

Seasonal Eating
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Cooler Weather Brings on Comfort Foods
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If you were to look in my vegetable bin on any day of the year there is one thing you would find: mushrooms. I almost always have some type of mushrooms, whether it is white button mushrooms, cremini mushrooms or Portobello caps. Sometimes there's even shiitake or dried porcini. Mushrooms are a year round, versatile favorite.

In the fall and winter particularly, they are one of the few vegetables with consistent flavor and quality. So they are the perfect ingredient for comfort foods.

Unless I'm doing a stuffed Portobello cap for dinner as a main dish, mushrooms usually play a supporting role - an addition to a soup or a pasta Alfredo or a red marinara sauce or sautéed over a grilled steak.



But as the cooler weather has set in, a casserole just hits the comfort food button. I have seen a lot of recipes for mushroom gratins lately so decided to make a mushroom gratin but with chicken added for a hearty, comforting casserole that makes mushrooms the star.

White, button mushrooms are the most common ones and are found in almost any grocery store. Pennsylvania produces about half of the country's fresh mushrooms with California, Florida and 27 more states following behind. Cremini mushrooms, which are baby portobellos, are browner in color and heartier and meatier in texture. The full grown Portobello caps are large, meaty in texture and great for stuffing for a main dish. Shiitakes have somewhat of a chewier texture and an earthy flavor that is great in risotto and soups. Just be sure to remove the shiitake stems before eating as they are tough and fibrous.

When you start this casserole, it will look like a mountain of mushrooms, but they cook way down. Mushrooms release a lot of water when they cook so they must be sautéed before adding to the casserole. They also soak up flavors like wine or butter or herbs. This casserole uses all three of these to flavor the mushrooms along with shallots and garlic and then coats them in a cream sauce layered with chicken and asiago cheese. The final touch is a crispy cracker topping. Comfort food doesn't get much better than this with its rich, creamy sauce enveloping meaty mushrooms and chicken and layered with cheesy goodness. A great fall supper.

Visit the Bedford County Extension website for more recipes and information about seasonal eating (bedford.tennessee.edu).

Chicken and Mushroom Gratin

7 tablespoons butter, divided
16 ounces mushrooms, sliced
16 ounces cremini (baby bella) mushrooms, sliced
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon black pepper
1 1/2 teaspoons dried thyme
1/2 cup chopped shallot or onion
2 cloves garlic, minced
1/4 cup white wine
2 tablespoons flour
1 cup heavy cream
1/2 cup water
2 cups cooked and shredded chicken
1 cup grated asiago cheese
1 sleeve round buttery crackers, crushed

In a large skillet or Dutch oven, melt 3 tablespoons of the butter. Add the mushrooms, salt, pepper and thyme. Sauté over medium high heat until mushrooms have given off their liquid and are almost dry. Add the shallot and garlic and cook for a minute or two. Add the white wine and cook until almost dry. Move mushrooms to one side and melt 2 more tablespoons of the butter. Stir in the flour and cook for 1 minute. Add the cream and water, stirring to incorporate into the flour mixture. Stir into the mushrooms and cook until thickened. Layer half of the chicken into a greased 7"x11" baking dish. Pour half of the mushroom mixture over the top. Sprinkle with half of the cheese. Repeat the layers with the remaining chicken, mushroom mixture and cheese. Melt the remaining 2 tablespoons of butter in a bowl. Add the crushed crackers and mix well. Sprinkle over the top. Bake at 350 degrees for 30 minutes until bubbly and browned on top.