

Deep Space Lasagna

by Michael Lennick

(1330 words)

As I write this, the Space Age is nearly 50 years old. That's fairly alarming to an old fart who clearly remembers the night that first Russian Sputnik beeped its way across an otherwise pristine North American sky. The spacecraft's eerie pulse could be picked up on any shortwave radio, and in those days there was a dad or two on every block equipped with such technology. Sputnik marked the dawning of an era that would see humans on the moon less than twelve years later. In the intervening decades we've built manned space stations, launched tourists into orbit, and begun designing vessels for our first missions to Mars. Space travel has finally become a very real option for all those with the yearning, and the price of a ticket. And yet, oddly enough, the food still sucks.

That's why I've chosen to share a recipe we employ frequently on our many space-oriented filming expeditions. It's relatively easy to prepare, unbelievably tasty, and as breathtaking in its multi-layered glory as the clouds girding Jupiter. Please memorize and destroy (through eating, natch) these top-secret specifications for the patent-pending Foolish Earthling Productions...

DEEP SPACE LASAGNA

1 can (19 fl. oz/540 ml) tomato sauce

1 can (19 fl. oz/540 ml) stewed tomatoes, Italian style

1 can (13 fl. oz/369 ml) tomato paste

2 cups (540 ml) water

1 dozen large white mushrooms, sliced

fresh garlic cloves (I use several, and have fewer friends each year)

1 package (500 g) wheat or spinach lasagna noodles

16 oz/950 g whole (not skim) mozzarella cheese

16 oz/950 g ricotta cheese (small curd cottage cheese also works in a pinch)

1 egg

1 – 2 tbs each of pepper, oregano, sugar, Italian seasoning etc.

1 lb. (450g) lean or extra-lean ground beef (optional)

Got all that stuff ready? Okay, here we go:

You'll begin with a great sauce. Feel free to go meaty or veggie for this step. Both work equally well. If you already have your own patented sauce recipe, go ahead and make up a batch. (Or heat up a couple of jars of your favorite commercial brand. Odds are I'll never find out.) Here's the version we like: It originated with my mom, and I've probably refined it a bit nearly every time I've made it (as did Mom.) Unlike some of our recent endeavors, this recipe is not Rocket Science. It's built to be messed with. I suggest following it as closely as comfortable the first time out, then altering it to suit your own taste and spice tolerance over future iterations.

Brown the meat in a large saucepan. *For a perfectly delicious Deep Space Veggie Lasagna (you unrepentant hippie you) just leave out the meat and start right in on the sauce. Down here in the vast Foolish Earthling Command Bunker we tend to alternate between versions.*

Add (or begin by heating in a large saucepan) the stewed tomatoes, tomato sauce, tomato paste, and as much water as seems reasonable to bring it all to a slow boil. It should at this stage begin to present a nice, thick-but-stirable, appropriately-sauce-like consistency. This can be a bit tricky to quantify (and is very much a matter of personal taste) but to paraphrase US Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's 1973 opinion, you'll know it when you see it. (He was actually referring to pornography at the time.)

Slowly stir in the pepper, oregano, sugar, Italian seasoning, and any other spice or flavor (crumbled bay leaf, sliced green peppers etc.) you find appropriate to the desired mood. Stir in as much fresh crushed or pressed garlic as you figure your company can handle. (As suggested earlier, we go a bit nuts around here on the garlic. Coincidentally, it's getting harder and harder to find good help.)

Stir in the sliced mushrooms and let this astonishingly-lifelike concoction simmer on low heat for a while. The longer you can allow these flavors to blend, the better. (This will be a truly great spaghetti sauce tomorrow but darn it all, we've got a lasagna to build today.) Boil the lasagna noodles in lightly salted water until al dente (about 6 – 7 minutes.) When done, drain the noodles into a large colander. Rinse with cold water to remove the starch.

While the noodles are boiling, let's prep the dairy ingredients. Grate the mozzarella cheese into a large bowl. If you're substituting small-curd cottage cheese for Ricotta, place it in a bowl and stir in one whole egg and a bit of pepper. This is a trick my mom came up with to get cottage cheese to resemble Ricotta, a very hard substance to find when I was a kid for some reason. We liked the results so much that to this day we alternate between Ricotta and the cottage cheese/egg thing, but please feel free to stick with the Ricotta. Not having shared this or any other part of my childhood has worked well for you so far; Why mess with that now?

Okay, let's line up our key ingredients – drained noodles, sauce, mozzarella cheese, Ricotta or cottage cheese – we're going for assembly-line configuration. The following scene may come to disturbingly resemble Lucy in the chocolate factory, but the results should be much tastier. You're about to build something wonderful.

Place the first layer of noodles on the bottom of a large casserole pan. Five noodles should cover the bottom wall to wall, and a bit of overlap at the edges wouldn't hurt. Ladle some sauce over the noodles, covering them in gloppy red glory. A light layer of shredded mozzarella cheese comes next, followed by another layer of edge-to-edge noodles. Top evenly with the Ricotta cheese, followed by another layer of sauce. (A pattern should be starting to emerge...) Crowning layers of noodles, sauce and the rest of your mozzarella fills the pan to the rim. If we've both done our jobs properly the result should be gorgeous, heavy as hell, and ready for the oven.

Bake for 20 – 30 minutes at 400 – 425 degrees using both top and bottom burners. You're looking for a nice, bubbly, golden-brown crust.

Results should ideally be served with Caesar Salad, garlic bread and a nice Chianti. This version of the recipe will serve 6 to 8 – or you, until such time as you can force yourself to stop eating it. Refrigerate leftovers and re-heat in a warm oven (300 – 350 degrees).

One final step: Since I promised you a Deep Space Lasagna, you'll need to get hold of either a really strong baggie or a sterile latex pouch. De-hydrate a single serving of baked-then-cooled lasagna and seal it into the pouch, applying all standard industry sterilization protocols. When it's time to eat, re-hydrate the sealed package using hot water from your spacecraft's on-board Hydration Delivery System (basically a stainless steel hose) or the nearest kettle. And as you sit there, straining to avoid sucking your lung through the egress tube while savoring a meal far better suited to a plate astride checkered tablecloth festooned with Chianti bottle candlesticks, consider that this is exactly how they still do it. It's how John Glenn ate aboard Friendship 7 in 1962, and again on the Space Shuttle in 1998. And yes, it still sucks – in every sense of the word. Next time, try slicing the mushrooms thinner.