



Easy Dinner Ideas for Quick Meals

Introduction

Baked Ziti is a comforting and hearty dish that combines pasta, rich marinara sauce, creamy ricotta, and melted cheese into a satisfying meal. Perfect for family dinners or entertaining guests, this simple yet delicious recipe is sure to please even the pickiest of eaters. By using fresh ingredients, including spinach and a blend of savory cheeses, you can create a dish that is both nutritious and indulgent.

Ingredients

4 cups (32 ounces) marinara sauce
2 cups (16 ounces) ricotta cheese
2 garlic cloves, minced
1 tablespoon lemon zest
1 teaspoon oregano
 $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes
 $\frac{3}{4}$ teaspoon sea salt, plus more for the pasta water
Freshly ground black pepper
1 pound ziti pasta
Extra-virgin olive oil, for drizzling
1 pound fresh spinach
 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups smoked mozzarella cheese
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated pecorino or Parmesan cheese

Prep Time

15 minutes

Cook Time

30 minutes

Total Time

45 minutes

Yield

Serves 6 to 8

Prepare your kitchen for a delightful baking experience with this easy and flavorful Baked Ziti recipe that brings comfort and joy to your dining table. Enjoy the creativity of layering ingredients and the aroma of the dish as it bakes in the oven, resulting in a bubbling, cheesy masterpiece. Enjoy your homemade baked ziti!

Detailed Directions and Instructions

Step 1: Preheat the Oven

Set your oven to 425°F (218°C). Spread ½ cup of marinara sauce evenly over the bottom of a 9×13-inch baking dish.

Step 2: Prepare the Ricotta Mixture

In a medium bowl, combine the ricotta cheese, minced garlic, lemon zest, oregano, red pepper flakes, ½ teaspoon sea salt, and several grinds of fresh black pepper. Mix until well combined.

Step 3: Cook the Pasta

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the ziti pasta and cook according to the package instructions until al dente. Reserve 1 cup of the pasta cooking water, then drain the pasta.

See also Hut of Baba Yaga

Step 4: Sauté the Spinach

Return the pot to the stove over low heat and drizzle the bottom with a little olive oil. Add the fresh spinach and sauté for 1 to 2 minutes until just wilted. If necessary, work in batches. Remove the spinach from the pot, gently squeeze out excess water, coarsely chop it, and set aside.

Step 5: Combine Pasta and Sauce

Return the drained pasta to the pot. Add the remaining marinara sauce, most of the chopped spinach, $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon sea salt, and more fresh black pepper. Toss until the pasta is well coated.

Step 6: Assemble the Dish

Transfer half of the pasta mixture to the prepared baking dish. Add dollops of the ricotta mixture and the remaining spinach. Layer the rest of the pasta on top. Sprinkle the smoked mozzarella and grated pecorino or Parmesan cheese over the top. Drizzle with a bit of olive oil.

Step 7: Bake

Place the baking dish in the preheated oven and bake for 16 to 22 minutes, or until the cheese is melted and lightly browned.

Step 8: Serve

Garnish with fresh basil or parsley before serving. Enjoy your homemade baked ziti!

Notes

Note 1

Feel free to add other vegetables or protein to customize the baked ziti to your liking.

Note 2

You can prepare the dish ahead of time and refrigerate it before baking. Just increase the baking time slightly if cooking from cold.

Note 3

Leftovers can be stored in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to 3 days. Reheat in the oven for best results.

See also [Chicken Salad with Grapes](#)



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Cook Techniques

Preheating the Oven

Preheating the oven ensures that your baked dish starts cooking at the right temperature, promoting even cooking and proper cheese melting.

Preparing the Ricotta Mixture

Mixing ingredients evenly in a bowl allows for consistent flavor throughout the baked dish. Incorporating garlic and lemon zest adds depth to the ricotta.

Cooking Pasta al Dente

Cooking pasta al dente means it's firm to the bite. This is essential as the pasta will continue to cook in the oven, preventing sogginess.

Sautéing Spinach

Sautéing spinach briefly wilts it while retaining its vibrant color and nutrients. This technique adds a fresh flavor and texture to the dish.

Combining Pasta and Sauce

Tossing the pasta with sauce while it's still warm ensures that every piece is coated evenly, enhancing the overall flavor profile.

Assembling the Dish

Layering ingredients thoughtfully allows for better distribution of flavors and textures, creating a harmonious dish with each bite.

Baking Until Golden

Baking the dish until the cheese is melted and lightly browned not only improves the appearance but also enhances the flavor through caramelization.

FAQ

Can I make baked ziti ahead of time?

Yes, you can assemble the dish and refrigerate it for a day before baking.

Can I substitute the cheese?

Absolutely! You can use different cheeses such as mozzarella or ricotta, depending on your preference.

How long can leftovers be stored?

Leftovers can be stored in the refrigerator for up to three days in an airtight container.

Can I add protein to the baked ziti?

Yes, cooked ground beef, sausage, or even shredded chicken can be added for extra protein.

What can I serve with baked ziti?

Baked ziti pairs well with a side salad, garlic bread, or steamed vegetables for a well-rounded meal.

See also [Beetroot with Pepper](#)

Conclusion

Baked Ziti is a delightful and comforting dish that brings together layers of pasta, rich marinara sauce, creamy ricotta, and melted smoked mozzarella. It's perfect for family dinners or gatherings, offering a combination of flavors that appeal to everyone. With its ease of preparation and the ability to make it ahead of time, Baked Ziti is sure to become a favorite in your dinner rotation.

Vegetable Stir-Fry

A quick and versatile dish that features fresh vegetables sautéed in soy

sauce and garlic. Serve it over rice or noodles for a complete meal.

Chickpea Salad

A refreshing salad packed with protein. Combine chickpeas, diced cucumbers, tomatoes, red onion, and a zesty lemon dressing for a light dinner option.

Stuffed Bell Peppers

Bell peppers filled with a mixture of quinoa, black beans, corn, and spices, then baked until tender. A colorful and nutritious dish that's sure to please.

Lentil Soup

A hearty and nutritious soup made with lentils, carrots, celery, and spices. Perfect for a comforting dinner, especially on chilly nights.

Sheet Pan Fajitas

Easy and flavorful, this dish involves tossing sliced bell peppers and onions with seasoned chicken or tofu, baking it all on one sheet pan for minimal cleanup.

Cauliflower Tacos

Oven-roasted cauliflower served in tortillas with avocado, cilantro, and a zesty lime dressing. A delicious vegetarian option for taco night.

Pasta Primavera

A vibrant pasta dish loaded with seasonal vegetables and tossed in a light olive oil or tomato sauce. It's fresh, colorful, and perfect for a

weeknight dinner.

Quinoa Bowls

A wholesome base of quinoa topped with roasted vegetables, proteins, and your choice of sauce or dressing for a customized meal that's both filling and nutritious.



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