

Butternut Squash, Sausage & Ricotta Stuffed Shells

INGREDIENTS

- 20-24 jumbo pasta shells (about 8-10 ounces dry)
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 pound mild Italian sausage
- ½ sweet onion, finely diced
- 3 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 cups fresh baby spinach, roughly chopped
- 1 (15-ounce) container ricotta cheese
- 1 large egg
- ½ cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese, plus more for serving
- 1 cup shredded mozzarella cheese, divided
- 1 teaspoon fresh thyme leaves, plus more for garnish
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt, or to taste
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 (24-ounce) jar butternut squash pasta sauce
- ¼ cup chicken broth, optional, to thin the sauce
- Red pepper flakes, for serving

DIRECTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 375°F. Lightly grease a 12-inch oven-safe cast iron skillet or 9x13-inch baking dish.
2. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Cook jumbo shells until just al dente, about 1-2 minutes less than package directions. Drain and rinse briefly with cool water to stop the cooking process. Set aside.
3. Heat olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Add diced onion and sauté for 2-3 minutes until softened. Add Italian sausage, breaking it apart with a wooden spoon. Cook for 6-8 minutes, until browned and fully cooked. Drain excess grease if needed.
4. Stir in minced garlic and cook for about 30 seconds until fragrant. Add chopped spinach and cook for another 1-2 minutes, until wilted. Remove from heat and allow the mixture to cool slightly.
5. In a large bowl, combine ricotta cheese, egg, Parmesan cheese, ½ cup mozzarella, fresh thyme, salt, and pepper. Mix until well combined. Fold in the sausage and spinach mixture.
6. Spread approximately 1½ cups of butternut squash pasta sauce across the bottom of your cast iron skillet or baking dish. If the sauce is especially thick, stir in a splash of chicken broth to loosen it.
7. Fill each cooked pasta shell with approximately 2 tablespoons of the sausage and ricotta mixture. Arrange the shells over the sauce, open side facing up. If using cast iron, arrange them in a circular pattern.
8. Spoon the remaining butternut squash sauce around and lightly over the shells, leaving some of the filling exposed. Sprinkle the remaining ½ cup mozzarella evenly over the top.
9. Cover loosely with foil and bake for 20 minutes. Remove the foil and bake for an additional 8-10 minutes, until the sauce is bubbling, the cheese is melted, and the filling reaches 160°F.
10. Remove from the oven and garnish with additional freshly grated Parmesan, fresh thyme, and a sprinkle of red pepper flakes. Serve warm!