

The Overnight Breakfast Casserole

Anne Byrn/Between the Layers

One year I asked my friend LouAnn about a wonderful strata she served at the stroke of midnight one New Year's Eve. The secret, she explained, was soft bread - you should be able to squish it in your hands. Could this have been why my mother chose hamburger buns to add lightness to her cornbread dressing? Cut off the crust for a softer consistency, or leave some crust on for more texture. And it doesn't matter if the loaf is fresh or stale. Just cut it into 1/2-inch cubes and measure by lightly packing into a dry cup measure. I've kept the ham in the recipe that follows, but feel free to omit for vegetarians.

Makes 8 generous servings

Bake: 55 minutes to 1 hour

Vegetable oil spray for misting the pan

1 tablespoon olive oil or butter

1/4 cup minced onion

1/4 cup minced red bell pepper

10 slices soft Italian-style bread, cut into 1/2-inch cubes (4 cups)

1 cup finely minced ham (about 4 ounces), if desired

2 cups (8 ounces) shredded very sharp Cheddar cheese

1 cup grated Parmesan cheese

6 large eggs

3 cups whole milk

1 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Pinch of cayenne pepper or nutmeg, if desired

1 cup crushed Ritz or buttery round crackers (about 16)

4 tablespoons unsalted, butter, melted

1. Lightly mist a 13-by 9-inch glass or ceramic baking dish with vegetable oil spray. Set aside.

2. Place the olive oil or butter in a small skillet and place over medium-high heat. Add the onion and bell pepper, and reduce the heat to medium. Stir and saute until the veggies soften, 3 to 4 minutes. Set aside.
3. Scatter half of the bread cubes in the baking dish. Top with the ham, if desired, the cheeses, and the onion and pepper mixture. Add the remaining bread cubes. Set the baking dish aside.
4. Place the eggs, milk, mustard, and cayenne or nutmeg, if desired, in a medium-size bowl and whisk to combine. Pour the egg mixture over the bread cubes and press down on them to immerse them in the liquid. Cover the dish with plastic wrap, and place it in the refrigerator overnight.
5. The next morning, preheat the oven to 350 degrees. Remove the plastic wrap. Toss the cracker crumbs and melted butter in a small bowl. Using your fingers, scatter the crumb mixture over the top of the soaked bread cubes. Place the dish in the oven, and bake until the casserole bakes up golden brown, about 55 minutes to 1 hour. Serve at once. (And you can reheat leftovers in the microwave on day two.)