

TUNA NOODLE CASSEROLE

I know what you're thinking... tuna noodle casserole sounds so old fashioned. But, I promise, this recipe is not your can-of-soup version. This is an amped up, gourmet, version with a creamy béchamel base. It's the ultimate comfort food in our house and we often make it for a friend or family in need. It's easy to double and pop in the freezer too.

You can also substitute the tuna for roasted chicken breasts when pregnant. (I buy bone in, skin on breasts, roast them at 375°F for about 40 minutes/until the internal temp is 170°, allow to cool, discard the skin and bone, dice up the chicken and toss it in).

Ingredients.

- 1 onion, chopped
- 3-4 stalks celery, sliced
- 1/2 cup parmesan cheese, grated or shredded
- 5 cups of pasta
- 3 cups cheddar cheese, grated
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 cans chunk light tuna, drained (lower in mercury than albacore)
- 1/4 cup Italian bread crumbs
- 2 cups low fat milk
- 1/2 stick butter
- 3 Tablespoons flour
- 1 Tablespoon extra virgin olive oil
- 1 bay leaf
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 1/2 teaspoons garlic powder
- 1 1/2 teaspoons onion powder
- 1/4-1/2 teaspoon red pepper flakes (depending on how much heat you like)
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon paprika
- 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried parsley
- pinch of nutmeg

Directions.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook the pasta until just al dente (usually less than the amount of time recommended on the package). Drain the pasta and return it to the large pot.

Meanwhile, heat up the olive oil in a pan over medium heat and saute the onion (with the bay leaf) until the onion is soft and just beginning to brown, then add in the celery and garlic and cook for 1-2 minutes. Discard the bay leaf. Add the onions, celery, garlic and tuna to the pasta and toss it all together gently.

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

In a small saucepan melt the butter, then add the flour. Whisk together until the mixture is smooth and creamy. Add in the milk and whisk over medium-low heat until the mixture thickens into a creamy sauce (usually about 5 minutes), remove from heat.

Then, add in all of the seasonings and half of the cheddar cheese and stir it together until the cheese is all melted. Pour the cheese sauce over the pasta mixture and mix gently until it's all incorporated.

Pour the whole mixture into a 9 by 13 inch baking dish. Sprinkle the top with the remaining cheddar cheese, parmesan and a healthy dusting of the bread crumbs before placing it in the oven. Bake for 20 minutes and then broil for 5-10 minutes to get the top golden and crispy.

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