

It's not just for pizza anymore. Ground pepperoni makes our sauce meaty and spicy.

Baked Manicotti with Meat Sauce

We spent hours in the kitchen, but our manicotti was still mediocre. Could we make it faster—and better?

BY CALI RICH

STUFFED MANICOTTI is a labor of love. It takes time and effort to brown ground beef, build a tomato sauce, cook and cool pasta tubes, pipe in the ricotta filling, sauce the stuffed pasta, and bake the ensemble. The reward is a hearty, homey, knockout dish—or at least it should be. I painstakingly prepared a number of recipes, only to discover the harsh realities of bland fillings, sauce and meat that never melded, and shredded pasta tubes. Where was the love?

Manicotti was originally made by rolling sheets of fresh pasta around a filling. This sounded easier than grappling with dried manicotti tubes, but making fresh pasta was out of the question for a weekday supper. What about no-boil lasagna noodles? Could giving them a quick soak to make them pliable save me trouble? After soaking 16 noodles (enough to fill a 13- by 9-inch dish) in hot water, I patted them dry, portioned out the filling, and started rolling. I filled these noodles much more quickly than dried tubes, and with no ripping. In a finished casserole, they were indistinguishable.

One and a half pounds of ground beef and two 28-ounce cans of crushed tomatoes made enough sauce to cover the filled tubes. But the beef flavor was faint. If I had all day, I'd let the sauce simmer and develop flavor. I remembered that a colleague had used the food processor to jump-start his Bolognese sauce: Once the ground beef was broken down, its flavor permeated the tomatoes. This technique worked just as well for my manicotti sauce. For rounder flavor, I tested using meatloaf mix and ground pork in combination with the ground beef, but they didn't contribute much. Hot Italian sausages were a modest improvement, and pepperoni—I know it sounds odd—was even better. When I ground pepperoni slices with the beef, tasters couldn't identify the new addition but loved the spicy, meaty taste it imparted.

The standard filling of equal parts ricotta and mozzarella (plus an egg for binding) tasted flat. I exchanged 1 cup of the mozzarella for more assertive Parmesan. While the taste improved, the texture took a nosedive. Provolone fixed both. A taster suggested adding meat to the filling. I reserved 1 cup of the sautéed meat mixture and stirred it into the ricotta mixture. Now the dish tasted meaty to its core. My manicotti isn't effortless. But the method is easy, and the robust, flavorful payoff is worth a little exertion.

BAKED MANICOTTI WITH MEAT SAUCE Serves 6 to 8

You will need 16 no-boil lasagna noodles. The test kitchen's preferred brand, Barilla, comes 16 to a box, but other brands contain only 12. It is important to let the dish cool for 15 minutes after baking.

MEAT SAUCE

- 1 onion, chopped
- 6 ounces sliced deli pepperoni
- 1 pound 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 5 garlic cloves, minced
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 (28-ounce) cans crushed tomatoes
- Salt and pepper

MANICOTTI

- 3 cups ricotta cheese
- 2½ cups shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1½ cups shredded provolone cheese
- 1 large egg, lightly beaten
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon pepper
- ¼ cup finely chopped fresh basil
- 16 no-boil lasagna noodles (see note)

1. GRIND MEAT Adjust oven rack to upper-middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Pulse onion and pepperoni in food processor until coarsely ground. Add beef and pulse until thoroughly combined.

2. MAKE SAUCE Transfer beef mixture to large saucepan and cook over medium heat, breaking up mixture with wooden spoon, until no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Using slotted spoon, transfer 1 cup beef mixture to paper towel–lined plate and reserve. Add tomato paste, garlic, and pepper flakes to pot with remaining meat mixture and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in tomatoes and simmer until sauce is slightly thickened, about 20 minutes. Season with salt and pepper. (At this point, sauce can be refrigerated in airtight container for 3 days.)

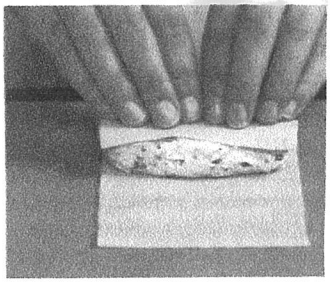
3. PREPARE FILLING Combine ricotta, 2 cups mozzarella, 1 cup provolone, egg, salt, pepper, basil, and reserved meat mixture in large bowl. Pour 2 quarts boiling water into 13- by 9-inch baking dish. noodles until pliable, about 5 min Drain noodles on kitchen towel. Pou water and dry baking dish.

4. ASSEMBLE DISH Spread half of sauce over bottom of baking dish. lowing photos below, top each so noodle with ¼ cup cheese filling, and arrange, seam-side down, over s in baking dish. Spread remaining s over manicotti. Cover with foil and until bubbling around edges, abou minutes. Remove foil and sprinkle remaining mozzarella and provo Bake until cheese is melted, about 5 utes. Let cool 15 minutes. Serve.

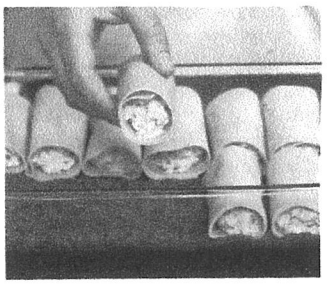
TEST KITCHEN TECHNIQUE

Thinking Outside the Tube

Manicotti shells are hard to fill without tearing. For easy-to-fill manicotti, we reinvented the noodle.



1. Soak the no-boil lasagna noodles briefly in hot water. With the short sid facing you, spread the filling across t bottom of each and roll into a tube.



2. Arrange the rolled manicotti, sean down, over the sauce in the baking