

## Papa's Lasagna

Debra Clifton | Minco, Oklahoma

"My dad spent three years in concentration camps, and he vowed if he ever got out of there he would never go hungry again, nor would anyone he knew, in or out of his family." This recipe is a direct result of that promise. Of course, it helped that Papa, named Raphaella, was born in Italy and loved cooking. After his first experience as a cook making a meal for the captain of a ship he was working on, he was hooked. He later went on to open two Italian restaurants in the United States, where he became a citizen and lived for 36 years before returning to Italy. "This is one of the dishes that really made him popular. It was passed down to me, his only daughter." This is no ordinary lasagna. With loads of cheese, meat, and sauce, as well as bell pepper and mushrooms, it's beyond hearty—think of it as a super-sized or ultimate lasagna. Debra shares it here in his memory.

Serves 8 to 10

### Sauce

- 1      tablespoon olive oil
- 8      ounces white mushrooms, sliced thin
- 2      celery ribs, chopped fine
- 1      onion, minced
- 1      red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and chopped fine
- Salt
- 6      garlic cloves, minced
- 2      tablespoons minced fresh oregano
- Pepper
- 11/2   pounds 85 percent lean ground beef
- 1      (28-ounce) can tomato puree
- 1      (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, drained

### Layers

- 12     lasagna noodles
- Salt
- 2      cups whole-milk ricotta cheese
- 11/4   cups grated Parmesan cheese
- 1/2    cup chopped fresh basil
- 1      large egg
- 1/2    teaspoon pepper
- 4      cups shredded mozzarella cheese

1. For the sauce: Heat the oil in a large Dutch oven over medium heat until shimmering. Add the mushrooms, celery, onion, bell pepper, and 1 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, 6 to 8 minutes. Stir in the garlic, oregano, and 1/2 teaspoon pepper and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

2. Add the beef, increase the heat to medium-high, and cook, breaking up any large clumps with a wooden spoon, until no longer pink, about 5 minutes. Stir in the tomato puree and diced tomatoes, bring to a simmer, and cook until the flavors are

blended, about 3 minutes. Season with salt and pepper to taste, then set aside off the heat. (You should have about 10 cups sauce.)

3. For the layers: Meanwhile, adjust an oven rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 375 degrees. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot. Add the noodles and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring often, until al dente. Drain the noodles and rinse them under cold water until cool. Spread the noodles out in a single layer over clean kitchen towels. (Do not use paper towels; they will stick to the pasta.)

4. Mix the ricotta, 1 cup of the Parmesan, the basil, egg, 1/2 teaspoon salt, and pepper together in a bowl. Spread 1 cup of the meat sauce over the bottom of a 13 by 9-inch baking dish. Place 3 of the noodles in the baking dish to create the first layer. Drop 3 tablespoons of the ricotta mixture on top of each noodle, then spread it into an even thickness. Sprinkle evenly with 1 cup of the mozzarella. Spoon 2 1/2 cups more meat sauce evenly over the cheese. Repeat this layering of noodles, ricotta mixture, mozzarella, and meat sauce twice more.

5. For the final layer, place the remaining 3 noodles on top of the sauce in the baking dish, spoon the remaining 1 1/2 cups sauce evenly over the top, and sprinkle with the remaining 1 cup mozzarella and 1/4 cup Parmesan.

6. Place the baking dish on a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet. Lightly coat a large sheet of foil with vegetable oil spray and cover the lasagna. Bake for 15 minutes, then remove the foil and continue to bake until the sauce is bubbling and the cheese is spotty brown, about 35 minutes longer. Let cool for 20 minutes before serving.