Turning Leftovers Into Casseroles

When you begin cooking more often from home, one of the issues you might come across is that you have a tendency to cook a little too much. This is a very common complaint among people who just start out with cooking, whether you cook for yourself, your spouse, or a big family. However, don’t forget about all the different things you can do with your leftovers!

If you have been throwing away the leftovers, you really are missing out on so many great food ideas. From using your meal for lunches the following days, to cooking meat in bulk and purposely saving it for future meals, there is just so much you can do with your leftovers. Throwing away leftovers not only keeps you from being able to use the food you worked so hard to make, but it can help save money as well.

Also consider how much easier it is to plan future meals when you know you will have leftovers to work with. Even if you have one day every week where you do a lot of cooking, you can plan to use half of some of these meals for leftovers, then have even more meals to work with.

If you are not quite sure how you can use your leftovers, you should definitely start with casseroles. Casseroles are easy to put together and can use just about any leftovers you have, from soup and chili, to chicken, spaghetti, and even Chinese food. Here are some tips for turning your leftovers into casseroles.

**Components of a Good Casserole**

Before we start getting into specific tips for turning leftovers into casseroles, let’s look at what a good casserole is. It is true that many casseroles just involve throwing in whatever food components you happen to have and baking it to heat up, but you could use a little bit more creativity than that. A casserole can be a main course, side dish, or your complete meal all in one dish. For this reason, it helps to know the main components to choose for a really excellent casserole. Here are some important parts of a casserole.

*Rice, Pasta, or Noodles*

The first component to a casserole is usually the starch portion. This is definitely not mandatory, but many full-meal casseroles, particularly when talking about comfort food, are going to include this component. It helps to beef up your casserole and make it more filling. Of course, if your family is on a low-carb diet, you could always make your own faux noodles or zoodles, which are typically made from zucchini or squash. For a healthier option, there are brown rice spaghetti noodles, brown or whole grain rice, and whole wheat pasta noodles. Depending on the type of casserole you are preparing, mashed potatoes or another type of potato might be the starch you choose instead or rice or pasta.

*Main Protein Source*

Most casseroles are also going to have a protein source, whether you are going with a vegetarian casserole, vegan casserole, or one with meat in it. If your casserole is going to have meat, that becomes the protein component. This can include any type of meat you have, such as cooked chicken breast, steak strips, pork chops or lamb chops, ham, bacon, or ground beef or turkey. Other types of protein sources include tofu, fish or seafood, hard-cooked eggs, or various types of cooked beans.

*Fruits and Vegetables*

Another aspect of a casserole you probably want to add is your vegetable or fruit. Some casseroles might have veggies and fruits, though vegetables do tend to be a little bit more common with casseroles made from leftovers. This can be cooked veggies you have leftover from a previous dinner, chopped veggies you never cooked, or even some canned veggies that you have and want to add to your casserole. Some popular veggie options for casseroles include broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, kale, green beans, peas, corn, carrots, onions, and zucchini.

*Sauce and Seasonings*

Now comes the flavor component of your casserole. To start with, you might want o add in flavorings or seasonings. This may include any types of seasonings you would add to this meal if it weren’t in a casserole, such as salt, pepper, or garlic. You can also season it with fresh herbs like tarragon, basil, thyme, rosemary, oregano, or marjoram. Some veggies also make good flavoring options, including black olives, tomatoes, celery, onion, and chives.

For the sauce portion, it sometimes includes a tomato or marinara sauce for pasta, or you may want to use a cream soup as your sauce, such as cream of celery or cream of mushroom. Some casseroles will use milk instead to create the sauce portion of the casserole.

To finish off your casserole, you may also want to add a topping for the last few minutes of baking it. This is often cheese, since it gets nice and bubbly on top of the casserole. Grated or shredded cheese like parmesan, swiss, or cheddar are all good options. You can also use French fried onions or bread crumbs as your topping.

**The ‘Dump and Bake’ Method**

If you don’t want to have to use this type of system for adding components one at a time to make a casserole, you definitely don’t have to. You might not have ingredients that create the ‘perfect’ casserole, or you may just have a few things you want to dump into a casserole dish and save for later. This is totally fine, and what is sometimes called the Dump and Bake method.

With this method of turning your leftovers into a casserole, you are taking the leftovers you have, combining them however you think will taste good and dumping them into a casserole dish. You don’t need to worry about what goes in first, having a starch and a protein, or worrying about flavor and toppings. You are simply trying to put together a dish that uses up all those leftovers and keeps you from having to throw them out.

Here are some different ideas for turning your leftovers into a casserole by using the Dump and Bake method:

*Put All Dinner Components Together*

The first way to quickly create a Bake and Dump casserole from your leftovers is by simply putting all of the dinner components together. Take some from every part of a single dinner and throw them all in the casserole dish. For example, you might have some chicken breasts, steamed vegetables, white rice, and dinner rolls all leftover from a simple chicken dinner you prepared. You can add these all to a casserole dish, add some type of liquid so the ingredients don’t burn, and it is good enough for a casserole.

*Use the Layering System*

Another way to create a casserole with your leftovers is to try the layering system. This works with leftovers from one dinner or from adding in whatever you happen to have on hand. For example, you might have leftovers from a big Thanksgiving dinner that you want o turn into a leftover casserole. You can start with a layer of mashed potatoes on the bottom, followed by a layer of stuffing. Add the layer of turkey on top of that, with some gravy on the very top. When it is almost done, add in some cranberry sauce right on top and you’re ready to go.

*Save Multiple Days’ of Leftovers*

This is done when you are making a lot of meals at home and have leftovers that you don’t intend to use right away. If you are going to save them for more than couple days, you are probably better off freezing them. Otherwise, placing them in your refrigerator to stay fresh should be good enough. With this method, you are mixing and matching with what you leftover. You can take the pork chops from one of your dinners, and instead of cooking applesauce with the casserole, instead add some leftover sliced apples from a snack the day before, and then add in some rice you made with Chinese food earlier that day for lunch. You are making a brand new dinner from different leftovers you have.

*Create Your Own Casserole*

This is similar to the previous idea, but you are using some food you have in the pantry that aren’t necessarily leftovers. For example, the only thing you have leftover might be a piece of steak that wasn’t eaten. You can slice this steak up into strips and add it to a casserole with some egg noodles and a sauce in a jar that combined could make steak tips, gravy, and noodles. This is a really easy dinner you have put together just with what you had in the kitchen.

*Save Breakfast Leftovers For Dinner*

Breakfast leftovers are often perfect for making a casserole, even when you are saving it for dinner. Some breakfast leftovers to consider saving for a casserole include:

* Pancakes, waffles or French toast
* Biscuits or English muffins
* Jam
* Eggs
* Bacon or sausage
* Omelettes
* Egg scramble
* Chopped veggies
* Salsa

**Turn Your Soup Into a Casserole**

One of the more surprising things you can do with leftover casseroles is turn soup into a casserole. Soup is actually an excellent thing to take and turn into a casserole! Definitely never throw your soup away unless it is spoiled, since it is perfect for turning into other meals. Here are some different ways to use soup with your leftover casserole.

**Thick soup** – Soup is going to be the main base of your casserole dish, keeping you from having to add liquid or a sauce of another kind to create a full meal. However, you are going to add things to it in order to make a meal large enough to feed your family. To start with, you need to look at the consistency of the soup. If it is on the thicker side, there isn’t much else that needs to be done before adding it to your casserole dish. Thick soups, such as potato cheese soup or clam chowder, are usually thick enough to add to the casserole dish as-is before adding in other ingredients.

**Thin or watery soup** – On the other hand, if your soup is a little watery or on the thinner side, you probably want to thicken it up a little bit before adding it to your casserole dish. You can do this by adding some flour to the soup if it is a cream-based soup, mixing it until it is a thick consistency, then pouring it in the casserole dish. Another method that is often used is to add some dry rice to the soup, then add this mixture to the casserole dish with your other ingredients.

**Add meat or vegetables** – Once you have added the soup or prepared it to where it can be dumped into the casserole dish, you will then start beefing up your casserole with other ingredients. A good way to start is by adding in vegetables and meat. You can add in both, or just choose one or the other. Some vegetables that are good to add to the dish are green beans, kidney beans, corn, and broccoli. For example, if you are using a potato cheese soup that you have leftover, you can add some broccoli and chicken to the casserole dish along with this soup to have the start of a really delicious casserole.

**Choose a casserole topping** – Many casseroles also contain a topping to add a little bit more to the casserole, thicken it up, and make it a bit more filling for your family. If the soup, meat, and veggies is already pretty hefty in the casserole dish, all you really need to add to the top of the dish are some bread crumbs or shredded cheese. Otherwise, you can add pasta, potatoes, or rice on top and bake the casserole as it is. Another option is to get canned croissants, roll them out and flatten them, and place them on top of the casserole dish. The dough will be golden brown by the time your casserole is done and all heated up.

**Ways to Improve Your Leftovers Casserole**

Aside from these great tips, there are also some other ways you can have an even better casserole. Whether you want to kick it up a notch to add more flavor, make it a bit healthier, or even add more color to make it enticing for the little ones, these tips are really going to help.

*Try Adding Fresh Herbs*

If you’re concerned about your casserole tasting a little bland from all the reheated food, you can try adding some fresh flavor to it with herbs. Use fresh herbs, which can be found at any supermarket or health food store. This will make your casserole taste really fresh and delicious, even if it is made up primarily of leftovers from the last few days of dinners. Some good fresh herbs that taste great with casseroles are thyme, basil, oregano, and rosemary.

*Give it More Color*

You can also improve upon your leftovers casserole by giving it a little more color. This can take a casserole made up of a cream-based soup, chicken, and rice, and turn it into a colorful and vibrant meal. It really helps it to be more appetizing, especially for the picky eaters in your home. Plus, adding more color means you are adding veggies that will improve its health and nutrition as well. Some colorful vegetables to consider adding include spinach or kale, carrots, peas, or bell peppers.

*Add Some Citrus Juice*

Many casseroles just need a little bit of a boost in flavor and freshness. In addition to using fresh herbs to make it taste a little better, you can also add just a bit of lemon zest or the juice from a lime or even an orange. This little bit of citrus juice added to a casserole really brings out its complex flavors.

*Have Enough Sauce*

Casseroles are not as simply as just putting food together and heating it up. If that were the case, you would pile the leftovers on a plate and pop it in the microwave. With a casserole, you are turning those leftovers into a brand new meal. You don’t want it to be too dry, so you should really focus on the sauce. Whether you add tomato sauce to pasta leftovers or you go with a cream-based soup as the sauce for a chicken or turkey leftovers casserole, you definitely don’t want to skimp on it.

*Make it a Little Healthier*

Just because you are making a casserole, doesn’t mean it has to be fattening. While a lot of people beef up a casserole with bread crumbs, cheese, and mashed potatoes, you definitely don’t have to. When adding more ingredients to a casserole, focus on adding more veggies. You can use whole wheat pasta or brown rice pasta for the starch instead of regular white pasta and rice, and you can use a nice pesto

**Ideas For Leftover Casseroles**

Now that you know how to put together your own casserole from leftovers you already have, it is time to talk about some specific casseroles that are great to put together. These ideas are just a way of inspiring you to create a casserole from your leftovers. Even if you don’t have all these ingredients, it gives you a good place to start with your own leftovers.

*Thanksgiving Leftovers Casserole*

This first casserole is going to use all of those Thanksgiving leftovers. Instead of just throwing all the leftovers on a plate and heating it up, consider making another meal by putting it together in a big casserole dish. It feels more like you are making a new meal, but with all the Thanksgiving classics. This recipe is going to use some classic Thanksgiving foods like mashed potatoes, stuffing, turkey, gravy or mayonnaise, and cheese. You can even use cranberry sauce in the casserole.

A recommendation for making this Thanksgiving casserole is to make your own sauce by combining mayonnaise with the cranberry sauce. Spoon in stuffing on the bottom of the casserole dish, followed by the turkey and then the sauce you just created. On top of that, you can add in your mashed potatoes and add more stuffing to the top, followed by either more sauce or gravy. You can add some shredded cheese on top if you happen to have it on hand. Change this recipe as needed based on the types of leftovers you have.

*Cheesy Rice Casserole with Meat and Veggies*

This casserole is a great way to use leftover ham, turkey or chicken, along with any veggies you happen o have in the fridge. Perhaps you have some broccoli and cauliflower leftover from a chicken meal you had a couple days ago, and last night you didn’t use up all of your ham. You can combine these together with cheese, rice, Italian seasoning, and water to create a casserole. If you have cheese soup, that is the perfect option for creating a sauce for your casserole.

Chop up your ham and add it to the casserole with uncooked rice of your choice, the veggies, and the cheese sauce you have created. Bake it for about an hour, or until the rice is tender. It is a super easy way to create a leftovers casserole.

*Chicken Parmesan Casserole*

If you like Italian food, you can take all your leftover chicken, a few added ingredients, and make yourself a chicken parmesan casserole. Make sure you used cooked chicken instead of raw chicken, otherwise you will need to bake your chicken first. This is perfect for leftover chicken or to use a Rotisserie chicken you happen to have. Chop up the chicken and add it to the casserole dish with parmesan cheese, marinara sauce, mozzarella cheese, bread crumbs, and your preferred herbs and seasonings. You can use an Italian blend or make your own with oregano, parsley, and basil.

*Taco Salad Casserole*

For something a little closer to a Mexican food meal, consider putting together a taco salad casserole. There is a lot of room for creativity when you make this type of casserole, since you are using up any taco ingredients you have in the refrigerator.

Some recommended ingredients are ground beef or cooked chicken, taco seasoning mix, enchilada sauce or red sauce, veggies like bell peppers and corn, onions, black beans or pinto beans, and cheddar cheese. Add in seasonings like salt, pepper, and garlic salt, and don’t forget the salsa on top when it is done baking. You can also add toppings like tomatoes, sour cream, guacamole, and shredded lettuce.

There are a lot of ways you can turn your leftovers into casseroles. This creates brand new meals for your family.