

Shape Up Your Pantry for the New Year

Cooking with what you have
so you don't have to
go out in the cold

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The pantry is an off-the-clock cook's best friend which is what I am when January rolls around. No matter how empty the pantry seems right now from all that holiday cooking and baking, there's sure to be some really good (and really easy) recipe fix'n's hiding in plain sight. It's time to clear out and cook up what's on hand because pantries, like people, need a little shaping up after the holidays. Besides, I'd rather hibernate in my nice warm house than brave the cold for groceries. Let's get into the kitchen!



Pantry Paella

Paella (pronounced – pie-yea-ya) is one of Spain's most famous dishes. If you've got rice, a can of tomatoes and some sausage, chicken or shrimp, you've got a hearty meal in less time (and for less money) than ordering take out. Not 100% authentic but close enough for our pantry purposes. Maybe there's a nice bottle of red wine to serve with it hiding in the pantry, too. Ole!

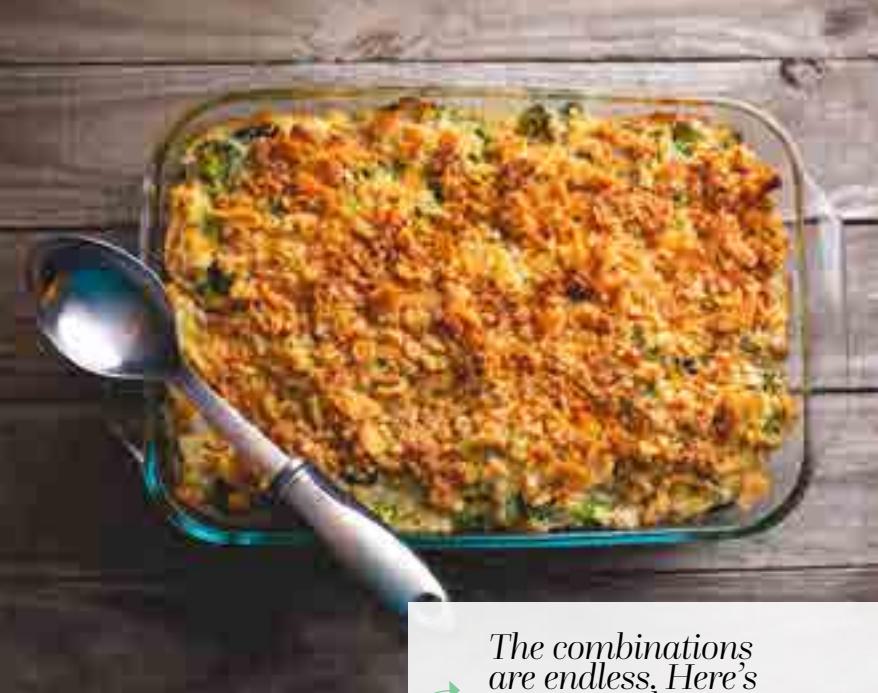
SERVES 4 TO 6 | PAN SIZE - 12" ROUND X 3" DEEP SKILLET WITH LID IS IDEAL BUT A LARGE POT WORKS WELL. DO NOT USE CAST IRON.

INGREDIENTS

1/3 cup olive oil
1/4 teaspoon pepper
2 onions, chopped (about 2 cups)
2 bell peppers, chopped (any color or combo - about 2 cups)
1 (28 oz.) can diced tomatoes (with the liquid)
1 1/2 cups water or broth (chicken, beef or vegetable)
1 Tablespoon sugar
2 teaspoons salt (or to taste)
1 bay leaf
2 cups instant brown or white rice (uncooked) or par-boiled rice
(like Ben's Converted - uncooked)
1 pound sausage, chicken, shrimp or a combo (cooked)

DIRECTIONS

Saute pepper, onions and bell pepper in olive oil till soft – about 5 minutes. Add remaining ingredients. Stir. Cover. Cook on medium till rice is done and almost all of the liquid has been absorbed – about 15 minutes. Remove cover. Fluff rice with a fork. Replace cover. Let rest 10 minutes before serving.



The 1-1-3-2-1 Crunch and Cheese Casserole

Only 3 ingredients to any main dish casserole - sauce, protein, carbs and/or veggies. Ok, 7 with milk, crunch and cheese. But even so, it's an easy to remember recipe that uses what you have on hand.

Cream of mushroom soup is the gold standard for casserole sauces but there's also cream of chicken and cream of celery. Cheddar cheese soup, too. (Purists will want to make a bechamel.)

SERVES 4 TO 6

USES ANY NON-METALLIC, 8 INCH SQUARE, OVEN SAFE BAKING PAN OR A 2 QUART (8 CUP) CASSEROLE DISH

INGREDIENTS

1 cup milk (dairy or nondairy)
1 (10.5 oz.) can cream of anything soup
3 cups cooked protein - meat, sausage, poultry, seafood, beans, tofu or combo.
2 cups cooked carbs - grains, pasta, stuffing, potatoes
1 cup veggies - cooked, canned/ drained or frozen/thawed

THE CRUNCH (THE BEST PART!)

4 Tablespoons butter
½ cup finely crushed crackers
The Cheese (Optional but everything's better with cheese!)
1 to 2 cups shredded cheese (your fav - to taste)

The combinations are endless. Here's one example.....

Chicken, Pasta and Butternut Squash Casserole

INGREDIENTS

1 cup milk
1 (10.5 oz.) can cream of mushroom soup
3 cups cooked chicken (bite size chunks)
2 cups cooked elbow macaroni
1 cup cooked butternut squash
4 Tablespoons butter
½ cup finely crushed saltines (½ sleeve - about 15 crackers)

DIRECTIONS

- (The directions are the same no matter what combo of ingredients you choose.)
- Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Butter pan or coat with cooking spray.
- In a medium pot over low heat, whisk milk and soup. Fold in your choice of protein, carbs and veggies. (Do not over mix. Mashed or soft ingredients should stay a bit chunky.) Heat till mixture begins to bubble - 2 to 3 minutes. Meanwhile, melt butter and stir in crushed crackers. Pour heated mixture into prepared pan. Sprinkle with cracker mixture. Bake (uncovered) in preheated oven till crackers are golden and casserole is bubbly - about 60 minutes. If desired, top finished casserole with cheese and return to oven to melt - about 5 minutes.

Mashed Potato Salad

If you have a box of instant mashed potatoes in your pantry, you've got the makings of so many yummy things - soup, potato rolls, gnocchi, potato pancakes, shepherd's pie and more. But my fav is mashed potato salad - yes, really! It's my go to potato salad recipe when it's the middle of winter with no picnic in sight.

INGREDIENTS

2 cups instant mashed potato flakes (uncooked)
2 cups boiling water
½ cup mayonnaise
2 Tablespoons plain yogurt or sour cream
3 Tablespoons pickle juice or apple cider vinegar (white vinegar is ok, too)
¼ teaspoon pepper
2 Tablespoons sugar
1 medium red or Vidalia onion
2 to 3 stalks celery

DIRECTIONS

- Stir instant potatoes into boiling water. Don't add anything else - no butter, no salt, no milk. Potatoes should be thick and chunky. Cool.
- Meanwhile, chop onion and celery. Whisk mayo, yogurt (or sour cream), pickle juice (or vinegar), pepper and sugar. Fold everything into the cooled potatoes. Chill.

Easy Unfried Apple Pies

Soooo easy you'll wonder why you never thought of this before. Apple pie filling, a few burrito wraps and you have dessert. No apple? Use any fruit pie filling you have on hand. Serve warm - with ice cream if you have it. Yum!

MAKES 4

PAN SIZE NOT IMPORTANT BUT AN 8 INCH SQUARE PAN WORKS WELL

INGREDIENTS

4 burrito size (9 inch) flour tortillas
1 (21 to 24 oz.) can apple pie filling
½ stick butter (4 Tablespoons)
3 Tablespoons sugar
1/8 teaspoon nutmeg or cinnamon

DIRECTIONS

- Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Lightly grease pan or coat with baking spray.
- Spoon pie filling onto wraps dividing evenly. (Use the whole can.)
- Fold in 2 opposite sides of each wrap about 1 inch to partially cover filling.
- Roll up (folded edges tucked in) like egg rolls.
- Place seam sides down into prepared pan.
- Melt butter and sugar. Stir. Spoon over filled wraps covering completely. Sprinkle with nutmeg or cinnamon.
- Bake (uncovered) in preheated oven till hot and slightly golden - 35 to 40 minutes. 