

Casserole Cravings

Get out the crockpot, elbow macaroni, and Campbell's Cream of Chicken. The covered dish is staging a comeback.

{ Written by **Brooke Cheshier** }



Remember when the casserole was a sign of creativity rather than a sign that Mom had cheated the family with a quick fix? Once upon a time the casserole had real class. Perhaps it was peasant class—like the cassoulets, paellas, and baked pasta made by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European mamans, but it was still esteemed as hearty, imaginative, even romantic fare.

In the South, casseroles have been popular since Reconstruction, when, to paraphrase *Crazy for Casseroles* cookbook author James Villas, women suddenly found themselves without slaves, sans provisions, and in desperate need of simple cuisine that could be stretched to feed many mouths. A second wave of popularity struck after the First World War and the Great Depression.

The covered dish again hit its stride mid-century, shaking free of its thrift-fare reputation as home chefs began to infuse gourmet ingredients like lobster and lamb into their one-pot recipes. Suddenly, chic young couples wanting to wow their dinner-party guests would set the table with Currier & Ives and chicken divan. A savory Shepherd's Pie became both a gracious way to mourn the loss of a loved one and comfort the living.

Somewhere along the way, however, true one-pot suppers lost their standing in "respectable" culinary circles and instead came to be seen as a cop-out de cuisine. Finally, the one-pot dish is making a comeback. Maybe it's because we're craving a little extra comfort during these economically recessed times, and covered dishes are great to use up leftover odds and ends in

our kitchens.

Don't worry. Home chefs have replaced processed ingredients with fresher fare—onions from the garden, wild mushrooms, fresh sage leaves, organic pappardelle. Still fresh, fast, and easy to make, today's covered dish is nothing like your Aunt Ruth's tuna noodle sur-

prise. Dressed up with a fresh green salad and a bottle of wine or pared down with a pitcher of sweet tea and some skillet cornbread, this improved breed of casserole is so good you'll wonder why it went out of vogue in the first place.



Crockpot Cassoulet

(SERVES 4-6)

- 1 lb. cooked white beans (like navy or cannellini)
- 1 bay leaf
- 1-2 cloves minced garlic
- 1-2 leaves finely chopped sage (optional)
- 1 tsp. dried thyme
- Fresh cracked black pepper
- 1 cup chicken stock
- 1 yellow onion, sliced (optional)
- 3-4 carrots, sliced (optional)
- 1 Tbs. oil
- 3/4-1 lb. sliced pork shoulder
- 3/4 lb. spicy Italian sausage

Put the beans in crockpot along with a single bay leaf and garlic. Add one or two finely chopped sage leaves along with dried thyme, fresh cracked black pepper to taste, and chicken stock. Add onion and sliced carrots, if desired. Lightly coat a large frying pan with oil and fry sliced pork shoulder (add some belly for extra fat and flavor) along with sausage until brown. Add to the beans and let mixture stew on a low setting for about eight hours. Serve in hearty bowls, crumble buttered, fried bread crusts over the top, and open a bottle of something rich and red.

