

Hogtown HomeGrown

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Granny's Veg-All® Casserole

You won't find it in *Fannie Farmer* or *The Joy of Cooking* and it doesn't even appear on the manufacturer's website, but Veg-All Casserole was a staple in the South and has found its way to many linen-covered dining tables, including Granny's. While her recipe varied depending on the number of guests and the contents of her pantry, you could always count on two things—square carrots and a topping of Ritz Crackers with butter.

Yes, square carrots are the hallmark of this vegetable medley still canned in Arkansas by Sager Creek Farms, formerly Allen's and now owned by Del Monte. Along with the square-cut carrots are potatoes, sweet peas, corn, celery, lima beans, plus onion flavoring, salt and calcium chloride. During her summers in Georgia, there were always at least two cans in the Lazy Susan corner cabinet, hidden behind Uncle George's favorite oyster stew. When the crowd was large and a feast of fried chicken with all the fixings wasn't enough, Granny grabbed those two cans, a few ingredients and put together a filling casserole.

Everyone has their favorite version, but the basic ingredients make the canned vegetable mixture creamy, cheesy and crunchy. Let's start with the top, a salty crunch that can only be achieved with Ritz crackers and butter. But do you dot the top with butter, mix melted butter with the crushed Ritz or do it Granny's way? She crushed the Ritz, spread them on top of the casserole and poured the melted butter over the top.

Many cooks make the Veg-All Casserole creamy with mayonnaise, others with Miracle Whip, sour cream or condensed soup. Granny's choice was usually Cream of Celery soup and a small container of sour cream. In her kitchen, cheesy always meant cheddar, but some recipes call for Monterey Jack or Parmesan. Since the onion flavoring in the Veg-All is very subtle, she added onion for flavor and texture. If she had a can of water chestnuts on the Lazy Susan, she would add them for more crunch and a little exotic flair. A few recipes call for fresh celery to achieve that crunch, without the flair.

Although I am sure there are others, I found a version of the recipe in one locally published spiral-bound fundraiser cookbook, *Cooking on a High Note* from the 1991 Howard Bishop Middle School Band. Mary Jane Fletcher's Vegetable Casserole has all the basics—Veg-All, onion, water chestnuts, cheddar, mayonnaise and of course Ritz crackers. Her use of margarine instead of butter reflects the era in which the recipe was written, when we were erroneously taught that margarine was healthier than butter. Thankfully Granny always knew butter was better. As our family moves toward more healthy eating, I am not sure the Veg-All Casserole will survive another generation. If that means we are eating flavorful fresh veggies and less “creamy, cheesy and crunchy,” that's not a bad thing at all.

® Veg-All is a registered trademark of Del Monte Foods, Inc.

What's Fresh Right Now?

Beans—green/purple long
Blueberries
Cabbage—napa
Carrots
Cucumbers—slicers, burpless
Eggplant—oriental, italian, fairytale, nubia
Greens—kale, collards
Herbs—tulsi, thai/lemon/italian basil, lime leaf, spearmint
Honey—orange blossom, gallberry, wildflower, everglades
Kohlrabi
Lettuce—red/green leaf
Melons—cantaloupe, honeydew, watermelon
Moringa
Mushrooms
Okra—red/green
Onions—red/yellow/white, green
Peas—creamer, white acre, black eyes, pink eyes
Peppers—red/green/yellow/orange sweet bell, aji, poblano, cayenne, shishito, jalapeño
Potatoes—red/white, creamer, blue, fingerling
Radishes—daikon, black, horseradish
Shoots and Sprouts
Squash—butternut, acorn, spaghetti, pattypan, yellow, zucchini, delicata, kabocha, seminole pumpkin
Tomatoes—grape, roma, cluster, green, yellow
Tomatillos
Turmeric

PUTTING FOOD BY

Tomatoes are abundant at the markets right now, so take the time to preserve some of that summer goodness to use year-round. While I prefer to roast tomatoes in the oven until they are sweet and caramelized, dehydrating or canning are also good options. Try making a batch of your favorite tomato sauce to either can or store in the freezer for an easy winter meal.

Local and Fresh—Tomatoes

Whether picked ripe and eaten immediately or picked green and ripened on your kitchen counter, nothing can compare to the taste of a fresh-from-the-garden tomato.

Choose tomatoes with smooth skins and allow them to ripen at room temperature. Do not store whole tomatoes in the refrigerator. Once cut, cover and store in the refrigerator.

Smokey Tomato Soup

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons olive oil
 2 Tablespoons butter, divided
 1 each onion, fennel and leek, chopped
 2 stalks celery, chopped
 6 fresh tomatoes, halved and seeded
 1/2 cup smoked sun-dried tomatoes, chopped
 1 large can diced fire-roasted tomatoes
 4 cups veggie or no-chicken broth
 2 cups water
 1/2 cup red lentils
 1 teaspoon each coriander and smoked paprika
 Salt, pepper and hot sauce to taste

DIRECTIONS

In a large covered pot, heat oil and 1 Tablespoon butter. Sauté onion, fennel, celery and leek until softened.


Add fresh, dried and canned tomatoes along with broth and water.

Bring to a boil and stir in lentils, coriander and smoked paprika. Stir well and return to boil. Reduce heat, cover and simmer 30 minutes.

Taste and add seasonings as desired.

Puree part or all of the soup to desired texture. Stir in remaining butter and serve hot.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

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Corn Casserole Elote

INGREDIENTS

8-10 large ears of corn OR 8 cups corn (fresh or frozen, not canned)
1 1/2 cups crema (try the Honduran crema at La Aurora)
1/2 cup mayonnaise
1/4 cup fresh lime juice
1-2 teaspoons of chili powder
1-2 cloves garlic, minced or grated
1/2 cup cilantro or parsley
8 ounces cotija cheese, crumbled

DIRECTIONS

Lightly grease a large shallow casserole. Preheat the oven to 400 degrees.

If using ears of corn, remove husks and silks and grill until kernels are tender and charred in spots, before cutting from cob. If using corn kernels, stir-fry in a heavy ungreased skillet (cast iron is perfect for this) until kernels have charred spots.

Place corn in prepared casserole. Set aside.

Combine remaining ingredients and stir until completely combined. Spoon on top of the corn to cover completely.

Bake 20 minutes or until topping mixture is hot.

Cool 5 minutes before serving. Serve hot or warm with lime wedges.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Tricks and Tips

Mexican street corn or “elote” is as messy as it is yummy.

There is no way to eat it neatly, so I put it in a casserole for company.

Chili powder is a major flavor in this dish and the best choice is a single chili instead of a mixture including other spices. For best results, buy whole guajillo chiles which are dried mirasol peppers, toast over an open flame and grind for a great fruity flavor with just a little heat.

Carrot Bisque

INGREDIENTS

2 Tablespoons unsalted butter
6 cups carrots, chopped into large chunks
2 shallots, chopped
2 garlic cloves, smashed and chopped
2 Tablespoons ginger root, peeled and chopped
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/2 cup sherry (water or carrot juice can be substituted)
2 cups milk
1 cup cream

DIRECTIONS

In a large covered pot, melt butter and combine with carrots, shallots, garlic, ginger and salt. Cover and cook over low heat, stirring occasionally, until carrots are tender.

Deglaze the pan with sherry. Puree sherry and veggies in blender with milk and cream.

Heat before serving. Cover and refrigerate leftovers.

Tricks and Tips

Sweating and deglazing are the keys to the deep rich flavor of Carrot Bisque. Sweating the veggies by cooking them covered on low without added water intensifies their flavors. Deglazing by adding liquid and scraping the pan after the veggies are cooked releases the flavor of the “fond” - the bits that stick to the pan.



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Tricks and Tips

Flan can be easily made with many of the readily available non-dairy milks, but the flavor and texture of Coconut Flan reminds me of Granny's Coconut Custard Pie. The light sweetness is perfect combined with the caramel syrup found on a traditional flan.

Want more than just the flavor of coconut?

If you don't have a fresh coconut on hand, use unsweetened bagged or frozen for the best flavor.

Stir shreds into the liquid mixture before it is baked or toast shreds to sprinkle on top of each serving for extra flavor and crunch.

Coconut Flan

INGREDIENTS

3/4 cup sugar, divided
2 cans coconut milk, full fat preferred
6 eggs
1/2 teaspoon vanilla extract
1/4 teaspoon almond OR coconut extract
tiny pinch of salt

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 325 degrees.

Select an ovenproof casserole, pie pan or bundt cake pan for the flan. Prepare a water bath by finding a roasting pan large enough to hold the flan pan. Fill roasting pan with enough water to cover one quarter of the outside of the empty flan pan.

In a heavy skillet or saucepan over medium heat, melt 1/4 cup sugar. Stir constantly until it forms a dark golden syrup. Immediately remove from heat and pour into the bottom of the flan pan. Don't worry if it isn't even, it will melt and distribute itself evenly.

Whisk together remaining ingredients. Be sure to add the eggs all at once and beat until completely incorporated.

Strain mixture into flan pan. Place in water bath and bake 30-45 minutes, until set. Test for doneness by inserting a silver knife—it should come out clean.

Invert immediately onto serving platter. Let cool before serving or refrigerating.

Cover and refrigerate leftovers.