

The Shell Game Redux

In November 2019 I published a blog post titled [The Shell Game](#), which if you want to revisit you can find here: [The Shell Game](#).

I don't often prepare baked pasta dishes, although at the time I recall my motivation was to develop a baked pasta dish that would be the alternative to the lasagna my grandmother always served at the large family gatherings we convened to celebrate Christmas Day and my grandfather's birthday.

Lasagna was way too much work, not practical to make in small portions, and too much food because it's just the two of us who are generally the only diners sharing the evening meal in our home most of the year.

I thought large-size stuffed pasta shells might be a viable alternative to lasagna. So I set out to put a batch together, and then wrote about it as noted above. In the end, the large, baked stuffed shells were equally uninspiring for me and I never prepared them again.

But I do enjoy stuffed pasta—think ravioli, agnolotti, and cannelloni, three of my favorites. When I am feeling ambitious, and have prepared a batch of fresh pasta dough, I might make one of these stuffed pastas. Cannelloni is the only one of the three that is baked, although all three can be stuffed with a wide range of fillings other than ricotta and mozzarella, making them far more interesting and fun to eat.

But I was still looking for a stuffed pasta that could showcase one of the more interesting filling options I like to explore, and also be a baked variety to cook.

What to do?

The solution came by way of an episode aired on a television travel and food show, where the host was navigating around the Italian town of Gragnano, located in the southern Italian region of Campania, near the Amalfi Coast.

“ . . . I was still looking for a stuffed pasta that could showcase one of the more interesting filling options I like to explore . . . ”

I didn't know anything about Gragnano, but learned by watching the show that the town has a centuries-old tradition of pasta making, said to date back to the 16th century. The pasta shops located there are renowned all over Italy and beyond.

As the host moved from shop to shop, showcasing one or more of the pasta varieties sold in the town, he held up an example of a special pasta shell which I had never seen before and which immediately got my attention. We stopped the show, and hit rewind so I could view the scene again to make sure I was seeing what was seemingly the largest pasta shell around.



Single large pasta shell

As it turned out, this pasta variety is called Caccavelle (pronounced kah-kah-VEL-leh), and is arguably the largest single-serving pasta shape in the world.

Loosely translated from the Neapolitan word, caccavella, for a small cooking pot, this pasta shape was created for stuffing and baking.

By their size they are essentially edible pasta bowls.

Wow! I might have just discovered the replacement for both lasagna and large stuffed shells—the challenge was where to source them.

The answer came together quickly.

While navigating the website of one of my favorite, exclusively Italian speciality food purveyors, the Pennsylvania Macaroni Company, based in Pittsburgh, I discovered that they carried one of the Gragnano-based pasta maker's products. Scrolling a little deeper I came upon a package of the Caccavelle that I was looking for and ordered two packages. Because of their large size they are sold four to a package, so having two packages on hand gave me enough “edible pasta bowls” to have some fun with in the kitchen.



Four per package

When preparing a baked, stuffed pasta dish there are a few steps you will need to follow.

Make a sauce(s) which you will initially bake the filled pasta in, and then spoon over the pasta when serving.

Make a filling, of which there are many options as I mentioned earlier. The three I chose to work with this time were a variation of the classic ricotta and cheese filling I used with my stuffed shell dish, paired with a basic tomato sauce; a filling featuring a mix of wild and cultivated mushrooms, paired with a béchamel sauce; and a scallop, shrimp, and white fish filling, paired with a sauce built on a broth of shrimp and lobster shells which I reinterpreted from a recipe served at the famous Harry's Bar in Venice, Italy.

Finally, precook the pasta shells and assemble the final dish for baking and serving.

So, if you are up for trying a unique pasta dish here is how I put all three of these together. No, not all at once for the same meal, because I betcha you can eat only one at any single meal!

Caccavelle Three Ways

(all recipes serve two; can be scaled up)

Classic Ricotta Filling

Sauce

You can use your own “house” favorite tomato sauce, or the sauce I prepared for the recipe featured in aforementioned *The Shell Game* post, or you might consider the tomato-based sauce I featured in the 2022 post titled, *Simple Is Sometimes Better*, which was my take on the iconic tomato sauce Marcella Hazan shared many years ago and still going strong today as an article in the *New York Times* recently reminded us.

I will leave the sauce for this variation of Caccavelle up to your personal preference and taste.

Filling Ingredients

10- to 12-oz young spinach or arugula leaves, finely chopped (arugula was used in this recipe)

1-1/2 cups whole milk ricotta, drained

1/2 cup whole milk mozzarella, shredded

1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or a pecorino of your choice

1 large garlic clove, very finely minced

1 large egg + 1 egg yolk

Salt, pepper, red chili flakes to your taste

Method

Combine all the ingredients into the work bowl of a food processor and pulse several times to combine. Using a rubber spatula, scrape down the sides of the work bowl and then pulse a few more times to thoroughly combine the filling but not puree it. Set aside and keep chilled until ready to fill the pasta shells.

Pasta

1 Caccavelle shell per person

Method

In a large pot of gently boiling salted water, place the Caccavelle using a slotted spoon or spider strainer.



Floating

Push the pasta shells down so that they fill with water and sink to the bottom of the pot. Allow them to gently boil, stirring around for just 1 to 2 minutes less than the cooking time instructed on the package.



Submerged

When the shells are cooked, carefully remove them using that same slotted spoon or strainer and place them on a kitchen towel, open side facing down so that they drain.



Drain after cooking

Once drained and cool enough to handle, spoon enough filling into each shell, leaving enough room to allow for expansion so that the shells don't burst during baking.



Ricotta-filled shells

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Ladle some of the tomato sauce around the bottom of the roasting pan. Place the filled shells on top of the sauce, ladle some additional sauce over the top of the shells, and sprinkle with grated cheese.



Ready to bake

Cover the baking dish with foil, place it in the oven, and bake for 25 minutes. Uncover and bake another 10 minutes until the tops are golden in color and bubbly.

Plate the dish, one Caccavelle per person, spooning a little of the pan sauce over and around, along with some additional grated cheese and minced parsley for a garnish.



Plated



Served



The next Caccavelle version I prepared was the mushroom recipe baked in and sauced with my variation of a béchamel.

Although all mushrooms can be edible, I don't forage for mushrooms myself, keeping in mind that there are some mushrooms I might find that can only be eaten once!

With that perspective top of mind, I always keep a variety of dried wild mushrooms on hand which I cook with all year long.

With this recipe I rehydrated a mix of porcini, chanterelle, yellowfoot, and meadow mushrooms, which I sourced from a purveyor based in Oregon. The meadow mushroom variety resembles the cultivated white mushroom—in both taste and texture—that we find in most grocery markets. For this recipe about 1-1/2 cups of dried mushrooms, which is equivalent to 2 pounds of fresh mushrooms, is required.

Here is how I put this Caccavelle variation together, with the sauce first up.



Béchamel Sauce Variation

Ingredients

4 tablespoons butter

1/4 cup flour

2 cups Half&Half, warmed

Salt, pepper, and a pinch of chili flakes to your taste

Method

Use a double-boiler pot, or a small saucepan placed over medium temperature, and gently melt the butter without browning. Whisk in the flour until all absorbed into the butter.

Lower the temperature and gradually whisk in the warmed Half&Half, approximately 1/2 cup at a time, until a smooth sauce begins to form. Season the sauce and continue to whisk for another 4 to 5 minutes keeping the sauce smooth. If the sauce seems too thick, whisk in a little more Half&Half.

Taste and adjust the seasoning to your liking, and cover the saucepan. If using the double-boiler pot, simply keep it warm. If using a small saucepan, set it on the stove at the very lowest temperature, or in a warm water bath as with a double boiler. Set the sauce aside until the pasta is filled and ready to bake.

Pasta Filling

Ingredients

1-1/2 cups of dried mushrooms or 2 pounds of fresh as described in the recipe introduction. The mushrooms used are entirely up to your personal taste, either a single variety or a mix. There are many options.

3 tablespoons olive oil

3 tablespoons butter

1 large garlic clove, very finely minced

8 oz strained broth used to rehydrate the dried mushrooms (or a vegetable broth could be substituted)

2/3 cup fresh minced herbs, a mix of thyme, marjoram, sage, rosemary, and lemon balm were used

8 oz plain goat milk cheese (*Note: Ricotta cheese could be used, but I find the tang of the goat milk cheese makes the filling much more interesting and complements the robust, woody flavors of the mushrooms and herb mixture.*)

1/2 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

1 egg

2 tablespoons finely minced fresh parsley

1/2 teaspoon freshly grated pepper



Filling ingredients

Method

Soak the dried mushrooms in warm water for 30 minutes. Once the mushrooms have sufficiently rehydrated, squeeze out as much liquid as you can, roughly chop the mushrooms, and set aside. Or, for a finer filling mix, place the chopped mushrooms into the work bowl of a food processor and pulse several times, scraping down the sides of the work bowl with a rubber spatula as needed, and continue pulsing until a small mince is achieved.

Strain the mushroom soaking liquid to remove any grit that may have accumulated, and set the liquid aside to be later used in the saute.

In a large sauté pan placed over medium-high temperature, melt the butter in the olive oil and add the minced garlic. Stir for 1 minute being careful not to burn the garlic.

Next add the mushrooms to the pan along with 1/4 cup of the soaking liquid. Continue to sauté, stirring for 6 to 8 minutes, lightly browning the mushrooms. If the sauté seems too dry, add more soaking liquid, 1 to 2 tablespoons at a time as needed. The mushroom sauté should be moist but not soupy.



Mushroom sauté

Take the sauté pan off the stovetop and quickly fold in the minced herb mix, and set the pan aside allowing the mix to cool.



Herb mix added to sauté

Once cool enough, transfer the mixture to a glass or stainless work bowl, and using a rubber spatula, fold in the goat milk cheese, the grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, the egg, the parsley, and the pepper.

Thoroughly mix the filling, taste to adjust the seasoning to your liking, and proceed to fill the pre-cooked Caccavelle shells as described in the initial recipe.



Filled shells ready to bake

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Spread several tablespoons of the béchamel sauce over the bottom of a lightly oiled baking dish, place the filled shells on top of the sauce, ladle additional sauce over and around the shells, and sprinkle with some additional grated cheese if you like.



Béchamel sauce added

Cover the baking dish with foil, place it in the oven, and bake for 25 minutes. Uncover and bake another 10 minutes until the tops are golden in color and bubbly.

Plate the dish, one Caccavelle per person, spooning a little of the pan sauce over and around along with some additional grated cheese and minced parsley for a garnish.



Baked shells



Plated



The final Caccavelle version I prepared was a mixed seafood-filled shell, baked and served with a sauce comprised of a shrimp and lobster shell broth with tomato. What follows is how this variation came together, starting with the sauce.

Shrimp and Lobster Shell Broth

Ingredients

Shells collected from two pounds of medium-size shrimp and two 1-1/2 pound lobsters, roughly chopped

1/4 cup olive oil

1 large garlic clove, chopped

1 medium onion, chopped

1 large celery rib, chopped

3 fennel top stalks, chopped

2 tablespoons mince fresh herbs, oregano, parsley, thyme

1/2 cup dry white wine, many options

1 quart water

1-1/2 cups crushed tomatoes with juice

Salt, pepper, chili flakes to your taste

2 tablespoons butter

2 tablespoons flour

Method

In a large stock pot placed over medium-high temperature heat the olive oil. Add the chopped shells, all the chopped vegetables, and scatter the minced herbs over and around. Cook for 30 minutes, stirring frequently.

Add the wine, water, and tomatoes while bringing the pot to a gentle boil.

Reduce the temperature—allowing the mixture to simmer—uncovered for another 15 minutes while frequently stirring.

Remove the pot from the stovetop and allow the mixture to cool. Once cool enough to handle, thoroughly strain out all of the solids and discard, returning the strained liquid to the stockpot and place back on the stovetop over a low temperature.

In a small saucepan, slowly melt the butter and then add the flour. Use a whisk to incorporate the flour into the butter, forming a smooth roux. To the roux, add a ladleful of the warm sauce and whisk it until it is smooth.

Add the roux to the sauce and whisk to thoroughly combine.

Simmer the sauce for another 35 to 45 minutes to thicken while stirring frequently. If the sauce seems too thin, raise the temperature and continue to reduce it until it can coat the back of a spoon.

Check and correct the seasoning to your liking. Cover the stockpot and keep it on a very low temperature until you are ready to assemble and bake the pasta shells.



Sauce base

Pasta Filling

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 tablespoons butter

1 small onion or 1 large shallot, minced

1/2 pound halibut filet or other white fish, cut into 1/2-inch pieces

1/2 pound medium shrimp, shelled, deveined, and roughly chopped

1/2 pound sea scallops, roughly chopped

3 tablespoons Rosso vermouth

2 eggs, separated

Zest from 1/2 lemon

2 tablespoons finely minced herbs, basil, mint, parsley

Salt, pepper, chili flakes to your taste



Prepared seafood filling

Method

In a large saute pan melt the butter in the olive oil over medium-high temperature.

Add the minced onion, stirring until softened.

Add the prepared fish and, while working quickly, mix the fish just until the white fish begins to flake and the shrimp turn pink, about 3 to 4 minutes.

Add the vermouth, stirring to combine, then remove the pan from the stovetop.

When the saute is cool enough to handle, add it to the work bowl of a food processor along with the other remaining ingredients, except the egg whites.



Seafood sauté cooling

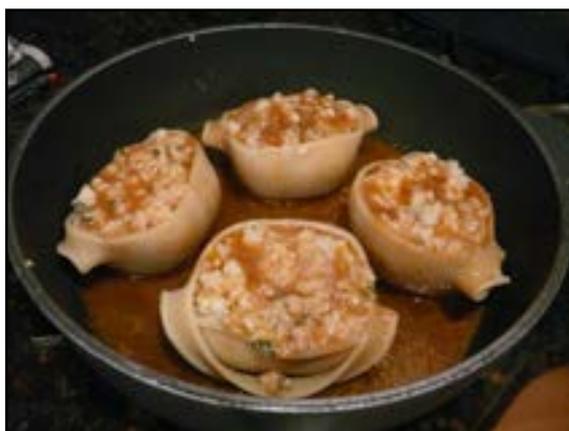
Using a high-speed hand mixer, whip the egg whites until they expand and the texture is between soft and firm. Set them aside.

Pulse the filling mixture just until it is combined, scraping down the sides of the work bowl with a rubber spatula if necessary and pulse a few more times.

Once the filling is thoroughly mixed, taste to adjust the seasoning to your liking, then using a rubber spatula, fold the whipped egg whites into the filling until they are completely incorporated. Proceed to fill the pre-cooked Caccavelle shells as described in the initial recipe.

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Spread several tablespoons of the prepared sauce over the bottom of a lightly oiled baking dish—in this case I used an ovenproof pan with a lid. Place the filled shells on top of the sauce, ladle additional sauce over and around the shells, and sprinkle with some additional minced herbs and zest if you like.



Filled shells ready for baking`

Cover the baking pan, place it in the oven, and bake for 25 minutes. Uncover and bake another 10 minutes until the tops are golden in color and bubbly.

Plate the dish, one Caccavelle per person, spooning a little of the pan sauce over and around along with some additional minced herbs for a garnish.



Plated and served

Well, that completes the trio of baked pasta dishes I have shared, featuring a unique dried pasta shape. This may become my new go-to baked-stuffed pasta dish just in time for the holiday gatherings.

The filling possibilities are many, and you don't have to prepare more than one Caccavelle per person since they are so large.

I recommend you give this one a try. It was a fun and tasty exercise for us.

Meanwhile, be thankful and enjoy the holidays with family and friends. All the best ...



Eat well • Drink well • Be well

Cooking is often about shared memory and experiences.

To know how to eat is to know enough . . .