creation, and give it the respect it deserves.

Its legacy is rich, having sustained humans for centuries — no, not the green bean casserole your granny made in the '60s but some of the culinary world's greatest hits: the pork, sausage and bean cassoulet from France, eggplant and lamb moussaka from Greece and that curly pasta, cheese and sauce lasagna from Italy.

They may not be called casseroles, but they are. That, perhaps, is where the confusion comes in, for the word casserole refers not only to a prepared dish but to the cooking vessel as well.

"There are two histories of casseroles. There's a medieval history and the modern history. The modern history really begins in America," says Clifford A. Wright, author of "Bake Until Bubbly: The Ultimate Casserole Cookbook" and "Hot & Cheesy."

"Casserole the cooking vessel, which we usually think of as being rectangular and ceramic, really began to take off in the late 19th century," Wright says. That was thanks to various potteries that were producing a variety of ceramic casseroles that worked well in ovens, coinciding with a time when in-home ovens were becoming more common in America.

Their history reflects our history, helping us stretch foods during tough times (world wars, economic depressions) and incorporating scientific advances (ceramic bakeware, canned foods, frozen foods), Wright notes. They joined us at potlucks and church suppers. Every region in America has one. They show up in movies, TV shows and on YouTube in musical homages. Many have colorful names: Strata. Supper. Supremes. Delights. Hottish. "There's one called ham medley," Wright says. "It's made of chicken on the bone, with onion, béchamel sauce, ham and Swiss cheese."

He remembers a casserole his mother made in the '50s. "It was the simplest thing in the world. It was just frankfurters, beer and sauerkraut."

Casseroles proved to be time savers, versatile and very economical for home cooks. Yet, Wright points out, in all those early 20th-century cookbooks or magazines deliciousness or taste was never an issue as long as you get it on the table quickly. "Taste didn't matter because it wasn't about taste. Now they're starting to have a good name because people are starting to pay a lot more attention to food."

### **Build a better casserole**

A well-made casserole often features a mix of textures, sometimes colors and a nice amount of browning, adding another dimension of flavor with that caramelizing. There are some guidelines for building a good one.

First you need to decide its purpose.

Perhaps it's simply a side dish, say a green bean or cauliflower casserole.

"If you're making a casserole as a one-pot dish, in other words, you want to feed your family and you only want to cook one thing — the casserole — then you're going to want some protein, some starch and some vegetable," Wright says.

"You want to pay attention to two things. One, is it balanced and do all the foods in it cook, more or less, at the same time? Let's say you have cubes of potatoes. What are the things that can go in the casserole that will cook in the same amount of time that it takes the potatoes to cook?" asks Wright. "You might want to use pork tenderloin, for example, rather than pork shoulder because it will take about the same amount of time as the potatoes.

"The other thing you've got to remember is it's got to have some kind of moisture to it. If the food itself is not emitting the moisture, what is the moisture going to be? Is it going to be a broth or a little sauce? And then you've got to decide how healthy it should be," Wright adds. "Are you going to put a béchamel or Mornay sauce on top? Sure, makes it delicious but maybe you don't want that much cream and cheese. So, you adjust it."

Betty Rosbottom's "Sunday Casseroles: Complete Comfort in One Dish" (Chronicle Books, \$24.95) covers a vast array of recipes, a cassoulet rapide to a turkey and corn tortilla matchup

and a baked French toast with apples, apricots and cherries morning dish. As she notes in her book's intro: "A good marriage is like a casserole; only those responsible for it really know what goes into it" — Anonymous.

Among her casserole tips:

- Shallower dishes tend to cook more quickly than deeper ones.
- Unless there's a lot of braising liquid, butter or oil baking dishes to prevent food from sticking.
- Creamy cheeses that melt easily can be used instead of white or cheese sauces; Gorgonzola and mascarpone are good stand-ins.
- When cooking pasta for casseroles, make sure to season the water with salt, but do not add oil to the pasta water or rinse the drained cooked pasta — both will prevent sauces from adhering to the pasta.
- In addition, or in place of breadcrumb toppings, use toasted nuts (such as almonds, walnuts, pecans).

### **Great moments in casserole history**

**1913:** Pyrex breaks into cookware. Bessie Littleton needed to bake a cake, but her casserole dish was broken. She asked her Corning Glass Works scientist husband to bring home some glass to use instead. He brought her the sawed-off bottoms of some battery jars. And thus, Pyrex, the glass cookware company, was born.

**1943:** Spot the silver-lidded casserole dish in Norman Rockwell's classic Thanksgiving family dinner "Freedom from Want" painting.

**1940s:** Eugenia Japp urges husband Leonard (who founded Jay's Potato Chips) to put a recipe on the chip bags. He used her version of a tuna fish casserole topped with crushed potato chips.

**1947:** Harry S. Truman asks Americans to help post-war recovery in Europe through "Meatless Tuesdays" and other efforts in his "Food Conservation Speech." Wife Bess created a casserole recipe (yet another tuna, this one with noodles) as a tasty alternative.

**1955:** Green bean casserole is born. Campbell Soup Co.'s Dorcas Reilly wanted to create a quick and easy recipe using two common items in American kitchens: green beans and Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup.

**1994:** Lasagna stars in the TV show "Friends" when Rachel (Jennifer Aniston) loses Barry's engagement ring in Monica's ([Courteney Cox](#)) lasagna in "The One with the Sonogram at the End."

**2011:** A CorningWare casserole dish with its blue cornflower design sits in the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History, donated that year by Mrs. Anne L. Bernat, who received a set for her 1967 wedding.

**2012:** "Cheesecake Casserole" — the movie. Four friends come together on the weekend before college graduation and make a cheesecake casserole. A lot has changed since they met freshmen year, and the girls worry if their friendship will keep them together for years to come.

SOURCES: [Campbellkitchen.com](#); [Internet Movie Database](#); [Norman Rockwell Museum \(NRM.org\)](#); [National Park Service Museum Collections: Harry S. Truman \(cr.nps.gov\)](#); [Pyrexware.com](#); [Smithsonian](#).

Compiled by Jane Chapman, Perry County

## Brief History of the Green Bean Casserole



Brian Hagiwara/Getty

Few dishes are as iconic as the **green bean casserole**. Whenever it's mentioned, everyone pictures the exact same thing: Green beans smothered in a white mushroom "gravy," and topped with a merry wreath of crunchy onions.

In its original form, green bean casserole (or GBC, for short) was made with canned green beans, Campbell's canned condensed cream of mushroom soup, and French's fried onions, so it's not surprising that this dish was invented in the Campbell Soup test kitchen in 1955, the heyday of canned convenience.

I dove into the *Good Housekeeping* archives to see what I could dig up about *GH's* relationship with this classic dish, but, surprisingly, I couldn't find a single mention from the mid-50s. It finally popped up in the 1967 edition of *The Good Housekeeping Casserole Cookery* cookbook where it was called, "Beans Très Bien" (ooh la la!). I was almost fooled for a second by its title upgrade, but one glance at the ingredient list told the real story.

Five years later in the 1972 edition of the *Good Housekeeping Cookbook*, it got a more straightforward name: "Green-Bean-and-Onion Casserole." This recipe jazzed things up with chopped pimentos and bacon, and swapped out the condensed cream soup for sour cream.

Here's photo history (and recipes!) of some of more recent versions of the dish:



In the '90s, GBC became a Thanksgiving staple in the magazine. The 1997 recipe really shook things up with *fresh* green beans (imagine that!) and *fresh* mushrooms that are sautéed with shallots and finished with a light cream. Nary a French-fried onion in sight!

**2008**



Kate Mathis

Then two **healthier versions** appeared in 2001 and 2008, calling for cornstarch and skim milk for the sauce.

2009



Kate Mathis

In 2009, we got really wild by **adding Parmesan and nutmeg to the mix** and mimicking the crunch of the canned fried onions with sautéed shallots mixed with toasted breadcrumbs.

2010



Kate Sears

The year after that, we **stretched our mushroom wings** and called for somewhat more exotic and pricier creminis and shiitakes in lieu of white buttons, but left out the creamy element altogether.



2012



Kate Mathis

In 2012, we decided to push our readers a little outside their comfort zones by giving **directions** for a proper roux-thickened sauce as the base of the mushroom "gravy," but brought back the pre-fried onions, just for funsies.

2014



John Kernick

And here we are now, in 2014. Our **latest incarnation** is my favorite one yet and is probably the biggest departure from the original, although we stood on the shoulders of all the versions that came before it.

We've replaced the creamy mushroom soup sauce with an über-cheesy béchamel (thickened with cornstarch à la 2001) and nixed the French-fried onions in favor of



chopped fresh green onions tossed with breadcrumbs (similar to 2009). And why the Parmesan and cheddar? Um, do you even have to ask?

*Sherry Rujikarn is the assistant food editor in the Good Housekeeping Test Kitchen.*

*Photos: Brian Hagiwara/Getty, Kate Mathis, Kate Sears, John Kerni:*

## **A Brief History of the Tuna Casserole**

People are either hot or cold when it comes to tuna casseroles, you like it or you don't. Helen Evans Brown, a cookbook author back in 1952, defiantly left the tuna casseroles out of her cookbooks. Ms. Brown writes, "If, for instance, a dish composed of tuna fish, canned mushroom soup, and corn flakes is in any danger on becoming a dish of the region, I prefer to ignore it. If by doing so I can give it an ever so gentle nudge toward oblivion, that is good." Later in 1955 another cookbook author included a modified recipe for tuna casserole in cookbook.

Although mainly associated with Middle America, and the 1950's housewife, the tuna casserole recipes actually appeared twenty years earlier in the Pacific Northwest. Mrs. W.F.S. had the first recipe entitled "Noodles and Tuna Fish en Casserole" printed in a magazine back in 1930. *The Modern Hospital* magazine, that same year, suggested "noodles and tuna fish casserole" appear on all hospital menus. It appeared in their publication from 1913 to 1974.

Mrs. W.F.S.'s groundbreaking recipe included mushrooms and cheese topping familiar today. The addition of mushrooms came later probably due to the widespread switch to canned cream of mushroom soup in lieu of the white sauce. In 1934, Campbell Soup Company introduced cream of mushroom soup and this pretty well cemented tuna casserole in the American housewife's culinary arsenal.

After the war, tuna casserole remained in the meal rotation of the American housewife and became associated with funerals and the Midwest rather than the Pacific Northwest. The tuna casserole contains the protein, vegetable, a starch, and a creamy binder as well as being economical and a time saver! It has all the legitimate elements to be labeled a "comfort food"; bouncy noodles, flakes of tuna, sweet crunchy peas, and a savory white sauce to bind it together.

### **How to freeze your favorite casserole**

Casseroles can be frozen in different sizes to provide meals suitable for different numbers of people.



### Frozen casserole in aluminum foil | Photo by Jeannie Nichols

Freezing casseroles is easy and economical. Always start with the best quality ingredients so that you end up with a high-quality casserole.

Casserole ingredients can be frozen or a casserole can be frozen after it is cooked. A casserole made from defrosted ingredients will produce a better-quality meal than reheating a frozen casserole that was cooked previously.

Not all ingredients can be frozen so make sure you choose a recipe that includes foods that freeze well. Here is a list of some common foods that might be used in casseroles that do not freeze well:

- Vegetables with high water content like cucumbers and lettuce
- Mayonnaise, salad dressing and cream
- Milk-based sauces

You can freeze casseroles in a pan but you must remember that the pan will be out of use for other recipes while it is in the freezer. If you want to be able to keep your pan available for other meals, [Michigan State University Extension](#) suggests trying the method outlined below.

### **How to freeze a casserole without a pan in six easy steps:**

1. Line your pan with heavy-duty aluminum foil.
2. Leave extra foil hanging over all edges so that you can pull it completely over the top later.
3. Place the food in the pan and then put the pan in the freezer, uncovered.
4. When the casserole is frozen lift it out of the pan, using the foil wrap as handles.
5. Tightly wrap the casserole with the foil that was hanging over the edges.
6. Label the frozen casserole, that is now in the shape of your pan. On the label, include what kind of casserole it is, how to cook it and the date it was frozen. Then place it back in the freezer.

Use frozen casseroles within two to three months. When you want to use your frozen casserole simply peel off the foil and then place it in the same size pan as you had originally frozen it. Place it in the refrigerator about one day before baking it. A casserole can be baked frozen but

plan on double the time to bake it using an oven set to 350 degrees Fahrenheit. Preheat your oven and bake the casserole covered loosely with some foil. Keep an eye on the casserole and take the foil off if the casserole needs to brown or dry out a bit before taking it out of the oven. Always cook casseroles to an internal temperature of 160 degrees F.

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### **Tuna Casserole** (serves 8)

2 cans (10 ¾ oz each) Campbell's Cream of Mushroom Soup'

1 cup milk

2 cups cooked peas

2 cans (about 12 oz. each) tuna, drained

4 cups hot, cooked medium egg noodles

2 tbsp. dry bread crumbs

2 tsp. butter, melted

Stir soup, milk, peas, tuna, and noodles in a 3-quart casserole.

Bake at 400 degrees for 30 minutes or until hot. Stir.

Mix bread crumbs with butter and sprinkle on top. Bake 5 minutes more.

### **Sue's Breakfast Casserole (from the kitchen of Sue Kuhnert)**

2 ½ cups of seasoned croutons

2 cups of shredded cheddar cheese

1 lb. sausage, browned and drained

1 lb. bacon cooked and drained

Little dab of diced onion (add to sausage while browning to sauté'

Mix the following together and add to the above ingredients;

7 eggs

3 cups of milk

Pour above mixture into a 9 x 13 dish, cover, and refrigerate overnight.

Mix the following together and pour over the above mixture the next morning before baking;

1 can of cream of chicken soup (cream of mushroom or cream of celery soup can be substitute)

1/2 cup milk

Bake at 300 degrees for 1 1/2 hours, uncovered.

**Pumpkin Farmer's Casserole** (Susan Young, Madison, Alabama)

Easy to prepare for a traditional Thanksgiving flavor, anytime.

12 oz. can evaporated milk

1/4 tsp. nutmeg

1/4 cup butter, melted

1/4 tsp. ground cloves

1/2 cup sugar

4 eggs

Mix all ingredients together in a large mixing bowl. Pour into a lightly greased 2-quart baking dish. Bake, uncovered, at 325 degrees for 45 minutes or until set. Serves 8

**Corn Casserole** (Marilyn Just, DeSoto, Ks)

1 stick margarine

7-oz pkg. corn muffin mix

15-1/4 oz can of corn, drained

2 eggs, beaten

14-3/4 oz can of cream style corn

8 oz sour cream

Melt margarine in a 13 x 9 baking dish in a 350-degree oven. In a large mixing bowl, combine remaining ingredients. When the margarine is melted, remove baking dish from oven. Pour corn mixture directly into baking dish with the margarine; combine thoroughly. Bake, uncovered, at 350 degrees for 45 minutes. Makes 8 servings.