**Extraordinary Enchilada Casserole**

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| **Ingredients (soup):**1 lb. cubed beef chuck (omit for vegetarian soup)1 red bell pepper1 medium onion (red or white)1 bunch scallions1 medium potato (red or yellow)2 medium carrots2 stalks celery1 bunch (about 2 handfuls) fresh spinach (or kale, or escarole)1 cup dried tri-color pasta (rotini or similar works well)2 gloves garlic1 28oz. can crushed tomatoes2 rounded Tbsp. tomato paste6 cups chicken stock (or beef stock, or vegetable stock, or use a combination of 2 or 3)4 Tbsp. olive oil1 Tbsp. soy sauce1 Tbsp. Worcestershire sauce (omit for vegetarian version)2 tsp. dried basil1 tsp. paprika1/2 tsp. cumin1/2 tsp dried sage1/2 tsp. dried thymesaltground black pepper | **Ingredients (crostini):**1 batard French or Italian bread1/2 cup grated Parmesan or Parmesan-Reggiano cheese4 - 5 leaves fresh basil (or 1 Tbsp dried basil), minced**Instructions (crostini):**1.  Preheat oven to 375°.2.  Cut the bread on the bias (angle) so you have long pieces of bread about 1/2 inch thick to work with.  (The Lady in Red likes her breadsticks thin, so she sliced the bread on the bias, then cut each slice in half lengthwise.)3.  Butter one side of each breadstick and place them on a baking sheet.4.  Sprinkle each breadstick with the grated cheese and basil.5.  Bake the crostini for 10 minutes.  (Watch them, you don't want burnt breadsticks!) |

Instructions (soup):

1.  Cut the beef chunks into smaller cubes.  Chef Jeff prefers 1/2 inch size cubes; The Lady in Red likes 1/4 inch size cubes.  The choice is yours.

2.  Heat a deep sided sauté pan, on medium-high heat, and add 2 Tbsp. olive oil.  Season the beef with approximately 1/8 tsp. salt and 1/8 tsp. pepper.  (You don't want to over-salt it.  There will be plenty of salt added intrinsically when the tomatoes and soy sauce are added to the soup later.)  Sauté it for about 8 minutes, stirring it occasionally. The beef will turn a gray color at first, then it will start to brown.  The brown color is what you want.

3.  Meanwhile, so you're not bored or anything, start cutting your veggies.

- Slice & dice the red pepper
- Peel, slice & dice the onion
- Peel & dice the potato
- Mince the scallions
- Dice the carrot (peeling is not necessary)
- Dice the celery
- Rough chop the spinach/kale/escarole
- Mince the garlic

And if you are using zucchini, or green beans, dice them, too.  If you are using frozen okra or any other frozen veggies, it's not necessary to defrost them.  Basically, you want to prepare all of your veggies while the beef browns.

4.  When your beef is brown, get it off of the stove, out of that pan, and put it right into your big-ass soup pot (or crock pot) - with all of the drippings.  (I'm all about having fewer dirty dishes to clean up.)

5.  Then add all of your stock, the crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, Worcestershire sauce, and soy sauce into the soup pot.

6.  Give it a stir, cover it, and let it simmer for about 20 minutes.  You're not done!  Don't go away! :)

7.  Now for the veggies:  Take that same sauté pan you just used for browning the beef and add the remaining 2 Tbsp. olive oil to it.  (No cleaning pans here.  Save your energy!)  Heat it on medium-high.

8.  Add all of the veggies, **EXCEPT** FOR THE SPINACH (OR KALE OR ESCAROLE) and save 1/2 the scallions for garnish.  Add the garlic  last, because that will cook the quickest and burnt garlic is gross.

9.  Stir the veggies to mix them all together.  Add the soup spices.  Stir again.  (This is my favorite part. I love dumping all kinds of ingredients into a big pot watching it turn into something amazing!  This part is really fun for kids, too.  Just like when you make chili, you keep on adding tons of stuff to make something even better!)

10.  Sauté the vegetables for about 5 - 10 minutes, stirring sometimes.  (I went more for the 10 minute side, because I wanted to make sure those carrots and potatoes softened up just a bit.  Chef Jeff will tell you to go more for the 5 minute mark because he likes his veggies a bit more firm.  You decide.)   Then, add them to the pot of soup.

11.  Turn up the heat!  - in the kitchen, on the stove - well, you can turn up the heat elsewhere later, but this is a PG recipe! :)   Increase the heat to high, and add the cup of pasta to the soup.  Stir.  When the soup starts to boil, turn the heat off, cover the pot.  (Alternatively, if you like softer vegetables, turn the heat to low, cover the pot, and simmer the soup while you prepare the crostini below.)

12.  Rough chop the spinach (or escarole or kale) and add it to the soup pot.  Give it a stir and cover the pot again.

13.  Ladle the soup into bowls.  Garnish with reserved scallions.  Serve with crostini on the side, which is great for dipping, too!

**Special Notes:**

Serves 8+.  Expect leftovers with this recipe.  That's what's so great about it - you expend the effort once to make this soup, then you can freeze leftovers for future 'Emergency Eats'.

When thawing leftovers, you can add a little water to the broth before you reheat it, since the pasta can absorb some liquid.

To make this recipe vegetarian, use vegetable broth and omit the beef and Worcesterhire sauce.

The crostini are a great accompaniment to Italian dishes.  You can substitute oregano for the basil, or do a combination of both herbs.

The vegetables listed are a base for minestrone.  Other additions can include, diced green beans, corn, cut okra, diced zucchini, kidney beans, or black beans.  Be aware, that the more vegetables you add, the thicker the soup.  If you find the soup to not have enough broth, add an additional cup during the cooking process.

If you are using frozen green beans, zucchini, or okra, it is not necessary to thaw them out before adding them to the soup.  Add them to the broth at the same time you add the other sautéed vegetables.  The frozen vegetables will cook in the soup as it simmers.

Don't use more than 1 cup of pasta.  The pasta absorbs broth as it cooks.  You want a soup; not a stew.

You can cook this in a crock pot!  Follow steps 1-10 for the soup preparation, then set your crock pot on low for 4 - 6 hours.  When you walk in the door, just add the spinach (or kale or escarole), give it a stir, and that's it!