

Baked Shells

Serves 6 - 8

Less intensely indulgent than classic Baked Ziti and a lot less fussy than lasagna, in my old age this is sort of the only baked pasta I'm making these days. It's got all the hits: pasta, cheese, sauce, but feels casual in a way that makes it seem possible to throw together for dinner to feed 6–8 of your closest friends tonight, if you wanted. The most time consuming part of this recipe is the whole chopping and slicing of onions and garlic, which, depending on your knife skills, can take a small eternity (it takes me a small eternity). After that, you can kind of close your eyes and put some things (boiled pasta, red sauce, cheese) in a baking dish, bake it, and love your life.

The tomato sauce here is my basic, gold standard sauce for nearly anything and everything. I use both whole peeled and crushed tomatoes for a nice mix of chunky texture and smooth body, and yes, lots of onions and garlic. I also really enjoy using shells here because I think it's nice to make shells you don't have to individually stuff, but of course (one lucky) rigatoni, or classic ziti work perfectly, too (personally, I can't stand penne. It's a prejudice I can't overcome). For the cheese, it's dollops of ricotta seasoned with raw garlic (I also add heavy cream to prevent it from getting that weird grainy texture), torn pieces of mozzarella and a good grating of Parmesan. For adjustments to suit your whims and preferences on the red sauce, scroll to the bottom of the recipe.

Ingredients

¼ cup olive oil

Kosher salt, fresh ground black pepper

2 large or 4 small onions (12–16 ounces), diced

8–10 cloves garlic, thinly sliced, plus 1 clove garlic, grated

½–1 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes, optional

1 (28-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, packed in juice

1 (28-ounce) can crushed tomatoes

1 cup (8 ounces) ricotta

2 tablespoons heavy cream

1 pound large pasta shells

½ pound salted mozzarella, roughly torn by hand or grated on a box grater

Parmesan, for grating

Instructions

- 1. Make the tomato sauce:** Heat oil in a large, heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. Add onion and garlic and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is totally softened and translucent (without letting it brown, turning down the heat if needed), 8 to 10 minutes. Crush the whole tomatoes by hand and add them (including the juice) and the crushed tomatoes to the pot, stirring to scrape up any bits from the bottom of the pot. Fill the empty can about halfway with water, swirling to get any excess crushed tomatoes hanging around, and add it to the sauce. Season with salt and pepper and add red pepper flakes, if using. Bring to a simmer, then reduce to medium-low (or low, depending on your stove) and cook, stirring occasionally, letting it bubble gently, until the tomato sauce has thickened and flavors have come together, at least 30 minutes, and up to an hour and a half.
- 2. Make the cheese mixture:** In a medium bowl, combine ricotta, heavy cream, and 1 clove grated garlic. Season with salt and pepper and set aside.
- 3. Assemble the pasta:** Heat oven to 425°. Cook pasta in a large pot of salted boiling water until al dente, and drain, reserving a little water in case your sauce is too thick. Return pasta to pot and add two cups sauce, tossing to get the sauce gets in all the nooks and crannies.
- 4. When assembling, try not to fuss too much over the measurements, but be mindful that you can use less sauce than you think and still end up with something very saucy. Also, make sure you save a good amount of cheese and sauce for the last layer to give you a bubbly, browned top.** Spoon a bit of the remaining sauce in the bottom of a 3 quart baking dish, then add 1/3 of the pasta. Spoon a little sauce on top, then dollop with ricotta, and dot with mozzarella. Grate parmesan on top. Add another 1/3 of the pasta, followed by more sauce, more ricotta, mozzarella, and parmesan. Add the rest of the pasta, more sauce, the rest of the ricotta, mozzarella, another good grating of parm, and some pepper (note: there's a good chance you'll have some pasta sauce left over refrigerate or freeze for another time).

5. Place the baking dish on a foil-lined sheet pan, and loosely cover the baking dish with foil. Place in the oven and bake for about 20 minutes before removing the foil and continuing to bake until it's nicely browned and bubbling, another 20-ish minutes. Let cool at least 5 minutes or so before eating—it will stay VERY hot for a while, so don't worry.

For toasted fennel red sauce: use 1 fennel bulb in place of ½ the onions; add 1–2 teaspoons fennel seed to toast in the oil before adding tomatoes.

For meaty red sauce: while onions are softening, add 1 pound ground beef, pork, lamb, turkey or sausage. Season well with salt, pepper (chili flake or fennel seed, if you want), and cook, breaking up the meat with your spoon or spatula until well browned, 8–10 minutes. Then go ahead and add tomatoes and cook per the instructions, maybe adding another 20–30 minutes.

Do Ahead: Sauce can be made 5 days ahead, refrigerated. It can be frozen for up to two months (probably longer). The baked pasta itself can be assembled and baked several days ahead, kept wrapped and refrigerated— to reheat from cold, simply bake per the instructions above. It can also be assembled and frozen up to two months ahead— to reheat from frozen, keep wrapped in foil and bake at 325° until totally defrosted and bubbly (60-ish minutes), remove foil, increase temperature to 425° and bake until golden brown, 20 minutes or so.