Skillet Strata

Strata in its most basic form is a layered brunch casserole comprising day-old bread, eggs, cheese, and milk. The result is a hearty, savory bread pudding. Typically, strata is made hours in advance, usually the night before serving, giving the dry bread enough time to soak up the custard; it then bakes for an hour or so. But we wanted a fast strata, one that would deliver the same cheesy richness in a fraction of the time. After numerous tests, we discovered a way to speed things up by using an oven-safe nonstick skillet.

Sautéing the filling ingredients is the first step. Then fresh bread (not stale) is added and cooked until lightly toasted-toasting the bread in the skillet is a crucial step because it gives the strata structure and prevents the bread from turning to mush. Finally, the custard is added to the skillet off the heat, and the strata is finished in the oven, producing a delicate, soufflé texture for an elegant main course in less than 30 minutes.

Skillet Strata with Cheddar and Thyme

SERVES 6 TO 8

Do not trim the crusts from the bread or the strata will be dense and eggy. Using a 10-inch skillet is crucial for the thickness and texture of this dish.

4 tablespoons unsalted butter
1 onion, minced
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 tsp ground black pepper

6 large eggs
1/2 cup whole milk
1 teaspoon minced fresh thyme
1 cup shredded cheddar cheese (4 ounces)

5 slices high-quality sandwich bread, cut into 1-inch squares

1. HEAT OVEN AND COOK ONION:
Adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 425 degrees. Melt butter in 10-inch oven-safe nonstick skillet over medium-high heat, swirling to coat skillet, until foaming subsides. Add onion and ½ teaspoon salt and cook until onion is softened and lightly browned, about 6 minutes.

2. COMBINE EGG MIXTURE
Meanwhile, in large bowl, whisk eggs, milk, thyme, and ¼ teaspoon pepper together, then, stir in cheese; set aside.

3. TOAST BREAD
Add bread to skillet and, using rubber spatula, carefully fold bread into onion mixture until evenly coated. Cook bread, folding occasionally, until lightly toasted, about 3 minutes.

4. ADD EGG MIXTURE
Remove skillet from the heat. Fold in egg mixture until slightly thickened and well combined with bread. Gently press on top of strata to help it soak up egg mixture.

5. FINISH IN OVEN
Bake until edges and center are puffed and edges have pulled away slightly from sides of pan, about 12 minutes, and serve.

RG note – it took 14-15 minutes for us.

HEARTY EGG SUPPERS

VARIATIONS

Skillet Strata with Bacon, Scallions, Pepper Jack Cheese

Substitute 4 slices bacon, chopped fine, for butter. Cook bacon in skillet over medium-high heat until fat begins to render, about 2 minutes, before adding onion in step 1. Omit thyme. Substitute 1 cup shredded pepper Jack cheese for cheddar and sprinkle with 2 scallions, sliced thin, before serving.

Skillet Strata with Sausage and Gruyere

Reduce butter to 1 tablespoon and add 8 ounces raw, crumbled breakfast sausage to skillet with onion in step 1. Substitute 1 cup shredded Gruyere or Swiss cheese for cheddar.

Strata with Spinach and Smoked Gouda

Removing the excess moisture from the spinach is crucial here. After thawing the spinach in the microwave, wrap it in paper towels and squeeze out as much liquid as possible.

After toasting bread in step 3, stir in 2 minced garlic cloves and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Stir 1 (l0-ounce) package frozen chopped spinach, thawed and squeezed dry, into skillet with eggs in step 4. Substitute 1 cup shredded smoked Gouda cheese for cheddar.

EQUIPMENT: Rubber Spatulas

Heatproof rubber spatulas can be used in a variety of applications, from removing stuck-on bits in a hot skillet to scraping the last bits of cookie dough from a mixing bowl. We tested 10 brands to find the best models. Two came out on top: the Rubbermaid 13.5-inch High Heat Scraper ($17.50), which has a fairly conventional design. The blade is wide and flexible, though firm enough to stir the stiffest batter-a big plus. Its long, plastic handle is stiff and sits comfortably in the hand.

The Le Creuset Heatproof 13-inch Spatula ($12.95) followed closely despite demerits for its thin wooden handle. Its blade. thicker than the Rubbermaid's, worked admirably and resisted wear well.

THE BEST RUBBER SPATULA

The Rubbermaid 13.5-inch High Heat Scraper (top) and the Le Creuset Heatproof 13-inch Spatula (bottom) are not only your best bets for folding and mixing, but because they're heatproof, they can also be used for stirring eggs in a skillet.