

The holiday lights have been packed up and put away. The crowds of family and friends have returned to their homes and the sky has faded to a cool shade of gray. The cold winds of January may be swirling outside, but the kitchen can still be warm and inviting. Pull a casserole out of the oven and feel every bit of the January blues melt away.

There's no better greeting at the back door than the smell of a comforting one-dish meal waiting to be enjoyed. Casseroles are easy to come by, but not all are the same. With thousands of recipes floating around featuring "cream of" soups and convenience products, it's refreshing to create a casserole from scratch.

Eating a casserole is comforting, but making one is downright therapeutic. Stirring together rich ingredients destined to become a serving spoon's dream job is good for any cook's soul. And few dishes are as universally appreciated in times of need—with news of a death or the arrival of a new baby, the 9x13 is the first pan that comes out of the cabinet. It's the comfort factor that consoles those we care about.



## SHARING THE Comfort from Casseroles

Breaking bread with friends and family gets richer by making recipes from cooks you know. I turned to my good friends in the food business to share their favorite casseroles with me. Doris Koplin, author of *The Quick Cook*, passed on her recipe for sweet noodle pudding, also known as kugel. This satisfying dish is great for brunch. I asked Virginia Willis, author of *Bon Appétit Y'all*, for her fabulous French toast casserole. Prepared the night before, this casserole makes an easy breakfast. My mentor Nathalie Dupree, well-known TV host and author of 10 cookbooks, graciously passed on her recipe for zucchini and sausage casserole. This recipe has graced our table many times. May these casseroles soothe you in the kitchen and give warm comfort to those you love. ★

### VIRGINIA WILLIS'S FRENCH TOAST CASSEROLE

4 tablespoons unsalted butter, melted  
 ¼ cup firmly packed light brown sugar  
 1 loaf brioche or challah, sliced 1½ inches thick (about 1½ pounds)  
 8 large eggs, lightly beaten  
 1 cup whole milk  
 1 tablespoon pure vanilla extract  
 ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon  
 ¼ teaspoon ground ginger  
 Pinch of salt  
 ½ cup chopped pecans  
 Confectioners sugar, for accompaniment  
 Sorghum, cane, or maple syrup, for accompaniment

1. Combine the melted butter and brown sugar in a baking dish. Arrange the bread slices in the dish. Whisk together the eggs, milk, vanilla, cinnamon, ginger, and salt in a bowl. Pour over the bread, letting it soak in. Top with the pecans. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for at least 3 hours and up to 12 hours.
2. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Let the chilled casserole stand at room temperature for 20 minutes.
3. Bake until browned and set, 30 to 45 minutes. Remove to a rack to cool slightly. Sift confectioners sugar over top. Serve hot or warm with sorghum, cane, or maple syrup. Serves 8.

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## REBECCA'S KITCHEN

### NATHALIE DUPREE'S ZUCCHINI AND SAUSAGE CASSEROLE

2 pounds zucchini or yellow squash,  
coarsely grated  
¾ pound sage sausage  
¾ pound hot sausage  
2 onions, chopped  
3 garlic cloves, chopped  
1 cup heavy cream  
1 cup fresh breadcrumbs  
5 large eggs, lightly beaten  
2 to 3 cups grated sharp cheddar cheese  
2 cups chopped pecans  
Salt  
Freshly ground pepper  
Hot sauce

#### Topping

6 tablespoons butter, melted  
¾ cup fresh breadcrumbs  
¾ cup chopped pecans  
½ cup grated cheddar cheese



1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Grease a wide, 2-quart baking dish, or spray it with nonstick spray.
  2. Put the zucchini in a colander to drain for about 30 minutes or wrap it in a clean tea towel and gently squeeze it to remove the excess liquid. Put the zucchini in a large mixing bowl.
  3. Heat a large skillet and add the sage sausage and hot sausage. Cook until the sausage starts to brown, stirring to break it up. Pour off all but about 3 tablespoons grease. Add the onions and cook until soft, about 5 minutes. Stir in the garlic and cook 1 more minute. Combine the sausage and onions with the zucchini.
  4. Stir in the cream, 1 cup breadcrumbs, the eggs, 2 to 3 cups cheese, and 2 cups pecans.
  5. Add salt, pepper, and hot sauce to taste. Pour the mixture into the baking dish. The casserole may be refrigerated at this point for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 3 months.
  6. For the topping, combine the butter, breadcrumbs, and pecans. Sprinkle evenly over the casserole. Bake, uncovered, until hot through, about 30 minutes. Sprinkle the top with cheese and return to the oven until cheese is melted and lightly browned.
- Serves 10 as a side dish, 6 as an entrée.

Recipe from Nathalie Dupree's

### DORIS KOPLIN'S SWEET NOODLE PUDDING (KUGEL)

#### Pudding

1 pound medium-wide noodles,  
cooked and drained  
1 ½ pints sour cream  
1 ½ cups butter, melted  
1 ½ cups sugar  
1 teaspoon vanilla extract  
2 1-pound cans crushed pineapple, drained  
5 eggs, beaten  
1 package dried apple slices, chopped  
1 package dried apricots, cut into small pieces  
½ cup raisins

#### Topping

½ cup sugar  
1 tablespoon cinnamon

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees.
  2. Butter a 9x13-inch baking pan or dish.
  3. For pudding, place cooked and drained noodles in a large bowl. Add remaining ingredients and mix well. Pour into prepared baking pan.
  4. For topping, combine sugar and cinnamon and sprinkle over casserole.
  5. Bake 35 to 45 minutes, or until set. Serve warm.
- Serves 12

