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REGISTERED DIETITIAN & CULINARY NUTRITION EXPERT

LIGHTENED-UP BAKED ZITI

Baked ziti is one of those dishes that brings back memories for me. As a more selective eater when I was younger, this cheesy, saucy, ooey, gooey delicious casserole was one of my favorite meals my mom made. Fast forward 30+ years, I'm still a fan, but in my typical fashion I had to make my baked ziti filled with a little more nutrition. If you struggle with your kids eating their veggies, this Lightened-Up Baked Ziti is a surprising way to get some in without too much effort. While I'm not into hiding vegetables per se, adding them to a mixed dish like ziti is a great way to introduce lesser liked veggies, herbs, and spices. Just be sure to let your kids know what's in it after they say "more please!"

Prep Time: 15 minutes

Cook Time: 30-35 minutes

Servings: 12

Course: Dinner

Cuisine: Italian

Dietary Notes: Vegetarian, Meat-free

INGREDIENTS

- Cooking spray
- 1 pound whole wheat ziti, rigatoni, or penne
- One 16-ounce package cauliflower rice (~3 cups)
- One 15-ounce container part-skim ricotta cheese
- One 8-ounce bag of part-skim shredded mozzarella, divided
- 1 large egg
- 1/2 teaspoon dried basil
- 1/2 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1/2 teaspoon dried thyme
- 1/2 teaspoon dried rosemary
- 1/2 teaspoon Kosher salt
- Freshly ground pepper, to taste
- 24 ounces marinara sauce, divided
- One 10-ounce package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and drained
- 1/2 cup grated parmesan cheese

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees F. Coat a 9x13-inch baking dish with cooking spray and set aside.
2. Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to boil. Add pasta and cook about 8 minutes (it will be slightly less than al dente, but will cook more in the oven). Drain and rinse pasta and return to pot.

3. While pasta is cooking, put cauliflower rice in a large microwave-safe bowl and microwave on high for 3 minutes. Using an immersion blender or food processor, puree cauliflower rice until smooth.
4. Add ricotta, 1 cup (~3 ounces) mozzarella, and egg to the pureed cauliflower. Season with basil, oregano, thyme, rosemary, salt, and pepper, to taste, and mix until ingredients are combined.
5. Toss drained pasta with ricotta/cauliflower mixture, 18 ounces of sauce, and drained spinach.
6. Spread half of the reserved sauce on the bottom of prepared baking dish. Pour pasta mixture over layer of sauce and spread evenly. Top with remaining sauce, mozzarella, Parmesan, and additional dried herbs, if desired.
7. Bake for 25 to 30 minutes until cheese is melted and golden brown on top. You can turn on the broiler for 2 to 3 minutes at the end if the cheese isn't browned enough. (Just be sure to keep an eye on it so the top doesn't burn!)
8. Remove the lightened-up baked ziti from the oven and let rest for 10 minutes before serving.

RECIPE NOTES

**Nutrition Facts (per 1/12th casserole):*

314 calories, 10 g total fat, 5 g saturated fat, 40 g carbohydrate, 6 g fiber, 7 g sugar, 16 g protein, 507 mg sodium, 20% DV Calcium

**To make ahead, follow steps 2-6, cover baking dish with foil, and refrigerate until ready to cook.*