

# Cheesy Meatball Pasta Bake

**Serves 4-6**

## **Ingredients for meatballs:**

- 1 lb lean ground beef
- ¼ minced onion
- 2 minced garlic cloves
- ¼ cup finely chopped parsley, plus xtra leaves for garnish
- 1 slice stale Italian bread, crust removed ( about 1/4 cup crumbled)
- 3-4 tablespoons milk (enough to soak bread)
- 1 egg, lightly beaten
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan
- 1 teaspoon smoked paprika
- 2 teaspoons oregano
- Kosher salt and pepper to taste

## **Ingredients for pasta and red sauce:**

- 1 lb large rigatoni or other pasta
- 1-15 oz can fire roasted crushed tomatoes (Muir Glen is my favorite)
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 2 tablespoons vodka
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 2-3 cups Quattro Formaggi (adjust to taste)
- ¼-½ cup grated parmesan

## **Directions for meatballs:**

Preheat oven to 400. Combine bread with milk in a small bowl and allow bread to absorb the milk. Break up bread with fingers and allow to stand to soak up milk for several minutes. In a large mixing bowl, combine meat with onion, garlic and parsley. Add salt and pepper and other spices. Add soaked bread and egg and using your hands, mix all the ingredients together so everything is well distributed. Roll meatballs forming about 1 dozen. Line a baking sheet with foil, place a cooling rack on the baking sheet and spray with cooking spray. Place meatballs on rack and bake for about 30 minutes.

## **Directions for sauce and assembly:**

In a 10 inch skillet, heat chopped onion and garlic with olive oil on medium heat. Add tomato paste and stir for a minute or two. Add crushed tomato, vodka and cover to simmer for 30 minutes or so. Boil pasta to al dente, drain and reserve about ½ cup of cooking liquid. Place pasta and red sauce back in cooking pot and stir to combine along with pasta liquid if sauce is thick. With heat off, toss in half the cheese. Spray a 9"x15" baking dish with cooking spray, transfer pasta and cheese to baking dish, nestle prepared meatballs in pasta and sprinkle remaining cheese around the pasta (pasta can be made ahead and refrigerated until ready to serve). When ready to serve, preheat oven to 350 and bake for about 25-30 minutes until heated through. Remove foil garnish with fresh parsley and serve.

