

Baked Ziti



budgetbytes.com/classic-baked-ziti

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As soon as the weather turns cool, I grab the cozy sweaters and start cooking all the comfort food, like this Easy Baked Ziti recipe. It's rich and gooey with its layers of pasta, homemade red sauce with Italian sausage, and blend of melty cheeses. It's total comfort in a bowl. And the best part is that homemade Baked Ziti is not fussy at all. You don't have to worry about delicate sheet pasta or tedious layering. It's all the great flavors of lasagna in a freeform delicious casserole!



Pin this recipe for later!

All recipes are rigorously tested in our [Nashville Test Kitchen](#) to ensure they are easy, affordable, and delicious.

“Holy moley...That sauce!!! Obviously this can be made without homemade sauce, but wow, it completely made the dish! I fed my family of seven with this and they cannot stop raving about it. I make Budget Bytes dishes all the time, and there hasn't been one that I don't like, but I think this takes the cake for the best recipe I've tried. Thank you so much for this!”

Danielle Steel

What Is Baked Ziti?

Baked ziti is a super cozy pasta casserole made with ziti pasta (a smooth tube-shaped pasta), red sauce, and a mix of cheeses (ricotta, mozzarella, and Parmesan). It has many of the same ingredients as a classic [lasagna](#), but the structure is much more freeform, making it really fast and easy to make.

Ingredients

Here's all you'll need to make our awesome baked ziti recipe:

- **Italian Sausage:** This recipe starts with a homemade meat sauce that is made with ground Italian sausage. The sausage is stuffed with tons of herbs and spices, which brings a lot of flavor to the dish. You can use hot, mild, or sweet Italian sausage.
- **Onion:** A little onion cooked down into the red sauce gives it a delicious subtle sweetness.
- **Tomato Paste and Crushed Tomatoes:** We use two types of canned tomatoes to give the red sauce a rich flavor and texture. The crushed tomatoes create the body of the sauce without being too chunky while concentrated tomato paste thickens the sauce and makes the tomato flavor extra rich.
- **Italian seasoning:** To keep this recipe simple, we use an Italian seasoning blend to season the sauce rather than several individual herbs and spices.
- **Ziti:** This is a smooth, tube-shaped pasta that is perfect for this cozy casserole. If you can't find ziti pasta at your local store, I've shared some of my favorite substitutions below!
- **Cheese:** This hearty pasta casserole contains a blend of several cheeses: ricotta, mozzarella, and a shredded Italian cheese blend.
- **Parsley (optional):** For extra color, you can top baked ziti with chopped parsley. If you happen to grow basil, you can garnish with chopped basil for extra color and flavor.

Ziti Pasta Substitutions

I usually find ziti down the pasta aisle, but if you can't find it at your local store, try these substitutions:

- **Rigatoni:** Rigatoni has a similar shape to ziti but has a ridged texture on the outside.
- **Penne:** Penne is a tubular-shaped pasta with angled ends and will work just fine in a pinch!
- **Mostaccioli:** Mostaccioli looks almost identical to penne and is a good substitute if it's what you have to hand. Although, if that's the case, I recommend you try our [baked mostaccioli recipe](#) instead!

But really, any pasta shape will work in this recipe. I boil the pasta until tender (or al dente) according to the package directions. So, you might need to adjust the boiling time if you choose a thinner or smaller pasta, but any type will work.

Can I Add Vegetables?

Yes! I almost always add extra vegetables to whatever I'm cooking, but today I decided to go with the classic form of Baked Ziti. If I were to add vegetables, I would probably add some fresh spinach into the sauce and stir until it is wilted. Or, roast some broccoli, zucchini, or eggplant, and then toss that into the sauce.

I've made this recipe SO many times since I first shared it, and I've picked up a few tips along the way (with some of them coming from readers like you!):

- **Shop sales + coupons:** I always stock up on canned tomatoes when they go on sale. And if you have a coupon? That would make this already budget-friendly recipe even cheaper!
- **Make it ahead:** This recipe is great for prepping up to 24 hours ahead of time. Assemble as directed, let the pasta and sauce cool, then cover tightly with foil and refrigerate. You'll just need to increase the baking time (while covered with foil) as needed since you're baking the dish from chilled.
- **Bulk ingredients are cheaper:** Check the price per unit to see if it's worth buying in bulk. If I know that I'll use a lot of something (like dried herbs), then it makes sense to buy in bulk.
- **Double the sauce:** The amount of sauce in this recipe was more than enough for me, but some readers doubled the sauce for a saucier pasta bake. If you like things extra saucy, then go ahead and double it. I'd still only use the 1lb of ground sausage, though, to keep it budget-friendly.
- **Use ground sausage:** I use ground Italian sausage because it's already seasoned and adds great flavor to the dish. You can also use regular Italian sausage in a pinch; just slice open the casings and squeeze the sausage out! Just use whatever you already have or can get the best deal on. :)



What to Serve with Baked Ziti?

[Homemade Garlic Bread](#) is awesome with this recipe, but if you want some vegetables on the side I would go with something like [Oven Roasted Frozen Broccoli](#), or a [simple side salad](#).

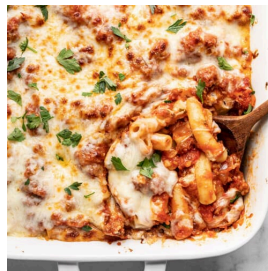
How to Store the Leftovers

Leftovers will keep in the refrigerator for 4-5 days. I highly suggest dividing the leftovers into single servings so they cool quickly in the refrigerator. This recipe makes 8 large servings, so once the servings are cooled completely in the refrigerator, you can transfer a few to the freezer for longer storage. Then each serving is just a quick microwave away from being a filling last-minute dinner!



4.81 from 66 votes

This Easy Baked Ziti recipe has layers of pasta, homemade red sauce with Italian sausage, and three types of melty cheese!



Servings

Prep 10 mins

Cook 55 mins

Total 1 hr 5 mins

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Ingredients

- 1 lb. ground Italian sausage (sweet, mild, or hot) (\$4.99)
- 1 yellow onion (\$0.27)
- 3 oz. tomato paste (\$0.50)
- 1 28oz. can crushed tomatoes (\$1.89)
- 1 Tbsp Italian seasoning blend (\$0.30)
- 1/2 cup water (\$0.00)
- 1 lb. ziti (\$1.67)
- 1/2 Tbsp salt (for pasta water) (\$0.05)
- 15 oz. ricotta (\$3.39)
- 1 cup Italian cheese blend* (\$1.24)
- 1/4 tsp freshly cracked black pepper (\$0.05)
- 2 cups shredded mozzarella (\$2.29)
- 1 handful chopped parsley (optional, for garnish) (\$0.20)

Video

Instructions

- Brown the sausage in a large skillet or pot over medium heat, until it's brown and crispy on the edges (pork sausage contains a lot of fat, so I didn't add any extra to the skillet).
- While the sausage is browning, finely dice the onion. Add the onion to the skillet once the sausage has browned, and continue to sauté over medium heat until the onion is soft and translucent.
- Add the tomato paste, crushed tomatoes, Italian seasoning, and ½ cup water to the skillet with the sausage and stir to combine. Place a lid on the skillet and allow it to come up to a simmer. Once simmering, turn the heat down and allow it to continue to simmer while you cook the ziti. Stir the sauce occasionally as it simmers.
- After getting the sauce started, begin the ziti. Bring a large pot of water with ½ Tbsp salt to a boil over high heat. Once boiling, add the ziti, and let it continue to boil until tender (about 7-8 minutes). Drain the pasta in a colander. Shake the colander a bit to shake excess water out of the pasta.
- While the pasta and sauce are cooking, prepare the cheese filling. Add the ricotta, Italian cheese blend, and some freshly cracked black pepper (about 10 cranks of a pepper mill) to a bowl and stir to combine. **Begin to preheat the oven to 350°F.**
- After draining the ziti, return it to the pot and add 1 cup of the red sauce. Stir to coat the cooked pasta in sauce.

- Pour half of the ziti to a 9×13" baking dish. Add half of the ricotta mixture on top of the pasta in small dollops. Finally, spoon half of the red sauce and sausage over the pasta and ricotta. It's okay if the ingredients don't cover in a solid layer. Repeat these layers with the second half of the pasta, ricotta mixture, and sauce. Finally, top with 2 cups shredded mozzarella.
- Cover the baking dish with foil, making sure it's slightly tented so that it doesn't touch or stick to the melted cheese. Transfer the covered casserole to the oven and bake for 20 minutes.
- After baking for 20 minutes, remove the foil, and turn the oven on to broil (keep the casserole on the middle rack, about 10-12 inches from the broiler). Broil for 5 minutes, or just until the cheese is slightly browned. Keep a close eye on the baked ziti as it broils, because broilers can vary in intensity. Top with chopped parsley, if desired, then serve.

See how we [calculate recipe costs here](#).

Notes

*In place of Italian cheese blend you can use a mix of mozzarella and Parmesan.

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Nutrition

Serving: 1 Serving Calories: 676kcal Carbohydrates: 56g Protein: 33g Fat: 36g Sodium: 881mg Fiber: 5g

Read our full [nutrition disclaimer here](#).

Scroll down for the step by step photos!



How to Make Baked Ziti – Step by Step Photos



Begin by browning 1 pound Italian sausage in a skillet until it is brown and crispy on the edges. Pork sausage has quite a bit of fat in it on its own, so I didn't add any extra to the skillet.



While the sausage is browning, finely dice a yellow onion. Add it to the skillet with the browned sausage and continue to sauté for a few minutes more, or until the onion is soft and translucent.



Add 3 oz. tomato paste (half of a 6 oz. can – don't forget to [freeze the rest of the can!](#)), 1 Tbsp Italian seasoning blend, one 28 oz. can of crushed tomatoes, and 1/2 cup water. Stir to combine, place a lid on the skillet, and let it come up to a simmer. Once simmering, turn the heat down to low and let it continue to simmer, stirring occasionally, while you begin cooking the ziti.



Once the sauce is simmering away, begin cooking the ziti. Bring a large pot of water with 1/2 Tbsp salt to a boil over high heat. Once boiling, add 1 lb. ziti. Continue to boil the pasta until tender, then drain in a colander. Shake the colander a bit to shake out the excess water.



While the ziti is boiling and the sauce is simmering, make the ricotta cheese blend. Add 15 oz. ricotta, 1 cup Italian cheese blend, and some freshly cracked black pepper to a bowl. Stir to combine. Also begin to preheat the oven to 350°F at the time.



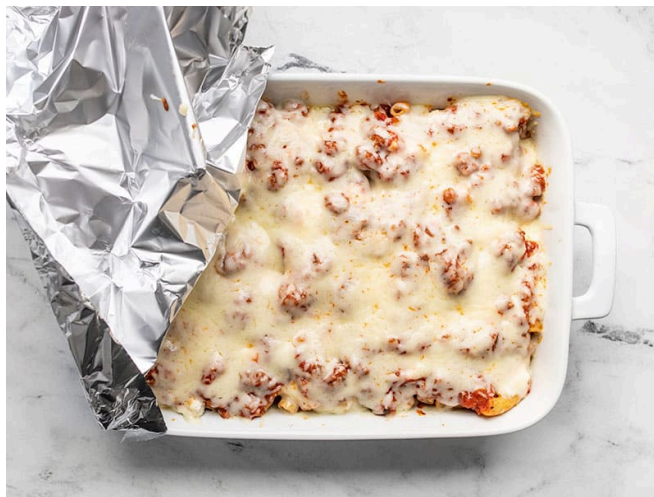
After draining the ziti, return it to the pot and add 1 cup of the red sauce. Stir to coat the pasta in the sauce.



Pour half of the sauce coated ziti into a 9×13" casserole dish. Add half of the ricotta mixture on top of the pasta in small dollops, then add half of the red sauce on top. Don't worry if the layers don't cover each other in a solid layer. It doesn't have to be perfect!



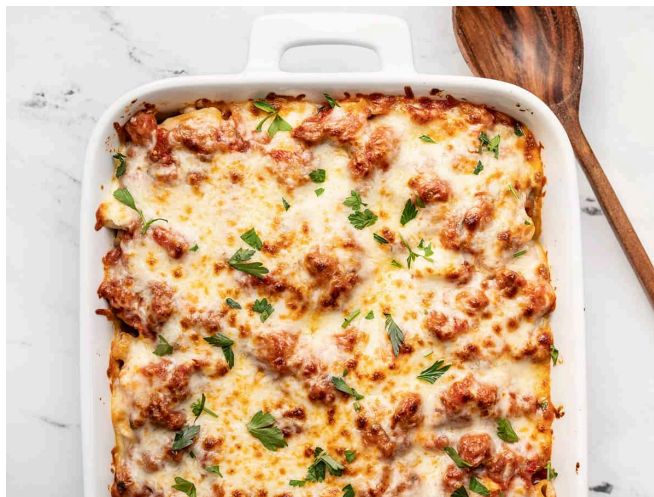
Repeat with a second layer of pasta, ricotta mixture, and sauce, then top with 2 cups shredded mozzarella.



Cover the casserole with foil and bake for 20 minutes. Make sure the foil is slightly tented so it doesn't touch the cheese and stick when it melts.



After baking for 20 minutes, remove the foil, turn the oven to broil, and return the casserole to the oven (keep it on the middle rack, about 10-12 inches from the broiler). Broil for about 5 minutes, or just until the cheese is brown on top. Keep a close eye as it broils because broilers can vary in intensity.



Garnish with a little chopped parsley, if desired, then serve!



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