

Inspired

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casseroles, but Letie cautioned that the right size noodle is important. It should be a medium size for best results - the very tiny soup noodles or the very thick ones can spell disaster. A rule of thumb, she said, is to use enough liquid "to almost cover the noodles," and to allow at least 25 minutes to get them cooked properly. A basic principle of rice cookery is to use two cups of water to one cup of rice.

Who also suggested that if you're going to be a truly inspired cook, you should learn how much of a substance you can hold in your hand, and then you can use a handful of this and a handful of that, but have a close guess as to the exact amount.

The next ingredient most casseroles need is something "wet and saucy." This liquid can come from soups - concentrated, soup-for-one, dried soups, single serving sizes or chunk varieties. Also liquid can come from Italian style sauces, gravy mixes, sour cream mixes, bouillon or catsup. Letie assures that soups are one of the best buys in the supermarket and offer a head start on flavor combinations.

Vegetables also contribute to a well-rounded casserole dish. Good standby vegetables are onions, green peppers, chopped celery, mushrooms and olives. Other vegetables can be in the form of cooked vegetables, frozen, canned or leftovers. Chinese vegetables could also add some interest for your family.

A fifth grouping for a successful casserole is a topping - to make it look good and to add texture. The variety here is almost endless, and can include such items as dried or fresh bread crumbs, whole or crushed croutons, cereals, wheat germ - to give both crunch and added protein, crushed pretzels, potato chips, corn chips, french fried onion rings, crushed cheese crackers and biscuit topping. In using a biscuit topping, Letie cautions that the casserole should be bubbling before the topping mixture is added so that it seals immediately and doesn't run into the rest of the casserole.

If you create a list of options in making casseroles it will help you when you need to think of something but draw a blank about what combinations might work.

A big advantage to casserole cooking is that you can effectively make them ahead and freeze them. To freeze, Letie suggests lining your favorite casserole dish with foil, then freezing the casserole and removing it from the dish. This allows you to reuse the dish and makes it easy to put the frozen casserole back in the container for proper reheating.

She also suggests that when making up individual portions of food, it be marked with the temperature and the contents so that family members can help themselves if the chief cook is not on hand to prepare a meal. She reminded the homemakers that frozen casseroles take a fairly long time to reheat.

All dishes are best if frozen immediately upon preparation, or in the case of leftovers, immediately after the first time served. This retains freshness, says Letie.

"It will never be any better than it is right after a meal."

The top limit on most casseroles in the freezer is three or four months. It is recommended that you slightly undercook things which you are assembling with the intention of freezing.

And for peace of mind and help in food preparation, Letie recommends keeping an inventory of the freezer. It saves time and effort if you know just what is going into and coming out of your freezer.

Above all, a "created" casserole should have a name. If you give it a name, it will lessen the chance of protest from the family, and it will make it sound much more appealing than just leftovers.

"It will be more helpful if you learn to think creatively about the things that are already in your cupboard instead of relying on recipes," said the home economist. And she added, "Casseroles make a little meat go a long way and offer a combination of texture, flavor and color for your family."

Casserole cooking can be a real eating adventure. To gain confidence, begin with one of the recipes below and continue from there to put more fun in your eating.

INSIDE-OUT TURKEY PIE

- ¼ cup butter or margarine
- 3 cups bread stuffing mix
- 7 tablespoons hot water
- 2 eggs, lightly beaten
- 4 teaspoons worcestershire sauce
- 1 can (10 ¾ ounces) condensed cream of chicken soup
- ¼ cup milk
- 2 cups diced cooked turkey
- 1 package (1) ounces) frozen peas or mixed vegetables

Melt butter in large saucepan. Stir in stuffing mix,

water, eggs and two teaspoons Worcestershire sauce. Turn mixture into a nine-inch pie pan; press into bottom, side and onto rim. Bake in a 375 degree F. over 15 minutes. Meanwhile, in a medium saucepan, combine soup, milk, remaining two teaspoons Worcestershire sauce, turkey and peas; bring to a boil. Simmer covered five minutes on low heat. Turn into pie pan with hot baked stuffing. Spread smooth, top with tomato halves. Return to oven and bake 10 more minutes. Makes six servings.

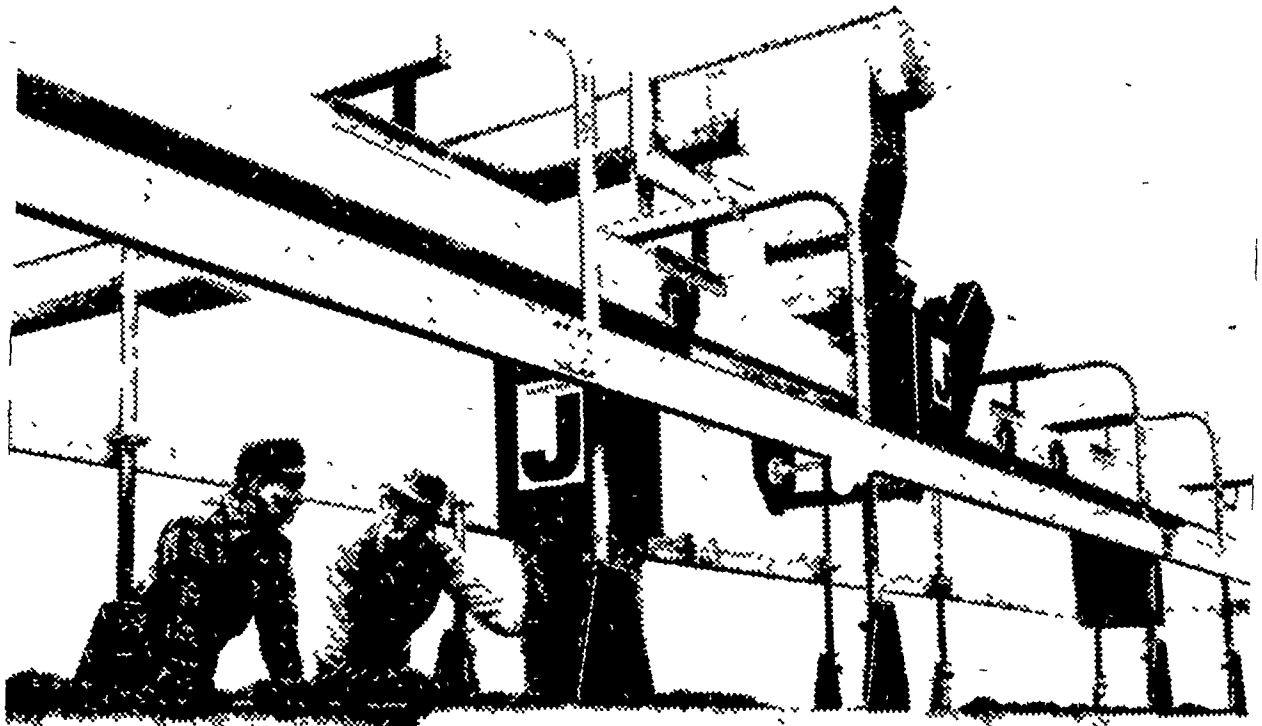
CREAMY TURKEY LASAGNE

- 8 ounces lasagne
- 1 can (10 ¾ ounces) condensed cream of chicken soup
- 1 can (20 ¾ ounces) condensed cream of mushroom soup
- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 cup sour cream
- 1 cup finely chopped onion
- 1 cup sliced ripe olives
- ¼ cup chopped pimiento
- ½ teaspoon garlic salt
- 2 to 3 cups diced cooked turkey

Cook lasagne as directed on package; drain in colander. Meanwhile, blend soups, Parmesan cheese, sour cream, onion, olives, pimiento and garlic salt; stir in turkey. Spread one-fourth turkey mixture over bottom of 13x9x2 inch baking pan. Alternate layers of lasagne, turkey mixture and American cheese three times, ending with cheese. Bake in 350 degree F. oven 40 to 45 minutes. Let stand 10 minutes before cutting. Makes eight servings.

NOTE: Mixture can be prepared ahead and kept in refrigerator until baking time.

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