

Perfect Pasta

Stuffed Shells with Vodka Cream Sauce

By Bob Skolnick Photography by Marty Snortum Studio

We will prepare four different fillings for the shells. Spinach, mushrooms, roasted red pepper and squash. Each filling should be done in advance before cooking the pasta shells.

Serves 4

SAUCE

- 16 oz whole plum tomatoes, canned
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 large white onion, finely diced
- 2 oz virgin olive oil
- 4 oz vodka
- 6 oz whipping cream
- 1 oz fresh basil, chopped
- 1 oz fresh dill, chopped
- Salt and pepper to taste

To prepare the sauce

Drain the liquid from the canned tomatoes and reserve. Place the tomatoes in a blender or food processor and pulse until chopped well, but not pureed. Heat the olive oil and sauté the onion until slightly brown. Add the minced garlic and sauté for a minute more. Add the vodka and simmer vigorously for a few minutes to reduce the vodka by half. Add the chopped plum tomatoes, fresh basil, and fresh dill. Mix all of the ingredients and season with salt and pepper to taste. Bring the mixture to a boil then reduce to a simmer for twenty minutes. Use the reserved tomato juice to thin the sauce, if needed.

Just before you are ready to serve, warm the whipping cream separately in a saucepan or in the microwave. Be careful not to overheat, as the cream will break down. Gently combine the heated cream with the tomato-vodka sauce. Blend with a whip and then adjust the salt and pepper after tasting.



FILLING FOR THE SHELLS

To prepare the mushroom filling

- 1 lb large white fresh mushrooms
- 3 oz white onion, minced
- 1 ½ oz beaten egg (yolk and white)
- Salt and pepper to taste

Wash and trim the stems of the mushrooms and cut into quarters. Place the onion and mushroom quarters into a blender or food processor, add salt and pepper and pulse until finely chopped, but not liquefied. Remove to a piece of cheesecloth or kitchen towel and squeeze out the excess liquid. Place in a glass bowl for later use and keep at room temperature. Add the beaten egg and mix just before ready to stuff the shells.

To prepare the spinach filling

- 24 oz fresh spinach
- 3 oz white onion minced
- 1 ½ oz beaten egg (yolk and white)
- Salt and pepper to taste

Trim the spinach and wash. Drain and place in a sauté pan and gently cook with olive oil. Cook the spinach until soft, but not fully cooked. Transfer to a blender or food processor and add the minced onion, salt and pepper to taste. Pulse until chopped but not liquefied. Place in a cheesecloth or kitchen towel and squeeze out the excess liquid. Place in a glass bowl for later use and keep at room temperature. Add the beaten egg and mix just before ready to stuff the shells.

To prepare the roasted red pepper filling

4 large red bell peppers
1 oz garlic, finely minced
1½ oz beaten egg
Salt and pepper to taste

Cut the peppers in half and gently remove the seeds and ribs. Cover a cookie sheet with aluminum foil and preheat your oven to 500 degrees. Coat the cleaned pepper halves with olive oil and place skin side up on the cookie sheet. Place in the preheated oven and roast until the skin is loose and the pepper flesh is softened. This should take no more than fifteen to twenty minutes. Remove the peppers from the oven and let cool in a tightly covered container for a few minutes. The peppers should cool enough so that you can handle them to remove the skin. Transfer to a blender or food processor and add the minced garlic. Pulse until chopped but not liquefied. Place in a glass bowl for later use and keep at room temperature. Add the beaten egg and mix just before ready to stuff the shells.

To prepare the squash filling

1 acorn squash, medium size
3 oz grated Parmesan cheese
1½ oz beaten egg
Salt and pepper to taste

Cut the squash in half. Be very careful, as the acorn squash is hard and can roll while cutting. Placing a towel bunched underneath the squash will help keep it from rolling while you cut it. Once cut in half, remove the seeds. Cover a cookie sheet with aluminum foil and lightly spray the foil with oil to keep the squash from sticking. Place the squash skin side up and bake in a preheated 375 degree oven for an hour or more until the squash is soft. Remove the squash from the oven and let cool to room temperature. Scoop out the squash flesh with a teaspoon. Place in a glass bowl and mix with the Parmesan cheese and set aside at room temperature for later. Add the beaten egg and mix just before you are ready to stuff the shells.

PASTA

32 each medium pasta shells
2 quarts vegetable-chicken broth

To prepare the shells

For this recipe, you will need eight shells per person. I recommend an imported variety. You might want to also cook a few extra, as there might be breakage during handling, plus you will need to test for doneness with a few shells. Prepare a strong chicken-vegetable broth and season with garlic and onion powder. Bring the liquid to a boil and gently add the pasta shells into the cooking liquid. Occasionally, gently stir the shells in the broth to make sure they do not stick together while cooking. You may want to cook the shells in two batches. Taste test a shell to determine doneness. The shells should be cooked al dente (firm to the bite). Remove the shells with a slotted spoon and immerse in ice water to immediately stop the cooking process. Once cooled to room temperature (20 seconds at most), remove the shells from the ice water, drain on a paper towel, transfer to a flat container and gently coat with olive oil. Set off to the side at room temperature.

Stuffing and baking the shells

A dinner portion is eight shells per person, two shells stuffed with mushroom, two with spinach, two with roasted red pepper and two with squash. Gently stuff the shells using a small spoon. Pack the mixture fully into the cavity of the shell. Once all of your shells are filled, place them into a well-oiled baking dish or on a foil-covered, oiled sheet pan. Place the filled shells in an oven preheated to 325 degrees and bake uncovered until the mixture in each shell is firm and hot, about thirty minutes. You can insert the tip of a knife or a cake-testing needle into the center and if it comes out hot to the touch on your wrist, you will know it is ready to be removed from the oven.

Plating and serving the shells

Preheat your dinner plates to warm. Place the shells around the edge of the plate, alternating fillings. Spoon or puddle the tomato vodka cream sauce in the center of the plate and garnish with a sprig of fresh basil. Serve with freshly grated Parmesan cheese on the side for use as requested.

Buen Provecho!



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