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Spinach and Ham Manicotti

This recipe comes to GOING LOCAL courtesy of Stephanie Rettig who is a student in the Culinary Arts Program at IVYTECH in Indianapolis, Indiana. I put out a call to the students in the program to develop an original recipe using locally sourced greens, eggs, and ham. Stephanie's manicotti combines all of those ingredients for a light but filling dish. To test the recipe I used my neighbor's hens' eggs, our own spinach, my homemade chicken broth, Trader's Point Creamery's milk, and ham from Phelps Family Farm in Lagoda, Indiana (765-942-2047). As always, the more local ingredients you use, the better the final dish.

12 uncooked manicotti shells (See notes below for alternate method)

For the filling:

1 large onion, chopped
1 garlic clove, minced
1 teaspoon olive oil
20 ounces fresh spinach, thick stems removed and leaves roughly chopped
3 cups diced cooked ham
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
2 egg whites
1/2 teaspoon dried basil
1/8 teaspoon pepper
1 dash ground nutmeg

For the sauce:

3/4 cup all-purpose flour
4 cups chicken stock, prefer homemade
1 cup whole milk, prefer Traders Point Creamery milk
1/4 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/8 teaspoon pepper
Dash cayenne pepper
1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese

Cook manicotti shells according to package directions, drain and cool to room temperature.

In a small skillet, sauté the onion and garlic in oil until tender but not browned.

Add the fresh spinach and cook down until the spinach is just wilted. Remove the pan from the heat.

In a large bowl, combine the onion/spinach mixture, ham, Parmesan cheese, egg whites, basil, pepper and nutmeg; set aside.

To make the sauce, combine flour and stock in a large saucepan stirring with a whisk until smooth.

Stir in the milk, salt, nutmeg, pepper, and cayenne. Bring to a boil over medium heat stirring constantly.

Cook for 2 minutes or until thickened.

Remove saucepan from the heat.

Spoon 1 cup of the sauce into the ham mixture.

Add Parmesan cheese to remaining sauce in the saucepan.

Spread 1 cup of the sauce into a buttered 13 inch x 9 inch x 2 inch baking dish.

Stuff the drained and cooled manicotti shells with the ham/spinach mixture.

Arrange the manicotti shells over the sauce in the baking dish.

Drizzle the tops of the manicotti with the remaining sauce.

Cover the pan with no-stick foil and bake at 375 degrees F for 35-40 minutes or until the sauce is bubbly and heated through.

Serve immediately.

Serves 4-6.

NOTE: This tip comes from Chef Liz Geeslin (<http://www.uspca.com/news/newsitem.php?id=230>) who says that you can use no-boil lasagna sheets/noodles for an easy alternative to manicotti shells. Here's her method:

Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Turn off the heat.

Slide the no-boil lasagna sheets/noodles (use the Barilla smooth no boil lasagna sheets) into the hot water and let them sit in the water.

After 4 minutes, drain the pasta sheets and place them in a large bowl of cold (no ice) water and let them sit for a few minutes.

Remove each sheet from the water and gently pat it dry with a lint free cloth kitchen towel before using it or drape the noodles on the edge of the colander to drain.

To make the manicotti, put an individual lasagna sheet on a cutting board, place your filling on one end of the noodle and gently roll the pasta sheet over the filling down to the end.

Place the individual pasta roll seam side down in the baking dish.

Some of the sheets may tear during the process so make a few more than you will need for your recipe.

Victoria Wessler