

BAKED MACARONI WITH RICOTTA, SPINACH, AND MINT

Serves 8, and doubles well

Cooking time: 60 minutes (35 minutes active)

Did the word “mint” in the recipe’s name throw you? Well, surprise, mint is a relative of basil, so it works beautifully in pasta dishes. It adds an unexpected twist and a hit of brightness that I really like. If you want to save a few calories, look for ricotta and mozzarella that are labeled “part-skim.”

One 14.5- to 16-ounce box whole-wheat or whole-grain ziti or penne

One 5- to 9-ounce bag baby spinach

1 cup ricotta

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup grated Parmesan

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup chopped mint leaves

$\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon pepper

One 24- to 26-ounce jar good-quality pasta sauce, or 3 cups Little Gem’s Sauce

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When I say “good-quality,” I mean a jarred sauce that uses only ingredients you recognize, things you’d use if you were making it yourself. So no high-fructose corn syrup, OK?

1 cup shredded mozzarella

Preheat oven to 375°F. Grease two 8-inch square baking dishes or one 9 x 13-inch dish.

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil (covered to speed things up). Cook the pasta for 2 minutes less than directed on the package.
2. While the pasta is cooking, combine the ricotta, Parmesan, mint, and pepper in a small bowl and set aside.
3. When the timer rings, add the entire bag of spinach to the pot—it will wilt quickly—and cook for 1 minute more. (The pasta should be slightly undercooked.) Drain well, then return pasta and spinach to the pot.
4. Add the entire jar of sauce to the spinach and pasta and stir to combine.
5. If using two 8-inch baking dishes, spread about one quarter of the pasta mixture on the bottom of each prepared dish (use one half of the pasta mixture if using one 9 x 13-inch dish). Spoon all of the ricotta mixture on top of the pasta layer (it will be too stiff to spread). It will remain a separate layer, even after cooking. Top with remaining pasta mixture.

6. Sprinkle the mozzarella on top, and bake until the mozzarella is melted and golden-brown, 20 to 25 minutes.

MAKE BABY FOOD: Everything in here is safe for baby, either pureed or as finger food.

MAMA SAID

“I was leery of the mint, as in my world ‘mint’ is usually followed by ‘juleps’ or ‘chocolate chip ice cream,’ but it really worked here. The nuttiness of the whole-grain pasta balanced it nicely, and made the dish filling without being heavy. As a bonus, my 14-month-old twins loved ‘helping’ me pick the mint out in the garden. Usually I try to cook while they nap, but this recipe was easy enough to throw together with toddlers underfoot.” —Tracy A., mom of twins, Portland, OR