

King Ranch Casserole •

Pressure-cooked chicken thighs are shredded and combined with sautéed vegetables (mushrooms, corn, onion, bell pepper, and garlic) and a creamy roux-based sauce enriched with Ro-Tel tomatoes. The mixture is layered with corn tortillas and sharp cheddar cheese, then baked until bubbly and golden.

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) — Reserve Small Bowl #3 for strained cooking broth (1 1/2 cups for cream sauce) — 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 — Reserve Large Bowl #3 for shredded chicken (after cooking), will become final mixing bowl — 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, until fragrant and slightly darkened, about 1 minute. Spices are done when they smell aromatic and appear slightly darker in color. Add 2 cups water and stir until dissolved.
2. Add the chicken thighs to the seasoned broth, ensuring thighs are fully submerged.

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3. Cook on *high* pressure for *14 minutes*, then allow for natural release for *5 minutes*. Chicken is done when meat is tender and easily pulls away from bones, and internal temperature reaches *165°F* on an instant-read thermometer.
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 $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups in *Small Bowl #3* for the cream sauce.
5. When chicken is cool, discard skin and bones, shred the meat into bite-sized pieces in *Large Bowl #3*. Shredded chicken should be in uniform pieces, not too fine or chunky. Skim any additional fat from the stock and add the remaining stock to the bowl and stir to combine.
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*. Vegetables are done when mushrooms appear golden brown with darker spots, corn kernels are caramelized and golden, and both release a nutty, sweet aroma.
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. If roux begins to darken too quickly or smell burnt, reduce heat immediately. If lumps form, continue whisking vigorously until smooth.
9. Gradually whisk in $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups **heavy cream** and $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups reserved **cooking broth** (*Small Bowl #3*), adding liquid in a steady stream while whisking constantly to prevent lumps. Add **sauce spices** (*Small Bowl #2*). Simmer, stirring frequently, until thickened to coat the back of a spoon, about *5 minutes*. Sauce is done when it coats the back of a spoon thickly (a line drawn through it with your finger should hold clearly), appears smooth and creamy (not thin or watery), and bubbles gently throughout. If sauce doesn't thicken after *5 minutes*, continue cooking and whisking; it may need an additional *2-3 minutes*. If lumps form, strain sauce through a fine-mesh strainer before proceeding.
10. Reduce skillet heat to *medium*. Add **cream sauce** from the saucepan and undrained **Ro-Tel**. Stir to combine until sauce and tomatoes are evenly distributed throughout the vegetables.
11. Bring to a simmer, reduce heat to *medium-low*, and cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture is well combined and slightly reduced, about *5 minutes*. The mixture should appear uniform with vegetables evenly coated in sauce.
12. Pour **vegetable and sauce mixture** from the skillet over the **shredded chicken** (*Large Bowl #3*) and stir to coat evenly. The mixture should appear uniform with all ingredients well distributed and no dry spots.

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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 edges are bubbly and beginning to brown, cheese is fully melted and golden, and casserole is hot throughout. Continue baking in *3 minute* increments if center is not hot or cheese is not golden.
15. Let stand for *10 minutes* before serving.

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Yield

- Serves 6-8 as main dish
- Makes one 3 quart (9 inch × 13 inch) casserole

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

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- 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
- If made ahead, add *10 minutes* to baking time
- Leftovers keep for *3 days*; reheat covered at *350°F*

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

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*