

AGGIElife

THE BATTALION

Mighty Manicotti

Pasta shells stuffed with cheeses, spinach and topped with sauce make a classic Italian meal

Certain recipes' ingredients should never be tasted individually, but when combined, they become an exquisite culinary masterpiece. There is no better example of this than spinach cheese manicotti.



STUART HUTSON

Spinach, although popularized by everyone's favorite squinting sailor, has long been the bane of children of all ages due to its squishy texture and veggie taste. The texture of ricotta cheese is indescribable, and the taste is such that one can never really tell when it has gone bad.

Parsley, normally viewed as little more than garnish shoved toward the outer edges of one's plate, gets a strong supporting role in this meal. Garlic gives zing and a distinctive aroma to the mix.

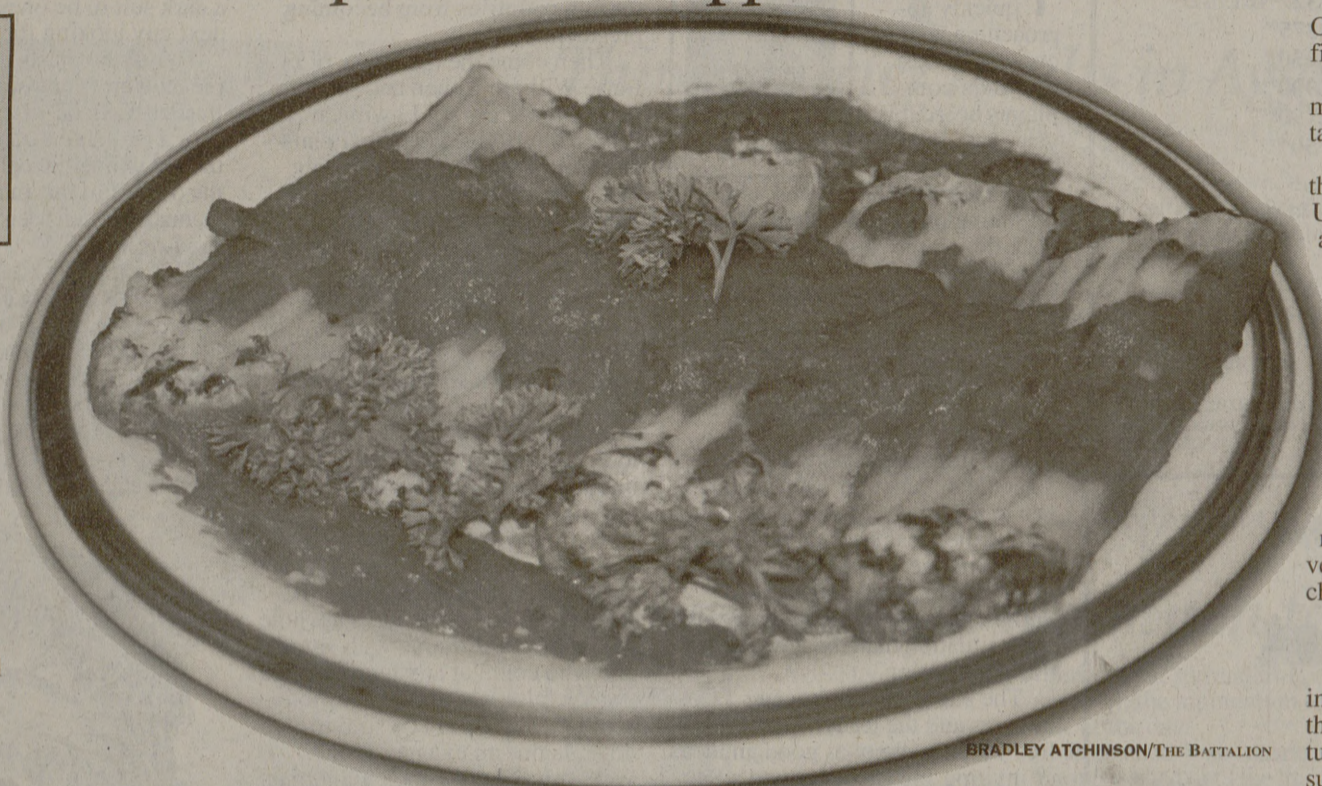
Nonetheless, combining these ingredients with ever-popular mozzarella and Parmesan cheese results in a meal fit to be eaten on an Italian gondola or just on a first date.

Many manicotti

You may be surprised when you go to the store to buy manicotti shells. These pasta pieces are cylindrical containers, usually as big around as a half dollar, but the variations in size, composition and cooking methods are enormous.

Manicotti comes in many flavors, from normal pasta to spinach to jalapeno cheese (although the latter is a little hard to find outside of a big city). Some are grooved, some are smooth and some have random decorative imprints.

Keep in mind that you need a shell with a taste that will not interfere with the cheese and spinach filling. Manicotti is also sold in "oven ready" form, meaning it does not need to be boiled like raw manicotti does.



BRADLEY ATCHINSON/THE BATTALION

Otherwise, the taste of the spinach will dominate the filling.

Beat the mixture until it has a marbled look. The marbled appearance of the filling is important to the taste and presentation of the dish.

Many recipes for this dish do not include eggs, but the eggs make the filling more solid after it is cooked. Using eggs also allows for a more appetizing browned appearance.

Next comes the fun part — stuffing the shells. Most directions will tell you to "carefully spoon the filling into the shells." Careful is right — spoon is wrong.

There is no better method to filling these shells than just holding the shell in one hand and pushing the filling in with the other. You will make a mess, but this is better than demolishing the delicate shells with a spoon.

A friend suggested slicing the shells down the middle and rolling the filling into them. This is a very, very bad idea. When the manicotti is cooked, the cheese will ooze out of the bottom of the shell.

Get cooking

Spread a layer of red sauce on the bottom of a 2-inch-deep pan. There are numerous possibilities for this sauce, from mushroom to beef. If you are adventurous, you may even attempt to make it yourself, but I suggest using store-bought. Making sauce at the same time as preparing everything takes too many hands.

Arrange the filled shells in a single layer in the pan and pour some sauce on top of them. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees, cover the pan with aluminum foil and bake for 40 minutes.

After 40 minutes, remove the foil and allow the manicotti to bake for an additional 15 minutes.

Serve with a red wine.

Fill 'er up

If you boil the shells, let them cool for at least 10 minutes. Do not stack them; they will stick to one another.

In a large bowl, beat the eggs then stir in the other ingredients. Be sure to warm the spinach before adding it (frozen spinach does not mix well in manicotti).

Strain as much liquid from the spinach as possible.

Spinach Cheese Manicotti

- 14 manicotti shells
- 10 oz. frozen cut spinach
- 1 1/3 cups (15 oz.) part-skim ricotta cheese
- 2 cups (8 oz.) shredded mozzarella cheese
- 1/4 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder

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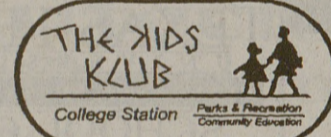
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