

Tuna Noodle Casserole

I am starting with tuna noodle casserole to make a point, and it is this: *Do not be a food snob!* This dish tastes great, is easy to make, and uses ingredients you can keep on hand. Like many other cooks, I started out learning to cook from a recipe book called *Take a Can of Soup*. You can mix canned soup with almost anything and turn it into dinner! Today, in addition to being just too, *too* ordinary, cooking with canned soup has fallen into disfavor because of the high salt and presumed high fat content. However, diluted in the recipes we use here, the amount of sodium or fat per serving is reasonable. Once again, eating dinner is far more important than avoiding salt and fat.

INGREDIENTS

1/2 lb dry packaged noodles (either wide or narrow)
7-oz can water-packed tuna
10 1/2-oz can cream of mushroom soup
1/2 cup milk
10-oz package frozen peas

MENU

Tuna noodle casserole
Poppy seed coleslaw (page 155)
Celery sticks, dill pickles
Crusty bread for something to chew: try toasted or plain bagels, English muffins, or French bread
Butter
Milk
Bread with cream cheese and jam for dessert

METHOD

Summary: Boil and drain noodles, mix them with tuna, canned soup, milk, and peas, and then gently heat.

Fill a 4 1/2-quart pan about half to two-thirds full of water, add 1 teaspoon salt per quart of water, and bring to a rapid boil. Add 1/2 pound dry packaged noodles and boil until al dente (see figure 8.1 on the next page).

Meanwhile, open a 7-ounce can water-packed tuna, drain it, and break the tuna into flakes with a fork. Mix with a 10 1/2-ounce can cream of mushroom soup and 1/2 cup milk.

Then open a 10-ounce package frozen peas and empty it into a colander. When the noodles are done, drain them through the peas in the colander to thaw the peas and warm them up.

Combine everything: Put the noodles and peas into the noodle pan and add the tuna-soup-milk mixture.

Turn the heat on medium low and warm the whole thing up, stirring occasionally until everything is hot.

RECIPE NOTES

Fast tip: Warm the mushroom soup up ahead of time in the microwave or a pan to save stirring and reheating time and keep from breaking apart and overcooking the noodles.

The night before: Review the recipes for the whole menu; find all the ingredients, menu items, and equipment, and put them where they will be handy.

Added touch: Add any or all of the following vegetables or herbs:

2 to 4 Tbsp dried onion flakes
1 to 2 Tbsp dried parsley flakes
4-oz can mushroom stems and pieces, drained
1/4 cup chopped green or black olives

If you want to substitute fresh herbs for dried herbs in a recipe, use about three times more. Dried herbs are potent, and too much can ruin the dish. As a rule of thumb, one teaspoon of dried herb equals one tablespoon fresh herb.

Involving your children: For this meal, a preschooler can cut up the dill pickles and olives with a plastic picnic knife; she can also open the peas and pour them into the colander.

If you help with draining the hot noodles, an older child can make this all by herself!

Adapting this meal for children: This meal is kid-friendly. It is all right to serve tuna noodle casserole to children who are just getting started with table food, as long as they have been previously exposed to all of the ingredients. For them, cut the noodles quite finely, mix in enough sauce to make it moist, and let them eat with their fingers. Keep in mind that a finger food is anything that sticks together long enough to get from dish to mouth. Even preschoolers and younger school-age children make use of this technique. Often they eat with their fork or spoon—but load it with their fingers. So relax. For a young child who might have trouble chewing the celery and

dill pickles, open a can of mandarin oranges. Plain bread or toast will also be easier for a toddler to chew than bagels.

The bread with cream cheese and jam makes a fine dessert, but follow the dessert rules: put a serving at each plate when you set the table, let your child eat it before, during, or after the meal, but allow only one helping. As my granddaughters taught me, if you allow it, children will fill up on bread and jam and not eat anything else.

Variation: Baked Tuna Noodle Casserole Put the tuna noodle mixture in an ovenproof casserole dish, sprinkle on some packaged bread crumbs and some grated cheese, and heat at 350° F uncovered for 20 minutes. If you prefer to heat in the microwave, use a microwave-safe dish, sprinkle with the cheese of your choice (bread crumbs will just get soggy in the microwave), cover, and heat for 4 to 5 minutes on high. Uncover and sprinkle on crushed potato chips. Voilà! For another variation, used canned salmon instead of canned tuna.

FIGURE 8.1 COOKING PASTA

For pasta that's well cooked and doesn't stick together, use plenty of water and keep it boiling rapidly the whole time the noodles cook. Fill a 4 1/2-quart pan half to two-thirds full of water to give room for the noodles and for the water to boil. Add 1 teaspoon salt per quart of water to flavor the noodles. Bring to a hard, rolling boil. Add the noodles all at once and stir to keep them from sticking together. *Watch the pot* until it boils again and turn it down to keep it boiling but not boiling over. Otherwise, it will overflow all over the stove, as mine has done many times. Estimate the cooking time according to the package directions, but test for doneness 1 to 2 minutes before the package says to. Check by tasting. The noodles should be soft but give your teeth just a bit of resistance: That's what is meant by *al dente*.

FIGURE 8.2 OIL- OR WATER-PACKED TUNA

I chose water-packed tuna because that is about all I could find in my grocery stores. You may prefer oil-packed tuna, and that's fine if you can find it. Some people think it's more flavorful. Just drain the fat and throw it away.

FIGURE 8.3 MERCURY IN CANNED TUNA

Being a long-lived fish, tuna is potentially high in mercury. To limit your mercury exposure, use light tuna and eat tuna or other large fish no more than once a week. Avoid eating tuna at all if you are pregnant or planning to become pregnant. In general, canned light tuna is lower in mercury than white tuna, but sometimes it contains just as much, or more. For more information, go to www.consumerreports.org and search on "mercury in tuna."

