

The Fall Casserole Planner

A printable companion: the formula, the recipe card and every chart you need

Print this and keep it where you keep your shopping list. It carries the four-part formula as a ratio card, the recipe card itself, a shopping list, the sauce and topping charts, pan and bake-time tables, a make-ahead timeline, a scaling grid and freezer labels to cut out — everything you need to build a casserole without scrolling back through the article.

Base, protein, sauce, topping. Keep the four proportions right and almost any combination of ingredients will work.

The Ratio Card

These are the numbers for one 9 x 13 inch dish. Write them on the inside of a cupboard door and you will never need to look up a casserole recipe again.

Part	Amount	Note
Base	4 cups cooked	Pasta measured after cooking; rice, potatoes and bread as they go in
Protein	1 pound	Or 3 cups shredded. Beans count — use 3 cups and add more sauce
Sauce	2 1/2 cups	Pours slowly, coats the back of a spoon, holds a line drawn through it
Topping	1 1/2 cups loose	Never packed — a packed cup is nearly twice a loose one

Using a base that drinks liquid, such as rice or stale bread, add half a cup of sauce. Using something already wet, such as frozen vegetables straight from the bag, take half a cup back out.

The Recipe Card

The Fall Casserole Formula

Yield	One 9 x 13 inch casserole, 6 to 8 servings
Prep	25 minutes
Cook	35 to 45 minutes
Total	About 1 hour 10 minutes

Ingredients

- 4 cups cooked pasta, rice or potatoes (about 12 oz dry pasta)
- 1 lb ground beef, Italian sausage or shredded chicken
- 1 onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, minced

- 1 tsp fine salt, plus more to taste
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 1/2 tsp cracked black pepper
- 2 1/2 cups tomato-cream sauce (2 cups marinara loosened with 1/2 cup cream)
- 1 1/2 cups grated mozzarella or sharp cheddar, divided
- 1 1/2 cups fresh breadcrumbs
- 3 tbsp melted butter
- 2 tbsp grated Parmesan

Instructions

1. Heat the oven to 350 F (175 C) and butter a 9 x 13 inch baking dish, or a 3 quart dish of similar size.
2. Brown the protein in a wide pan over medium-high heat, breaking it up as it cooks, about 6 minutes. Add the onion, garlic, salt, oregano and pepper and cook 4 minutes more. Taste it and salt again if it needs it.
3. Stir the sauce into the pan and bring it just to a simmer, then take it off the heat. It should coat the back of a spoon and hold a line drawn through it.
4. Spread half a cup of sauce across the bottom of the dish. Add half the base, then all of the meat, then half the cheese. Add the remaining base, then pour the rest of the sauce over the top and spread it level.
5. Tilt the dish to check the sauce: it should sit level and move as one slow mass rather than running to one corner. Cover with foil and bake 25 minutes.
6. Toss the breadcrumbs with the melted butter and the Parmesan. Uncover the dish, scatter the topping evenly over the surface, and bake a further 10 to 15 minutes, until golden and bubbling at the edges.
7. The centre should read 165 F (74 C). Rest the casserole 10 minutes before serving so it slices cleanly.

Notes

- Salt the protein while it is still in the pan — the sauce cannot season the meat afterwards, so this is where the flavour is decided.
- Cook the base and drain it properly first. Pasta carrying its cooking water is the most common cause of a watery casserole.
- Measure the topping loose. A packed cup of breadcrumbs is nearly twice a loose one, and too much topping steams itself soft.
- Assemble up to two days ahead with the topping kept separate, or freeze unbaked for three months. Bake from frozen at 325 F, covered, adding about 25 minutes.

Shopping List

Section	Item	On hand?
Produce	Onion — 1 large	
Produce	Garlic — 1 head	
Protein	Ground beef, sausage or chicken — 1 lb	
Pantry	Pasta, rice or potatoes — 12 oz dry	

Section	Item	On hand?
Pantry	Marinara sauce — 2 cups	
Pantry	Cream or whole milk — 1/2 cup	
Pantry	Breadcrumbs — 1 1/2 cups fresh	
Pantry	Fine salt, black pepper, dried oregano	
Fridge	Mozzarella or sharp cheddar — 6 oz	
Fridge	Parmesan — 2 tbsp grated	
Fridge	Butter — 3 tbsp	
Optional	Extra vegetables, or a second protein for a variation	

Sauce Chart

Whichever you choose, the test is the same: a sauce ready for the oven coats the back of a spoon and holds a line drawn through it.

Style	How to make it	Best with	Watch out for
Cream and cheese	White sauce with 2 cups grated cheese stirred in off the heat	Pasta, potatoes, chicken	Splits if boiled after the cheese goes in
Tomato-cream	Marinara loosened with a splash of cream	Ground beef, sausage, tortillas	Too much cream and it bakes thin and pink
Gravy	Pan drippings, flour, stock	Leftover turkey, beef, potatoes	Salts fast — taste before seasoning
Salsa and sour cream	Equal parts, stirred together cold	Chicken, beans, tortillas	Curdles above 350 F
Cream of mushroom	One can plus half a can of milk	Anything, in genuine haste	Tastes of the can unless you add garlic and pepper

Topping Chart

Topping	How much	Note
Buttered fresh breadcrumbs	1 1/2 cups	Toss 3 parts crumbs with 1 part melted butter
Grated cheese	1 1/2 cups	Sharp cheddar or Gruyere; last 15 minutes only
Crushed buttery crackers	1 1/2 cups	Salty and rich; needs no extra butter
Potato chips, crushed	2 cups	Crunchiest option, first to disappear

Topping	How much	Note
Fried onions	1 1/2 cups	Last 5 minutes only or they scorch
Toasted nuts or seeds	1 cup	Best over an already-rich vegetable bake

A topping goes on late and it goes on dry. Anything wet sitting on the surface steams itself within minutes.

Pan Sizes and Bake Times

Dish	Volume	Oven	Time
9 x 13 inch (3 quart)	The whole formula	350 F / 175 C	35 – 45 min
8 x 8 inch (2 quart)	Two thirds of the formula	350 F / 175 C	40 – 50 min
2 quart oval gratin	Two thirds of the formula	375 F / 190 C	30 – 40 min
4 quart deep dish	One and a half times the formula	350 F / 175 C	50 – 60 min
Six individual ramekins	One third of the formula	375 F / 190 C	20 – 25 min
Cast iron skillet	The formula	400 F / 205 C	25 – 35 min

Cover with foil for the first two thirds of the bake and leave it off for the rest. Covered the whole way through, a casserole comes out pale and soft.

Doneness Check

- The centre reads 165 F (74 C) on an instant-read thermometer.
- The sauce bubbles steadily at the edges of the dish.
- The topping is golden rather than pale, and crisp when pressed.
- A knife pushed into the middle meets no resistance and comes out clean.
- It has rested 10 minutes, so it slices into clean squares.

The Tilt Test

1. Assemble the casserole fully, but do not put it in the oven yet.
2. Tilt the dish gently to one side and hold it there for a moment.
3. If the sauce runs to the low corner straight away, it is too thin — stir through a spoonful of cornstarch or a handful of grated cheese.
4. If nothing moves at all, it is too stiff — loosen it with a splash of milk and spread it level again.
5. The correct read: the sauce sits level and moves as one slow mass. That is a casserole that will slice cleanly.

Make-Ahead Timeline

Up to 3 months ahead	Assemble completely, leave the topping off, wrap tightly and freeze unbaked. Bake from frozen at 325 F, covered, adding about 25 minutes.
Up to 2 days ahead	Assemble and refrigerate covered, with the topping stored separately in a bag. Let it sit on the counter 30 minutes before baking.
Morning of	Brown and season the protein and make the sauce. Both keep covered in the fridge, and the base can be cooked and drained the same morning.
One hour before	Layer the dish, run the tilt test, and cover it with foil. Set the topping aside so it goes on dry and late.
Last 15 minutes	Uncover, scatter the topping, and bake until golden. This is the only step that cannot be done in advance.
To reheat leftovers	Covered at 325 F to 165 F in the middle, or about 2 minutes per portion in the microwave. Cool within 2 hours of leaving the oven.

Scaling Grid

Serves	Pan	Base	Protein	Sauce	Topping	Oven and time
4	8 x 8 inch	3 cups	12 oz	2 cups	1 cup	350 F, 40 min
6 to 8	9 x 13 inch	4 cups	1 lb	2 1/2 cups	1 1/2 cups	350 F, 35 – 45 min
10 to 12	4 quart deep dish	6 cups	1 1/2 lb	3 1/2 cups	2 cups	350 F, 50 – 60 min
14 or more	Two 9 x 13 inch dishes	8 cups	2 lb	5 cups	3 cups	350 F, 40 – 50 min

Two shallow dishes always beat one deep one. A wide bake browns across a much larger surface and sets in the middle before the outside dries out.

Six Variations From One Formula

Casserole	Base	Protein	Sauce	Topping
Cheesy pasta bake	4 cups penne	1 lb Italian sausage	Tomato-cream	Buttered crumbs and mozzarella
Ground beef and noodles	4 cups egg noodles	1 lb ground beef	Tomato with garlic and oregano	Sharp cheddar
Chicken and stuffing	4 cups cubed bread	3 cups shredded chicken	Gravy	Herb stuffing and butter
Zucchini and beef	3 cups sliced zucchini, drained	1 lb ground beef	Marinara	Mozzarella

Casserole	Base	Protein	Sauce	Topping
Sweet potato and black bean	4 cups roasted sweet potato	3 cups black beans	Salsa and sour cream	Crushed chips
Baked feta pasta	4 cups rigatoni	1 block feta with tomatoes	The roasted pan juices	Torn basil and breadcrumbs

Troubleshooting Card

What you see	Why	Next time
Watery at the bottom	Wet base, or sauce too thin	Drain pasta properly; run the tilt test
Dry and stiff	Too much base, no cover	Hold to 4 cups; cover for the first two thirds
Bland all the way through	Protein went in unseasoned	Salt the meat in the pan and taste it
Curdled or grainy sauce	Dairy sauce boiled, or oven too hot	Add cheese off the heat; 350 F for salsa versions
Topping soggy	It went on at the start	Add in the last 10 minutes, on a dry surface
Soupy after freezing	Thawed before baking	Bake from frozen at 325 F; never thaw first
Burnt edges, cold middle	Deep dish in a hot oven	Lower to 325 F and cover for the first half
Slides apart when served	Cut too soon	Rest 10 minutes before cutting

Casserole Night Log

Keep this on the fridge and note what you built each time. After three or four entries you will know which combination your household actually wants, which is more useful than any list of twenty recipes.

Date	What I built	Base / protein / sauce	Topping	Verdict and what to change

Freezer Labels

Cut along the lines, fill in the details and tape one label to each wrapped casserole before it goes in the freezer. Write the topping on the label too, so it does not get baked into a soggy layer by mistake.

CASSEROLE: _____ **MADE:** _____ **BAKE FROM FROZEN AT 325 F,**
COVERED, _____ MIN. TOPPING: keep separate — add for the last 15 min.

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savorydiscovery.com — By Elowen Thorn. Printable for personal use. Internal temperatures are kitchen-tested guidelines, not food-safety advice; cool leftovers within two hours and refrigerate anything containing meat or dairy.