

So Many Casseroles!

Brenda Davis, RD

One of my earliest food memories is standing on a step stool in my childhood kitchen, carefully rolling boiled cabbage leaves around a savory filling while my mother coached me from nearby. I was only eight years old, but I had already claimed cabbage rolls as my culinary domain. These weren't just any cabbage rolls—they were my family's traditional version. They were filled with rice, loads of onions and garlic, and, yes, seasoned ground beef, then baked in a tangy tomato sauce. The process felt magical, and I took great pride in the production!

Since then, my cabbage rolls have evolved. Lentils and walnuts now stand in for the beef, creating a texture and richness that are just as satisfying. Sometimes I replace rice with quinoa or barley. When I am serving company that is less familiar with plant-based eating, I might use a veggie ground round for broader appeal. But regardless of the protein, the essence of the dish—the flavors, the aroma, the feeling of home—remains unchanged. If you would like comfy casseroles to play a bigger role in your family meals, this article is the perfect place to start.



The Global Story of the Casserole

The word "casserole" comes from the French word for a saucepan, but the concept itself transcends borders, languages, and culinary traditions. At its heart, a casserole is a communal, oven-baked dish built from layers or combinations of starches, vegetables, proteins, sauces, and seasonings. What makes it special is its adaptability to local ingredients and cultural preferences.

Historically, casseroles have served as a means of nourishment and resourcefulness—a way to stretch food, feed large families, and utilize leftovers. From ancient clay pot meals to contemporary lasagnas, baked rice dishes, and layered stews, the casserole has evolved in form but remained constant in function: to comfort, to feed, and to bring people together.

Below is a brief guide to traditional casserole-style dishes from around the world, many of which can be adapted into plant-based versions:

Region/Country	Traditional Dish	Description	Making It Plant-Based
France	Gratin Dauphinois	Thinly sliced potatoes baked with garlic and creamy sauce.	Replace cream with cashew, oat, or cauliflower-based sauce; use nutritional yeast.
Greece	Moussaka	A layered dish typically made with eggplant, spiced meat, and béchamel sauce.	Use lentils or crumbled tofu for the filling; make béchamel with cashew or soy milk.
Hungary	Rakott Krumpli	A layered dish of potatoes, sausage, egg, and sour cream seasoned with paprika.	Use veggie sausage, tofu and plant-based sour cream; layer with spiced veggies and sliced potatoes.
India	Biryani (baked version)	Spiced basmati rice layered with vegetables, and meat, chicken, fish, or tofu.	Use tofu, tempeh, or chickpeas in place of meat, and a generous mix of spices and herbs.
Ireland/UK	Shepherd's Pie	A savory casserole with a base of ground beef and onions, vegetables (often corn), topped with mashed potatoes.	Use lentils and mushrooms or veggie ground round instead of meat; mash potatoes with plant milk.

Italy	Lasagna	Alternating layers of pasta, tomato sauce, ricotta or béchamel, and vegetables or meat.	Use cashew ricotta or tofu, whole wheat noodles, and lots of roasted vegetables.
Middle East	Maqlooba (Maqluba)	A layered, upside-down rice dish with vegetables and meat or legumes.	Use chickpeas or fava beans; focus on eggplant, cauliflower, and other hearty veggies.
Puerto Rico/Dominican Republic	Pastelón	A Latin Caribbean casserole made with layers of ripe plantains, picadillo (ground meat with seasonings), and sauce.	Use lentils, mushrooms, or plant-based ground to replace meat in the picadillo.
United States	Baked Macaroni and Cheese	A creamy pasta casserole traditionally made with cheese and sometimes breadcrumbs on top.	Make cheese sauce from soaked cashews, carrots, or roasted red Peppers; top with whole grain breadcrumbs.

Let's look a little closer at a few of these traditional dishes:

Maqlooba (Middle East)- This fragrant dish translates to "upside-down" in Arabic. It begins with layers of vegetables (like eggplant, cauliflower, or tomatoes), rice, and chickpeas (or meat) packed tightly into a pot. Once cooked, the entire dish is inverted onto a serving platter, creating a beautiful, structured mound. It's both festive and humble, often served on large trays at gatherings.

Pastelón (Puerto Rico/Dominican Republic) Think of pastelón as a Caribbean take on lasagna. Ripe, sweet plantains replace the pasta, layered with savory filling—traditionally seasoned ground beef, but easily substituted with lentils or seasoned tofu. It's rich, sweet-salty, and full of flavor, baked until bubbly and golden.

Moussaka (Greece) Moussaka is a quintessential Greek casserole, typically featuring layers of eggplant, a hearty tomato-based filling (often with lentils in plant-based versions), and a creamy top layer of béchamel sauce (also easily made with plant-based cashew cream). It's deeply comforting and perfect for family meals or entertaining.

Each of these dishes illustrates the universal appeal of casseroles: humble, nourishing, often celebratory, and perfectly adaptable to a plant-based kitchen.

Why Casseroles Are Nutritional Powerhouses

Plant-based casseroles can provide both comfort and nutrition. They offer an ideal canvas for layering:

- **Legumes** like lentils, beans, or tofu for protein, iron, and zinc
- **Whole grains** such as barley, brown rice, bulgur, farro, millet, or quinoa for sustained energy, B- vitamins, and fiber
- **Vegetables** of all kinds, boosting phytochemicals, vitamins, and minerals
- **Herbs and spices** that add antioxidants and elevate flavor without added fat or salt
- **Sauces** made from nuts, seeds, or pureed vegetables for healthy fat and richness

These components come together in a way that supports satiety, blood sugar balance, gut health, and nutrient density. With such a wide variety of whole plant foods included, plant-based casseroles typically deliver balanced, comprehensive nutrition—offering excellent sources of protein, fiber, essential vitamins and minerals, phytochemicals, and antioxidants. This nutritional synergy makes them not only hearty and filling but also deeply supportive of long-term health. And because casseroles are usually baked, the flavors have time to meld and deepen—creating the kind of satisfying experience that keeps people coming back for seconds.



Comfort Food with a Modern Twist

Comfort food isn't just about indulgence. It's about warm memories, a sense of belonging, and special times with family or friends. Casseroles are the foods we bring to

potlucks, deliver to friends in need, or make for ourselves after a long day. They are, at their best, foods that feel like a hug—nourishing the mind and the body.

For plant-based cooks, casseroles are a dream: they lend themselves well to batch cooking, they freeze beautifully, and they allow for endless variation. You can assemble them in advance, customize them to fit dietary needs, and lean on pantry staples to keep things budget-friendly.

Below are three oil-free, vegan casserole recipes inspired by different culinary traditions. Each one is deeply satisfying, nutrient-packed, and easy to make. Whether you're feeding your family, meal prepping for the week, or bringing a dish to share, these casseroles offer a delicious way to celebrate the power of plant-based eating.



Plant-based Casserole Recipes

Stuffed Veggie Cabbage Rolls

Makes 12 to 16 cabbage rolls.

Inspired by my childhood favorite, this version is rich in flavor, texture, and comfort.

Ingredients

- 2 cups cooked brown rice
- 2 cups cooked green or brown lentils (firm, not mushy)
- 1 large onion, finely chopped
- 4–6 cloves garlic, minced
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup walnuts, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 2 teaspoons dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes (optional)
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup chopped fresh parsley



Instructions

1. In a large skillet or Dutch oven, dry-sauté the onion over medium heat, adding a splash of water if needed to prevent sticking. Cook until softened and translucent (6–8 minutes).
2. Add garlic and cook for another minute, stirring constantly.
3. Stir in tomato paste, smoked paprika, oregano, and spices. Let them toast slightly to intensify flavor.
4. Fold in cooked lentils, brown rice, and walnuts. Mix thoroughly.
5. Adjust salt and pepper and stir in parsley just before stuffing the cabbage leaves.

Kind Shepherd's Pie

Makes about 8 hearty servings.

This classic comfort food is composed of a rich, savory base, a veggie center, and a smooth topping of mashed potatoes. If you prefer, substitute sweet potatoes for some or all the potatoes. You can also replace up to half of the potatoes with parsnips and/or cauliflower. If you have any melty cheese sauce on hand (see below), you can add a thin layer on top before baking. French lentils or small brown lentils are preferred in the base layer, but regular lentils can be substituted if you like.

Ingredients

Base Layer

- 3 cups mushrooms, sliced
- ¼ teaspoon salt
- 1 large onion, diced
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 tablespoons vegetable broth or wine OR 1 Tbsp avocado or olive oil
- 3 cups cooked lentils (see page xx for cooking instructions)
- ¾ cup walnuts, finely chopped (or coarsely ground)
- 1 tablespoon vegetarian Worcestershire sauce or 12 drops of Tabasco sauce or a few drops of hot sauce to taste (optional)
- 4 tablespoons tamari or liquid aminos
- 1 teaspoon each, marjoram, rosemary, sage, thyme
- 1½ cups unsweetened, non-dairy milk
- 3 tablespoons cornstarch
- freshly ground pepper, to taste

Middle Layer

- 5 cups mixed vegetables (carrots, cauliflower, corn, green beans, peas, peppers, etc.), chopped into small pieces
- 2 tablespoons all-purpose, whole wheat, or gluten-free flour
- ¼ cup unsweetened soy milk or other non-dairy milk
- ½ teaspoon salt

Pepper to taste

Top Layer

½ cup unsweetened soy milk, other non-dairy beverage

¼ cup cashews, soaked or rinsed well (optional, but delicious addition) 4-6 large potatoes (about 2 ½-3 pounds), washed, peeled, cut in halves or quarters, and boiled

¾-1 teaspoon salt

white or black pepper, to taste

1. **Prepare the base layer.** Begin by dry sautéing the mushrooms. Heat a large saucepan over medium heat, add mushrooms and a dash of salt. Let cook for 5-10 minutes until the mushrooms begin to caramelize – do not stir. Add onion, garlic, broth, wine or oil and cook another 5-7 minutes. Add cooked lentils, walnuts, Worcestershire sauce (if using), tamari, marjoram, rosemary, sage and thyme. Simmer for 10-15 minutes. Whisk together cornstarch and non-dairy milk. Add to the lentil mixture and stir until the liquid thickens. Add pepper to taste.
2. **Prepare the middle layer.** If using frozen vegetables, thaw in a bowl, and toss with flour, milk, salt and pepper. If using fresh or a combination of fresh and frozen vegetables, steam the fresh ones for about 5 minutes before tossing. They should be very tender crisp as they will cook more fully in the oven.
3. **Prepare the top layer.** If you are making cashew cream, blend milk and cashews until a thick cream is formed. Drain cooked potatoes and mash with non-dairy milk or cashew cream, salt and pepper.
4. **Preheat oven to 375° F.**
5. **Assemble the pie.** Use a large casserole dish (or two smaller casserole dishes). Begin by spreading the base layer evenly in the dish. Add the vegetable layer evenly on top. Spread the mashed potato layer evenly over the vegetables. Score potatoes with a fork and sprinkle with rosemary, thyme and/or paprika, if desired.

6. Bake uncovered for 50-60 minutes or until heated through and nicely browned on the top. Serve hot.



Pinto Enchilada Bake

Make 6 generous servings.

My dear friend, Margie, adapted this recipe from the *Newstart Lifestyle Cookbook*. Add one cup of corn kernels to the bean mixture, if desired. Replace the brown rice with 3 cups of finely chopped cauliflower for an even more nutritious version. Cook the cauliflower with the onions, carrots, and celery.

Ingredients

- 2 onions, chopped
- 1 carrot, grated fine
- 1 celery stalk, chopped fine
- 2 tablespoons water
- 3 cups cooked pinto beans, drained
- 1 cup cooked brown rice
- 1 tablespoon cumin
- 5 garlic cloves, minced (or 1 heaping tsp garlic powder)
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon cayenne powder (or to taste)
- 6 large whole wheat or sprouted wheat tortillas
- 14-oz jar of tomato sauce
- 1½ cups Melty “Cheese” Sauce



Instructions

1. Simmer the onions, carrots, and celery in a skillet in 2 tablespoons of water for about 12-15 minutes. Add more water if needed to prevent sticking.
2. Add beans, rice, cumin, garlic, salt, and cayenne powder. Heat through.
3. Pour a layer of tomato sauce into the bottom of a deep, flat casserole dish.
4. Place 1 layer of tortillas on top of the sauce in the casserole dish.

5. Add the entire bean mixture, then another layer of pita, then tomato sauce. Top with “Melly Cheese Sauce”. Decorate with cherry tomatoes and/or basil (fresh or dried). If desired.
6. Bake at 350 F. for about 30-45 minutes.
7. Remove from oven when bubbly and before topping dries out. Serve immediately with salsa and guacamole, if desired. Perfect with a green salad.

Melly “Cheese” Sauce

Makes about 2½ cups

This sauce works well smothered over broccoli or cauliflower, or as a replacement for anything you would use “cheese” sauce. For a nut-free variation, replace cashews with sunflower seeds.

Ingredients

2 cups water

½ cup raw cashews, washed and drained

½ sweet red pepper (fresh or roasted)

3 tablespoons nutritional food yeast flakes

3 tablespoons cornstarch or arrowroot

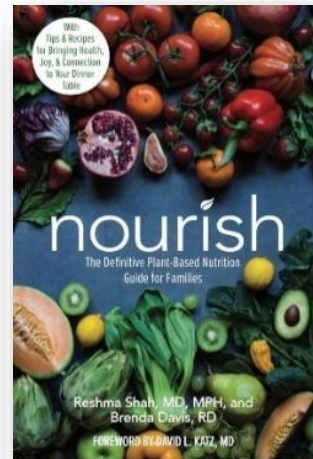
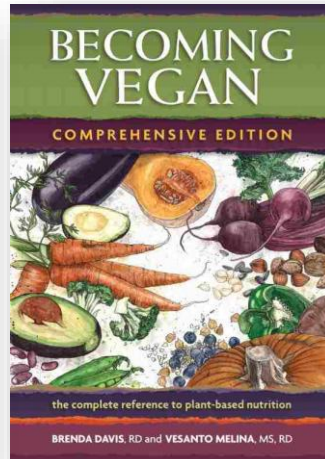
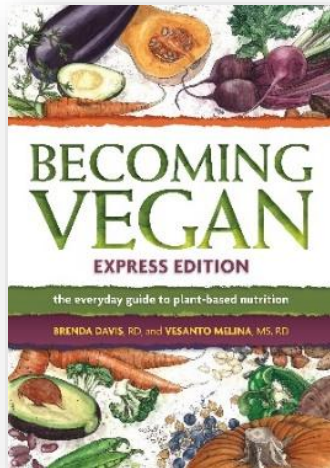
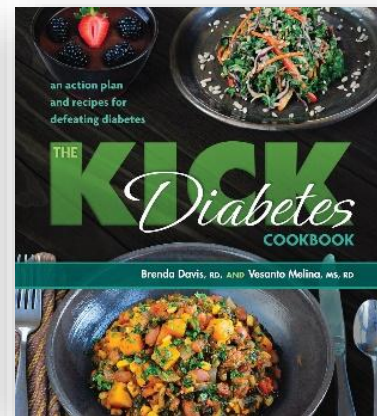
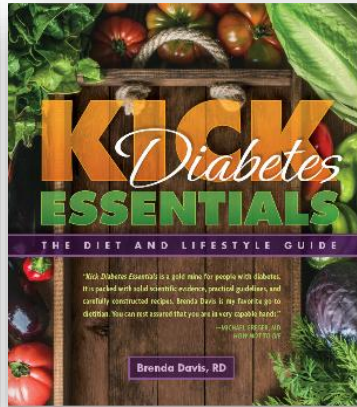
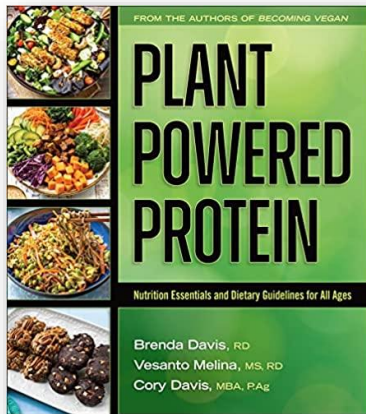
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice

1 teaspoon salt

¾ teaspoon onion powder

¾ teaspoon garlic powder

1. Blend cashews in about ½ cup of the water in a blender until very smooth.
2. Add remaining water and other ingredients and continue blending until very smooth.
3. Simmer in a heavy saucepan until thickened, stirring occasionally (5-6 minutes).



This article was originally written for So Many Cooks in the Kitchen. Brenda Davis, RD is a plant-based pioneer and author/co-author of 13 books on plant-based diets. She is the author/co-author of Plant-Powered Protein, Nourish, Becoming Vegan: Comprehensive and Express Editions, Kick Diabetes Essentials, and The Kick Diabetes Cookbook.

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