

Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	35 minutes
Total Time	55 minutes
Difficulty & Intensity	Intermediate (Medium Intensity)
Heat Levels Used	Medium-High (Searing), Medium-Low (Simmering), 375°F / 190°C (Baking)
Yield / Servings	8 generous portions
Shelf Life / Storage	4 days in refrigerator; up to 3 months frozen

Table of Contents

- ✦
 - [Why Combining Pasta Shells and Rice Works](#)
 - [Equipment Needed](#)
 - [Ingredients List](#)
 - [The Base](#)
 - [The Grains & Garnish](#)
 - [Sauce & Seasonings](#)
 - [Cheese Topping](#)
 - [Step-by-Step Cooking Instructions](#)
 - [Nutritional Breakdown](#)

Why Combining Pasta Shells and Rice Works

Traditional stuffed peppers rely on rice to absorb savory juices and add body to the meat filling. Adding small or medium pasta shells introduces a contrasting, delightfully chewy texture. Pasta shells act as micro-pockets that capture the garlic-infused tomato sauce, melted mozzarella, and ground beef.

- **Textural Harmony:** Rice absorbs the seasoned tomato broth, while pasta shells hold structural integrity so the casserole doesn't turn mushy.

- **Balanced Moisture:** Cooking pasta shells *al dente* before folding them into the simmering rice-pepper mixture prevents excess liquid accumulation.
- **Weeknight Efficiency:** Everything bakes together in a single 9 × 13-inch dish, saving dishwashing time.

Equipment Needed

- 1 Large Dutch oven or deep skillet (12-inch)
- 1 Pot for boiling pasta
- 1 9 × 13-inch baking dish
- 1 Colander
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Aluminum foil

Ingredients List

The Base

- 1.5 lbs (680g) ground beef (85/15 lean ratio works best)

- 1 tbsp extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, finely diced
- 3 large bell peppers (mix red, green, and yellow), chopped into 1/2-inch pieces
- 4 cloves fresh garlic, minced

The Grains & Garnish

- 1 cup medium pasta shells (uncooked)
- 1 cup long-grain white rice (uncooked, rinsed)
- 2 cups low-sodium beef broth (or vegetable broth)

Sauce & Seasonings

- 1 can (15 oz) tomato sauce
- 1 can (14.5 oz) fire-roasted diced tomatoes (with juices)
- 2 tbsp tomato paste

- 1.5 tsp Italian seasoning
- 1 tsp smoked paprika
- 1 tsp garlic powder
- 1 tsp salt (adjust to taste)
- 1/2 tsp freshly cracked black pepper
- 1/2 tsp crushed red pepper flakes (optional, for heat)

Cheese Topping

- 1.5 cups shredded Mozzarella cheese
- 1 cup shredded Sharp Cheddar cheese
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 tbsp fresh parsley, finely chopped (for garnish)

Step-by-Step Cooking Instructions

1.Preheat & Prep the Baking Dish:Prerequisite Step.

Preheat your oven to 375°F (190°C). Lightly grease a 9 × 13-inch ceramic or glass baking dish with cooking spray or oil, then set it aside.

2.Boil the Pasta Shells:Heat Intensity: High.

Bring a medium pot of salted water to a rolling boil over high heat. Add 1 cup of pasta shells and cook for 2 minutes less than package instructions (roughly 6 to 7 minutes) until very *al dente*.

Note: The shells will continue cooking in the oven. Drain and set aside.

3.Brown Beef & Vegetables:Heat Intensity: Medium-High.

Heat 1 tbsp olive oil in a large Dutch oven over medium-high heat. Add the ground beef, breaking it up with a wooden spoon. Cook for 5 to 6 minutes until browned. Drain excess grease, leaving about 1 tablespoon in the pan for flavor.

Add the diced onion and chopped bell peppers. Cook over medium-high heat for 4 to 5 minutes until the peppers begin to soften. Stir in minced garlic and cook for 1 minute until fragrant.

4.Build Sauce & Cook Rice:Heat Intensity: Medium-Low.

Stir 2 tbsp tomato paste into the meat and vegetable mixture for 1 minute. Add tomato sauce, fire-roasted diced tomatoes, Italian seasoning, smoked paprika, garlic powder, salt, pepper, and red pepper flakes.

Stir in 1 cup rinsed long-grain white rice and 2 cups beef broth. Bring the mixture to a simmer over medium-high heat. Once simmering, reduce heat to medium-low, cover with a tight-fitting lid, and let simmer gently for 15 to 18 minutes until the rice is tender and liquid is

absorbed.

5.Combine & Transfer:Assembly Step.

Remove the Dutch oven from heat. Gently fold in the cooked, drained pasta shells and 1/2 cup of the Mozzarella cheese.

Taste and adjust seasoning with extra salt or pepper if desired. Transfer the combined mixture evenly into your prepared 9 × 13-inch baking dish using a spatula.

6.Top with Cheese & Bake:Oven Temp: 375°F (190°C).

Evenly sprinkle the remaining 1 cup Mozzarella, 1 cup Sharp Cheddar, and 1/4 cup Parmesan over the top.

Cover the baking dish tightly with aluminum foil (tent it slightly so cheese doesn't stick). Bake for 15 minutes. Remove the foil and bake uncovered for an additional 10 minutes until the cheese is completely melted, bubbly, and golden brown around the edges.

7.Rest & Serve:Final Step.

Remove the casserole from the oven and let it rest uncovered for 8 to 10 minutes before serving. This rest period lets the sauce thicken and prevents slices from slumping. Garnish with chopped fresh parsley and serve hot.

Nutritional Breakdown

The following values are estimated per serving (based on 8 total servings).

Nutrient	Amount Per Serving	% Daily Value*
Calories	430 kcal	—
Total Fat	18 g	23%
<i>Saturated Fat</i>	8 g	40%

Nutrient	Amount Per Serving	% Daily Value*
<i>Trans Fat</i>	0.5 g	—
Cholesterol	65 mg	22%
Sodium	780 mg	34%
Total Carbohydrates	42 g	15%
<i>Dietary Fiber</i>	4 g	14%
<i>Total Sugars</i>	5 g	—
Protein	26 g	52%
Calcium	220 mg	17%
Iron	3.5 mg	19%
Potassium	560 mg	12%