

Baked Ziti

Serves 6

1	lb.	ziti or penne
3	TBSP.	extra-virgin olive oil
1	med.	onion, finely chopped
3	med.	garlic cloves, minced
1	lb.	lean ground sirloin, sausage, or meat of choice
¼	cup	dry wine (either white or red – what's open)
¼	tsp.	crushed red pepper
½	tsp.	smoked paprika (optional)
- - -	- - -	sea salt and pepper
3	cups	marinara sauce (24 oz.), either fresh or jarred
1¾	cups	fresh ricotta (15 oz. container)
1	lrg.	round ball of fresh mozzarella (sliced thinly), or pre-sliced pkg., about 16 oz.
¼	cup	freshly grated Parmesan cheese, more to taste

1. If you're making this ahead, don't preheat your oven yet. If you're making it all at once, preheat your oven to 450 °F.
2. In a large deep skillet, heat the olive oil on medium heat, add the onion and a pinch of salt and cook until the onion is softened but not brown. Add the garlic and cook another minute just until fragrant. Add the ground sirloin, crushed red pepper and paprika, seasoning with salt. Turn the heat up to high, break up the meat with a spoon and cook until the meat is brown (and no longer pink). Deglaze the pan with the wine and continue cooking until almost all the wine has evaporated. Add the sauce; bring to a boil, lower to a simmer and cook—partially covered—for 5 minutes until the sauce tastes great. Set aside.
3. Boil the pasta in a large pot of salted water. Cook one or two minutes less than the package says; you want it *al dente*. Drain the pasta and then toss the pasta in the sauce (I found it easier to do this in the pasta pot rather than the sauce sauté pan, but it's up to you.) Add the ricotta in large dollops and stir gently, leaving some clumps.
4. While the pasta is boiling, heat the pasta sauce in a medium saucepan. Add any fresh herbs of choice – fresh basil, rosemary, etc., (if you add rosemary, remember to remove the sprigs before mixing the pasta and the sauce together).
5. Pour half the ziti into a 9" X 13" baking dish, top with half of the mozzarella and Parmesan. Repeat with the remaining ziti and cheeses. Here's where you can cover with foil and refrigerate until you're ready to bake.
6. When you're ready, get the oven to 450 degrees and bake the ziti—uncovered—for 15 minutes, until bubbling and browned. Let the ziti rest for 10 minutes before serving.

Preparation time: 30 – 45 minutes

Cooking time: 15 minutes