

Baked Penne Bolognese

Ingredients

3 slices white bread, toasted and cut into 1/4-inch pieces
1/2 cup milk
3/4 pound ground beef
3/4 pound ground pork
2/3 pound Italian sausage (half sweet, half hot), casings removed
8 lardons bacon, cut into 1/2 inch pieces
1 large onion, diced
10 cloves garlic, minced (yes, 10)
1/4 cup fresh parsley, chopped
1/4 cup fresh oregano, chopped
1/4 cup fresh basil, chopped
salt and pepper, to taste
hot red pepper flakes, to taste (optional)
3 28-ounce cans San Marzano plum tomatoes
1 12-ounce can tomato paste
3 cups beef broth
3 bay leaves
3-4 tablespoons heavy cream
2 cups penne pasta, cooked al dente
1/2 cup mixed grated Italian cheese, such as mozzarella, fontina, parmesan, etc.

Directions

Preheat oven to 325F.

Soak the bread in the milk until the liquid is absorbed, about 8 minutes. Meanwhile, combine the ground beef and pork, and Italian sausage in a bowl with the parsley, 1 teaspoon salt, and pepper to taste. Add the soaked bread and mix with your hands until combined. Set aside.

Heat large heavy-bottomed oven-safe pot over medium heat. Render the bacon until crispy and remove bacon bits (save for later), but leave bacon grease in the pot. Add the meat mixture and cook thoroughly, about 10-12 minutes. Remove to a paper towel lined plate to remove any excess grease.

Return the pot to the heat and add 3 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the onion and smashed garlic to the pot and fry until soft, about 4 minutes. Crush the tomatoes into the pot with your hands and pour in the juices. Stir in the tomato paste and add oregano, basil and hot pepper flakes, if using. Season with salt and pepper and cook 5 minutes.

Add 3 cups beef broth and the bay leaves, then return meat mixture and bacon bits, stirring carefully. Bring to a low boil, stir, then place covered pot in the oven. Simmer (as low as possible) for 2 hours. Return to the stove top, uncover and simmer until the sauce thickens, approximately 30 more minutes. Note that you may need to skim the sauce if too much grease has rendered from the meat mixture. Discard the bay leaves. Stir in the cream.

Preheat oven to 400F.

Meanwhile, fill a pot with water and cook the penne according to directions. Drain and mix with 2 cups of the Bolognese. Place in an over-proof dish and cover generously with the grated cheese. Bake for 15-20 minutes, until bubbly and lightly browned.