

King Ranch Casserole •

Ingredients

Chicken thighs, bone-in	3 lbs	Onion powder	1 tsp.
Water	2 cups	White pepper	1/4 tsp.
Mexican spice mix	4 Tbsp.	Ground nutmeg	1/8 tsp.
Caldo de tomate	1 Tbsp.	MSG	1/2 tsp.
Better Than Bouillon - Chicken .	1 Tbsp.	Lard (or bacon fat)	2 Tbsp. + 1 tsp.
Butter	4 Tbsp.	Onion	1 large
Flour	2 Tbsp.	Bell pepper	1
Heavy cream	1 1/2 cups	Ro-Tel	10-14 oz, can
Mushrooms, canned	8 oz, can	Corn tortillas, medium	16
Sweet corn, canned	10 oz, can	Sharp cheddar cheese	16 oz.
Garlic cloves	4-6		

Directions

Preheat oven to 375°F — Bring chicken thighs and heavy cream to room temperature (*30 minutes*) — Combine Mexican spice mix, caldo de tomate, and bouillon in *Small Bowl #1* (spice blend) — Combine onion powder, white pepper, nutmeg, and MSG in *Small Bowl #2* (sauce spices) — Quarter 16 corn tortillas; set aside on a plate — Drain mushrooms and sweet corn and pat dry with paper towels; combine in *Medium Bowl #1* — Dice onion and bell pepper; mince garlic; combine in *Large Bowl #1* — Shred cheese; set aside in *Large Bowl #2* — Grease a 3 quart baking dish with 1 tsp. lard

1. Add spice blend (*Small Bowl #1*) to the Instant Pot and heat on sauté mode. Toast spices, stirring constantly, for 1 minute. Add 2 cups water and stir until dissolved.
2. Add the chicken thighs to the seasoned broth.
3. Cook on *high* pressure for 14 minutes, then allow for natural release for 5 minutes.
4. Transfer chicken thighs to a plate and let rest for 5-10 minutes until cool enough to handle. Meanwhile, skim the fat from the stock and strain the remaining stock through a fine-mesh sieve and reserve 1 1/2 cups in *Small Bowl #3* for the cream sauce.
5. When chicken is cool, discard skin and bones, shred the meat into *Large Bowl #3*. Skim any additional fat from the stock and add the remaining stock to the bowl and stir to combine.

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6. In a large skillet, melt 2 Tbsp. **lard** over medium heat. Add **mushrooms** and **sweet corn** (*Medium Bowl #1*) and sauté until well browned, about *5-6 minutes*.
7. Add **onion**, **bell pepper**, and **garlic** (*Large Bowl #1*). Sauté for *8 minutes*. Raise heat to *high* and cook undisturbed for *1 minute*, then stir and cook *1 minute* more until vegetables have dark caramelized spots on edges.
8. Meanwhile, in a small saucepan, melt 4 Tbsp. **butter** over medium heat. Sprinkle in 2 Tbsp. **flour** and cook, stirring constantly, until the mixture is smooth and smells nutty, about *2 minutes*. The roux should be pale golden.
9. Gradually whisk in $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups **heavy cream** and $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups reserved **cooking broth** (*Small Bowl #3*). Add **sauce spices** (*Small Bowl #2*). Simmer, stirring frequently, until thickened to coat the back of a spoon, about *5 minutes*.
10. Reduce skillet heat to *medium*. Add **cream sauce** from the saucepan and undrained **Ro-Tel**. Stir to combine.
11. Bring to a simmer, reduce heat to *medium-low*, and cook, stirring occasionally, for *5 minutes*.
12. Pour **vegetable and sauce mixture** from the skillet over the **shredded chicken** (*Large Bowl #3*) and stir to coat evenly.
13. Layer ingredients in the prepared baking dish:
 - First layer: $\frac{1}{3}$ of the **tortilla quarters**, $\frac{1}{2}$ of the **chicken mixture**, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the **shredded cheese** (*Large Bowl #2*)
 - Second layer: $\frac{1}{3}$ of the **tortilla quarters**, remaining **chicken mixture**, $\frac{1}{3}$ of the **shredded cheese** (*Large Bowl #2*)
 - Final layer: remaining **tortilla quarters**, remaining **shredded cheese** (*Large Bowl #2*)
14. Bake uncovered for *30-35 minutes* until bubbly and cheese is melted.
15. Let stand for *10 minutes* before serving.

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Equipment Required

- Instant Pot or pressure cooker
- 3 Quart (9x13) inch baking dish
- Large skillet (deep 12-inch preferred)
- Small saucepan for cream sauce
- 3 small prep bowls
- 1 medium prep bowl
- 3 large prep bowls
- 2 Large plates (for tortillas and resting chicken)
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Whisk
- Wooden spoon or spatula
- Sharp knife and cutting board
- Box grater for cheese
- Fine-mesh strainer or sieve
- Can opener
- Paper towels (for drying mushrooms)

Mise en Place

- Bring **chicken thighs** and **cream** to room temperature (*30 minutes*)
- *Small Bowl #1 — spice blend:* 4 Tbsp. **Mexican spice mix**, 1 Tbsp. **caldo de tomate**, 1 Tbsp. **bouillon**
- *Small Bowl #2 — sauce spices:* 1 tsp. **onion powder**, $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp. **white pepper**, $\frac{1}{8}$ tsp. **nutmeg**, $\frac{1}{2}$ tsp. **MSG**
- *Small Bowl #3 — reserved for strained cooking broth* ($1\frac{1}{2}$ cups for cream sauce)
- *Large Plate — quartered corn tortillas* (16 tortillas)
- *Medium Bowl #1 —* drained and patted dry **canned mushrooms** (8 oz. can) and **sweet corn** (10 oz. can)
- *Large Bowl #1 —* diced **onion**, diced **bell pepper**, and minced **garlic**
- *Large Bowl #2 —* shredded **cheddar cheese** (16 oz.)

- *Large Bowl #3 —* reserved for **shredded chicken** (after cooking), will become final mixing bowl
- Keep **Ro-Tel** undrained
- Cut and prep all vegetables before starting

Ingredient Tips

- Drain **canned mushrooms** thoroughly and pat dry to remove excess moisture before sautéing
- Extra-sharp cheddar adds more depth of flavor
- If **Mexican spice mix** unavailable, combine equal parts ground cumin, chili powder, and paprika
- Authentic **lard** makes a difference - avoid hydrogenated versions

Preparation Tips

- Pat **canned mushrooms** very dry before sautéing to help them brown deeply
- Cook **mushrooms** first in the skillet to develop deep browning without crowding
- Make the cream sauce in a separate small saucepan while vegetables cook in the skillet
- Cook roux until it smells nutty and is pale golden, but watch carefully to avoid burning
- Don't skip charring the vegetables - look for dark caramelized spots on edges for essential depth of flavor
- Let **chicken** rest after pressure cooking - it's too hot to handle immediately
- Use reserved **broth** to adjust chicken mixture consistency if needed
- Warm tortillas slightly before cutting to prevent cracking

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Make Ahead & Storage

- Chicken can be cooked and shredded up to *2 days* ahead
- Complete sauce up to *24 hours* in advance
- Assembled casserole can be refrigerated up to *24 hours* before baking
- If made ahead, add *10 minutes* to baking time
- Leftovers keep for *3 days*; reheat covered at *350°F*

Serving Suggestions

- Serve with Mexican rice and refried beans
- Garnish with diced avocado and fresh cilantro
- Offer sour cream and hot sauce on the side
- Can be frozen in individual portions for *2 months*