

The Shell Game . . . Conchiglioni

I have always enjoyed dishes featuring something stuffed—for example, a rolled and stuffed pork loin or a butterflied stuffed turkey breast. Roasted peppers or tomatoes in the summer months, calzones, ravioli, and for dessert, a cannoli, you get the idea.

As a youngster my initial exposure to what seemed like a stuffed pasta dish at the time, was my grandmother's lasagna. At Christmas, big roasting pans of this thickly layered pasta were generously dished out to our large family gathering. Those were happy times resulting great memories, but not great enough for me to want to make my own version of that dish. Too much work, too labor intensive, and most of the time way too much food for only the two of us in our home now. In fact, the only time I have eaten lasagna since those early days was when my goddaughter Kali, who actually makes a mean version of the dish, served it to a group of us after she spent many hours preparing and assembling a large pan full. Like I said, labor intensive!

So where is all this lasagna discussion leading us? Back to something that is less time consuming, easier to prepare, and makes a great substitute for someone who desires a piping hot, right-out-of-the-oven bowl of a baked, stuffed pasta dish like lasagna. Stuffed shells of course!

Conchiglia (pronounced con-KEEL-yay) means seashell in Italian. Pasta shells come in various sizes, where the smallest are generally used in a soup or even a variation of mac 'n' cheese, the medium size are generally served as a standalone pasta course topped with your favorite sauce, and the jumbo are best served stuffed and baked, as in conchiglioni ripieni al forno.

The most common stuffing for these jumbo shells, similar to a lasagna filling, is a mix of ricotta, egg, parsley, diced mozzarella, grated Parmigiana-Reggiano, salt, and pepper. Some recipes also include ground beef or pork sausage, which was the way I recall my grandmother layered her version of lasagna.

“ . . . something that is less time consuming, easier to prepare, and makes a great substitute . . . for lasagna. ”

In the recipe featured in this post, my stuffing is made up of a mix of roasted butternut squash, sautéed wild mushrooms, onion, garlic, soft ricotta salata, sage, parsley, salt, and pepper. The dish is finished in the oven with a simple tomato sauce, Parmigiana-Reggiano, and a drizzle of olive oil.

You can sauce the shells any way you like but there is no easier and quicker to make tomato sauce than this three ingredient version; 28 oz can of tomato puree, olive oil, and garlic. Simply saute 2 large garlic cloves in 4 or 5 tablespoons of olive oil until lightly browned. Once the oil is infused with the garlic flavor discard the cloves and add the tomato puree, stir to disperse the flavored olive oil and heat the sauce through. Set aside to be used later to finish the baked dish.

Truth be told, I already had the roasted butternut squash puree on hand frozen. If you decide to make this stuffing, roasted squash puree is quite simple to prepare. Cut the squash, butternut or Kabocha, in half through the length, remove the seeds, place skin side down in an ovenproof dish, drizzle with olive oil, and place in a preheated 350- to 375-degree oven for 45 minutes to an hour. Test for doneness, allow to cool, and scoop out the pulp which is then easily mashed. Set aside to be used to prepare the filling mix.

Conchiglioni Ripieni al Forno . . . Baked Jumbo Stuffed Shells



Ingredients (serves 6 with extras)

Notes: The pasta I used was packaged by Rustichella d'Abruzzo my go-to dried pasta maker, although any jumbo shell would work fine; the soft ricotta salata was a Greek import packaged by Manouri. It is less salty than other, drier ricotta salata cheeses I've used and has more texture and less moisture than plain ricotta. The mushrooms in this recipe were dried and reconstituted Maitake (Hen-of-the Woods) along with a small amount of dried and reconstituted Porcini for extra depth of flavor. Strain and set aside the soaking liquid to be used in the mushroom saute.

Most any dried mushrooms would work fine in this recipe as would fresh mushrooms, or even a mix of both as it is all a matter of personal taste; one (optional) ingredient in my recipe was a 1/4 pound of diced smoked bacon used to add extra flavor to the saute. Once the bacon was rendered I removed it to be used in another dish, while saving the rendered oil to be used in the saute.

1 large or 2 small butternut or Kabocha squashes, roasted, peeled, and mashed as described above

1/4 pound diced smoked bacon (optional)

1 large onion, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, finely minced

4 oz dried Maitake mushrooms plus 1/2 oz dried Porcini mushrooms, reconstituted as described above, squeezed dry and finely chopped

2 tablespoons each of finely minced fresh sage and parsley

1 large egg, whipped

1/2 pound of soft ricotta salata, finely grated

1 package of jumbo shells

Basic tomato sauce prepared as described above

Grated Parmigiano-Reggiano to finish the dish



Mise en place

Method

Roast the squash as described and set aside to fold into the stuffing. In a large saute pan render the bacon, if using, and once crisp remove it for another use, keeping only the rendered oil. Alternately, if not using the bacon, heat 4 tablespoons of olive oil until hot but not smoking and saute the onion until it begins to soften. Add the minced herbs along with salt and pepper to taste, continue to saute for 2 minutes stirring to combine. Sprinkle the minced garlic around and saute for another minute allowing the garlic to infuse the mix.

Add the chopped mushrooms and ½ cup of the soaking liquid to the pan. Raise the temperature, stirring the mixture while cooking off most all of the liquid. Set the pan aside to cool.

Heat a large stockpot of salted water to the boil. Cook the pasta until almost done. For example, the package directions on the pasta I used suggested 14 minutes cooking time, which I reduced to 12 minutes resulting in a firmer pasta which is easy to handle for stuffing. Strain the pasta shells and lay out on a kitchen towel in a sheet pan until they are cool enough to handle.

In a large work bowl place the mashed squash, grated ricotta salata, mushroom saute, and the whipped egg, folding together with a rubber spatula until completely combined.

Pre-heat the oven to 400 degrees.

Spread some of the tomato sauce to cover the bottom of an ovenproof baking dish. Take one of the pre-cooked pasta shells in your hand, gently squeezing to open it up, scoop a generous teaspoonful of the stuffing into the open shell and gently press and shape the stuffing with your thumb. Place the stuffed shell on top of the sauce in the baking dish and repeat until the baking dish is completely filled in neat rows.

Note: There will be more shells and stuffing remaining, so complete the process, setting the shells aside on a towel covered sheet pan in the freezer. Once frozen they can be separated and packaged for another meal.

Top the completed shells with additional sauce to cover each. If the sauce seems too thick, add a small amount of water, stock, or even wine to thin it out slightly because it will evaporate while baking, drying out the shells. Sprinkle with a generous amount of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano and a drizzle of olive oil.

Cover the baking dish with foil and bake in the pre-heated oven for 30 minutes until the shells are completely cooked through and lightly browned on top.

A serving of 6 to 7 of these stuffed shells per person should be satisfying. Any remaining baked shells will freeze well for a future meal.

Simply bring to room temperature, and follow the cooking instructions above, placing them this time in a 250- to 300-degree oven until heated through.

For the extra stuffed shells frozen but not yet baked, bring to room temperature and follow the cooking instructions initially described above.

If you enjoy stuffed dishes as I do, then these stuffed jumbo shells would be a good choice for you to explore. A lot less work than lasagna—versatile, lighter, and the end result is just as good. But I'll leave that for you to decide.



Served

Eat well. Be well.



Good food always has a good story . . . Proceed as the way opens, to know how to eat is to know enough!