Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	35–40 minutes
Total Time	55–60 minutes
Yield	6 servings
Difficulty	Easy
Cuisine	Italian-American / Comfort Food

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Ingredients

For the chicken:

- 2 lbs (900 g) boneless, skinless chicken breasts (about 4 breasts), cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon garlic powder
- 1 teaspoon Italian seasoning
- 2 tablespoons olive oil

For the creamy Parmesan sauce:

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 3 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1½ cups whole milk
- 1 cup chicken broth (low-sodium)

- 1 cup grated Parmesan cheese, divided
- ½ cup heavy cream
- ½ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon black pepper
- Pinch of nutmeg (optional)

For the pasta and layers:

- 12 oz (340 g) penne, rigatoni, or rotini pasta
- 1½ cups shredded low-moisture mozzarella
- 1 cup marinara sauce (optional, for a tomato-Parmesan twist)
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan, for topping

For the crispy topping:

- ½ cup panko breadcrumbs

- 2 tablespoons melted butter
- 2 tablespoons grated Parmesan
- ½ teaspoon Italian seasoning

For garnish:

- Fresh parsley or basil, chopped
- Red pepper flakes (optional)

Equipment Needed

- Large pot (for pasta)
- Large skillet (12 inch)
- 9×13-inch baking dish
- Whisk

- Wooden spoon or silicone spatula
- Colander
- Small bowl (for the topping)
- Aluminum foil

Instructions

Step 1: Preheat the Oven and Cook the Pasta — *Time: 10 minutes | Intensity: Medium*

Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C). Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook the pasta for 1–2 minutes less than the package directions — it will finish cooking in the oven. Drain and set aside. Slightly undercooked pasta prevents a mushy casserole.

Step 2: Season and Sear the Chicken — *Time: 8–10 minutes | Intensity: Medium–High*

Pat the chicken pieces dry and season with salt, pepper, garlic powder, and Italian seasoning. Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-high heat. Sear the chicken in a single layer for 3–4 minutes per side, until golden and just cooked through (165°F / 74°C). Work in batches if needed to avoid crowding. Transfer the chicken to a plate and set aside. Note: The chicken will continue cooking in the oven, so slightly underdone is better than overcooked.

Step 3: Make the Parmesan Sauce — *Time: 6–8 minutes* | *Intensity: Medium*

In the same skillet over medium heat, melt the butter. Add the minced garlic and cook for 30–45 seconds until fragrant. Sprinkle in the flour and whisk constantly for 1–2 minutes until the roux is smooth and pale golden. Slowly pour in the milk and chicken broth in a steady stream, whisking continuously to prevent lumps. Cook for 3–4 minutes, stirring, until the sauce thickens enough to coat the back of a spoon. Stir in ¾ cup of the Parmesan, the heavy cream, salt, pepper, and nutmeg (if using). Whisk until smooth and creamy. Remove from heat.

Step 4: Combine the Casserole — *Time: 3 minutes* | *Intensity: Low*

In a large bowl, combine the cooked pasta, seared chicken, and Parmesan sauce. Toss gently until everything is evenly coated. If using marinara, swirl it in now for a tomato-Parmesan variation — don’t stir it in completely; leave streaks for visual appeal.

Step 5: Assemble the Baking Dish — *Time: 3 minutes* | *Intensity: Low*

Transfer the mixture to a greased 9×13-inch baking dish, spreading it evenly. Top with the shredded mozzarella and the remaining ¼ cup of Parmesan.

Step 6: Make the Crispy Topping — *Time: 2 minutes* | *Intensity: Low*

In a small bowl, combine the panko breadcrumbs, melted butter, Parmesan, and Italian seasoning. Toss until the crumbs are evenly moistened and buttery. Sprinkle the topping evenly over the casserole — this creates a golden, crunchy crust that contrasts beautifully with the creamy interior.

Step 7: Bake — *Time: 25–30 minutes | Intensity: Low (passive)*

Cover the dish loosely with foil and bake for 15 minutes. Then remove the foil and bake for another 10–15 minutes, until the casserole is bubbling around the edges and the topping is golden brown. If the top needs more color, broil for the final 2–3 minutes — watch closely so it doesn't burn.

Step 8: Rest and Serve — *Time: 10 minutes | Intensity: Low*

Let the casserole rest for 10 minutes before serving. This allows the sauce to set and makes portioning cleaner. Garnish with fresh parsley or basil and a pinch of red pepper flakes. Serve with a crisp green salad or garlic bread.

Time & Intensity Summary

Phase	Duration	Intensity
Preheat & cook pasta	10 minutes	Medium
Season & sear chicken	8–10 minutes	Medium–High
Make Parmesan sauce	6–8 minutes	Medium
Combine casserole	3 minutes	Low
Assemble dish	3 minutes	Low
Make crispy topping	2 minutes	Low
Bake	25–30 minutes	Low (passive)
Rest & serve	10 minutes	Low
Total	~55–60 minutes	Easy

Nutrition Information (Per Serving — 1/6 of recipe)

Nutrient	Amount
Calories	625 kcal
Total Fat	32 g
Saturated Fat	17 g
Cholesterol	155 mg
Sodium	890 mg
Total Carbohydrates	43 g
Dietary Fiber	2 g
Total Sugars	6 g
Protein	42 g
Calcium	45% DV
Iron	15% DV