

The Canned and Boxed Food Cookbook

Dressing it up!

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Introduction

I fall into ruts. I'm sure we all do. It seems like our day-to-day menu gets stale and although the food still tastes good, it's not very interesting. I don't have time to cook from scratch as often as I would like. So we end up having some variety of Hamburger Helper, Rice a Roni, or Macaroni & Cheese more often than I ever thought we would.

One day I had half of a can of diced tomatoes in the fridge when I was cooking dinner, and on inspiration I added it to the Lasagna Hamburger helper. Spotting the bag of onions I grabbed one and chopped it up and put it in as well. I wished I had thought of it while I was browning the hamburger so I could have sautéed the onion with it.

The meal was delicious. We usually have garlic bread or cornbread with tomato-type meals like lasagne, and this night we had cornbread. While eating the cornbread I thought about various things like goulash, which I make from scratch, and to which I add a can of corn. I thought that might not be a bad idea with this Lasagna Hamburger helper.

I was really excited and started thinking of other options. We had boxed macaroni & cheese the next day, and I added onions, peppers, and a can of chopped ham. I loved it!

Then some of my fluff was taken away when I mentioned this to friends. They said, "Oh, we've been doing that for *years!*"

Oh. Sure, I guess it wasn't reasonable to think that I was so smart and original that I had thought up something no one else had thought of. For a long time I didn't mention it again. But I started taking my concoctions to potluck dinners and parties, and I got a lot of praise.

People probably thought I cooked it all from scratch. I didn't want to mislead them, but I felt silly admitting it was Hamburger Helper with a little more help from me every time someone mentioned it.

Over time I ran into a few other people who had never thought about adding other food to boxed or canned food, and they were happy to get the idea. I got to thinking that if I could get as old as I am and just now think of this in the past couple years, then maybe there are other people who would appreciate stumbling across some suggestions.

Even if you've been doing the same thing for years, you might enjoy reading my ideas. There might be something here you haven't thought of. It may help you think of new things I haven't thought of. I never get tired of reading books like this one, so I hope there are people out there who will enjoy this one.

I applaud you if everything in this book is "old stuff", and apologize at the same time if you feel I've wasted your time after you read this book. To the newbies, let's go for a

tour through my new-found imaginative cooking! Okay, that might be overdoing it a bit!

Hamburger Helper-type boxed meals

I divide these types of meals into categories. There's the tomato family, which is anything like lasagne or the Mexican ones with tomato sauce. Some things just go really well with tomato sauce, like diced tomatoes (no surprise there!), corn, beans, onions, peppers, black olives, and garlic.

Another family are the stroganoff type meals. They have a white sauce, sometimes with sour cream, sometimes just a white sauce. These things mix well with green vegetables like green beans, peas, and celery. Diced carrots or mushrooms are a good addition.

Sometimes I've added white beans to them. There's also zucchini, sliced or shredded, which takes on the flavor of whatever it's in and adds nutrition.

Onions and peppers go good in these meals, but then I put them in just about everything. I also add garlic salt and a light shake of hot pepper flakes to most dishes. Keep in mind, these things are all according to my own likes and tastes. You can change them around and do some experimenting on your own.

When I make Hamburger Helper I throw the chopped onion in with the meat and give it a sprinkle of garlic salt and hot pepper flakes. Then I add the noodles or rice, whatever came in the box, and the seasoning packet. When it's about half done cooking I add my other extras like vegetables or beans.

If you don't have onions on hand, onion salt or onion powder gives it a good flavor. If you have other spices you like, try adding some. You don't have to do it the next time if you don't like it. Go light on the spices until you're sure everyone who will be eating it, likes it.

I love rosemary and used to add some to the stroganoff and stew-type Hamburger Helpers, but some family members thought it tasted weird, so I stopped.

The Mexican Hamburger Helper meals are really delicious with a can of chopped chilis in them. If you have shredded cheddar cheese, sour cream and/or green onions on hand, put a dollop of fresh sour cream on it and sprinkle with chopped green onions. Top with a bit of shredded cheese, and now you have a gourmet meal.

Sour cream also goes well with most of the rest of the varieties of Hamburger Helper. In my opinion, parmesan cheese or shredded mozzarella are great on the white sauce-type meals.

If you're having garlic bread, make an extra piece and toast (or bake) it longer until it's crispy but not burned. Crumble it on top of the food, either as it sits in the pan or serving dish, or put it in a bowl and set it on the table with a spoon, as an option for people to sprinkle it on their meal if they wish. You can do this with cornbread, too.

There are boxed meals for all kinds of meat. Some call for chicken or tuna, but you can mix them up. I've fixed the beef stroganoff one with chicken, and some of the cheesy noodle ones are really good made with a can of chopped ham. Not spam. Chopped or chunk ham comes in little cans like tuna. Although I suppose spam would work too.

If I use canned meat I hold the meat until I put in the water, noodles, and seasoning packet. I sautee the onions and garlic, and if I'm using it, the celery. Then add the water or milk and the rest of the stuff from the box.

You can get a lot of ideas by looking at recipes for made-from-scratch meals. Look at what kind of spices, herbs, or vegetables are in the recipe, along with the sauce, noodles, and meat. Try adding some of them and see if you like it.

These things all add to the volume of the box of Hamburger Helper, which makes it go farther. If you're not sure you'll have enough for the number of people you're feeding, rather than cook a second box at the same time, try adding extra noodles, macaroni, rice, or whatever came with the box. I often throw in a couple handfuls of egg noodles or macaroni to stretch it.

If you add too much, then might dilute the seasoning too much and it'll be bland. However, if you've added onions, garlic, peppers, or spices and herbs with strong flavors, you're more likely to still have a tasty dish.

Macaroni & Cheese

Whether you buy name-brand or store-brand, boxed macaroni & cheese can get kind of boring after a while. We have caselot sales in our area and I buy a case of 24 boxes for a really great price about once a year. Most of the time I save it for when our grandkids come, but sometimes I fix it for my husband and I.

For years we've added meat to it, usually canned meat or leftover browned hamburger meat. Tuna, ham, turkey, and chicken are all good, as well as beef or venison. I used leftover roast beef once, chopped into small pieces, but it was just plain weird, so we didn't do that again. Others might like it, so that's why I mentioned it.

I started making the macaroni and cheese like I would make Hamburger Helper. I heated water in the pan and added the noodles, sauce, and meat all at once. I had to experiment to get the amount of water correct and had some pans of macaroni and cheese that were more like Mac'n'cheese soup, or were so dry we had to add more butter and milk to try and moisten it.

Generally I put in about a cup of water per cup of uncooked noodles. Then when it's about half done cooking I add the milk and butter it calls for. If the water dries up before the macaroni is cooked, add a bit more water. Use hot water if you have it, to save time.

This year I started dressing the macaroni & cheese up a bit more. I sautéed a chopped onion and garlic, then added the hot water, canned meat, macaroni, and cheese sauce packet. Like mentioned above, I added the milk and butter halfway through, as well as any vegetables such as canned peas. Our family likes peas in the macaroni and cheese. I've also added a peas & carrot mix, or mixed vegetables. We like it, the grandkids don't!

If you're using fresh meat, brown it first, with the onions if you're using onions, or by itself if you're not using onions. Then proceed as I described.

Something that tastes really good on top of this, and makes it taste like a pan of baked homemade macaroni & cheese, is to crumble saltine crackers and sautee them in melted butter or margarine. Sprinkle them generously on the macaroni & cheese. You can do this while it's in the pan, or you can put

them in a bowl on the table, with a spoon, so people can serve themselves.

In case you're new to cooking, sautee means to fry, sort of. You put a little bit of oil in a pan, heat the oil until it's hot but not smoking. Then you fry the onions, celery, and garlic, if you are using those things in your meal. Cook them until they start to look sort of clear instead of white or green.

You can sautee in a dry non-stick pan or with a little bit of water, if you prefer not to use oil.

Rice-a-roni

Rice-a-roni is a fun food to play around with. Some varieties come with dried vegetables already in it, but you can add onions and peppers. Garlic and hot pepper flakes go well with most.

A lot of the tips for Hamburger Helper work here. If it has tomato, such as the Spanish rice variety, things like diced tomatoes, corn, and beans go well in it. You can top it with sour cream, green onions, and shredded cheese.

I'm sure most of you realize you can add meat to Rice-a-roni. I've seen it listed as a cooking suggestion on the package. Be flexible. Just because it suggests chicken doesn't mean you can't use a different meat, for example. If you have it and want to try it, go for it.

Sausage is a good meat to add to both tomato and white-type Rice-a-roni. It gives a nice tang to the seasonings.

Instant Potatoes

I treat these like baked potatoes on a potato bar. I'll add ham chunks and shredded cheese to them, sometimes as toppings and sometimes stirred in. You can make a well in the middle of your pile of mashed potatoes and put chili in it, and top with shredded cheese.

Then there's sour cream and chives. They taste just as wonderful on mashed potatoes as they do on a baked potato. If you dress your potatoes up too much you might want to think of them as the entree (main dish) rather than a side dish.

Something I like to do is to mix in a can of cream of chicken soup when I make instant potatoes. Sounds weird but it tastes really good. I especially like to do this if I've just made homemade bread. I lay a slice of warm bread on the plate and put the potato/cream of chicken mixture on the bread and eat it with a fork.

I like to sautee onion, garlic, and peppers in a little bit of oil, mix them in with the potatoes, and then form the potato mixture into patties and fry them as potato pancakes. Spread a little butter on them and enjoy.

Store-Bought Canned Chili

Store-bought canned chili usually has the meat in it, as well as tomatoes and sometimes beans. We buy the kind with beans in it. It comes in various temperatures of mild seasoning to grab-the-hose, my-mouth-is-on-fire seasoning. If you're buying it on a sale and all they have left is mild, buy it anyway. You can always add chili powder.

Don't have chili powder? Add taco seasoning either from a packet or a large can, such as sold at places like Costco. I go through tons of it and keep an extra can of it on hand so I'm never out. It's great in, obviously, tacos, enchiladas, burritos, etc., but it's also great in Spanish rice, goulash, and chili.

So, I've got my canned chili open and dumped in a pan. I'm looking at a reddish-brown sludge of meat, sauce, and beans. Time to round up the onions (or onion powder or salt), peppers, garlic or garlic salt/powder, and a can of diced tomatoes. By the time you add all of that, it looks and tastes like homemade chili.

I do like the chili straight out of the can, but I've gotten bored over the years and I just can't leave it alone. I've added more beans, other types of meat like sausage, or corn, zucchini, and probably a few other things, but in the end, the things in the paragraph above this one have become my standby.

Crackers or cornbread usually accompany it at our house, but if you have corn chips or tortilla chips in the house, try putting those in the bowl first, and pour the chili over them. Or crumble them and sprinkle them on top of the chili. Yum!

You can add a dollop of sour cream, and/or chopped green onions and shredded cheddar cheese on it, especially if your chili is fairly thick. I boil mine down until it is. I have heard of using peanut butter as a thickener for chili, but it's something I haven't tried. I enjoy a peanut butter and jelly sandwich with chili sometimes, so I can see how the flavors would mix well. Black olives would probably be good in chili, but I've never tried that. It's on my list to try now.

Store-Bought Canned Soup

Soup is fun to play with. One of my favorites is Chicken Noodle soup. It's mostly like getting a can of broth with some noodles and a few bits of chicken, but it's a great start. I thicken it a bit with a little flour before starting to heat it. Don't add too much flour or it'll turn into a gummy mess. Then I add onions and mixed vegetables.

I mix up about a fourth of a recipe for biscuits, or a little bit of Bisquick, and when the soup is bubbly hot, I drop small blobs of the dough into the soup. The soup must be boiling or the dough mixture will mix with the broth and you'll have another gummy mess. When the broth is hot it seals the outside of the dumpling and then it'll cook without dissolving or mixing. Minutes later I have a delicious pan of chicken and dumplings.

This also works great with vegetable soup, with or without meat in it, and with stews like beef stew. You might have to add a little water to the beef stew if it's too dry to handle simmering with dumpling/biscuit batter in it.

Celery or any type of onion usually tastes good added to soup. If I've thickened it and added dumplings, it's usually also good with mushrooms in it. When I open mushrooms or black olives I often don't use the whole can. I spread the leftovers on a drying rack and dehydrate them. The olives are whole so I have to slice them first.

When I need them, I just grab a small handful and toss them in whatever I'm cooking. They rehydrate and soften as the meal cooks. Same with peppers. Some of those bell peppers are so big I can't use it all in one meal, so I chop up the rest and dehydrate it, right in the open air on a high shelf. Late in the winter I'm usually out of fresh onions, so I use dehydrated ones.

Your herbs can be fresh or dehydrated. A sprinkle of dried parsley on top of your soup is a refreshing touch as good as fresh parsley.

Keep in mind, these are my opinions, or those that my family and friends like. Food is very much a matter of personal taste. That is one reason I love to read other people's cookbooks. I might turn up my nose at half of their ideas, but it's things *they* like, so I don't complain. It's their book!

Spaghettios and Ravioli

A couple of years ago I bought a case of spaghettios to fix for lunch when my grandchildren visited. After the first few cans they decided they didn't *like* spaghettios any more. These were the meatless kind, and I thought they were pretty bland too. They were nothing more than tomato sauce with some little round noodles.

One day I opened a can and started adding things to it. I crumbled up a leftover hamburger patty from the cook-out we'd had the day before. I added some diced tomatoes, garlic, onion, and peppers. Still kind of bland. I stared into my spice cupboard. Taco seasoning was out, because the base of the sauce in spaghettios is Italian, not Mexican.

I grabbed a can of Italian seasoning and sprinkled it on. Delicious! I served it with grated parmesan cheese. Now the grandkids ask for spaghettios!

I was smart enough not to buy a case of the ravioli. I added the same things to it that I added to the ravioli, but it still felt lacking. It was one case where I almost preferred the unadulterated food right out of the can. So I'm still working on that one.

I'll include my email address at the end of the book in case any of you have good ideas. I would be happy to update the file of this book and include your name.

Canned Vegetables

When we were kids my Mom cooked green beans with a bit of bacon or ham in them. My sister-in-law did that, plus she added a spoon of lard to the pan. One day when I opened a can of green beans to heat as a side-dish with dinner, I thought....hmmm.

The day before we'd had salads with a whole slew of veggies, boiled eggs, shredded cheese...and bacon bits. I grabbed the can and sprinkled some bacon bits into the green beans. Was it wildly successful? No. The bacon bits were hard little chunks and didn't add flavor to the beans.

Next time I soaked the bacon bits for a little while in a small bowl of boiling water. I drained off some of the water from the can and added my bacon water. It was better. Other times we had leftover bacon from breakfast, and leftover bacon grease, and I added a bit of both to the canned green beans and they were great. Well, as great as canned green beans could be!

Another thing that is great with canned green beans is onions or the dry French's onions. If you're using fresh or dried chopped onion, throw it in the water with the green beans. If you're using the French's onions, drain the beans and sprinkle the onions over the top. This can be used with or without the bacon or ham.

Canned carrots were the next thing I played with. I added butter and a little bit of brown sugar. Yuck. Then I discovered you don't just add this stuff to the water when it boils. You simmer it all together until the water boils down. I cheat and pour off a little bit of the water so it goes faster.

Then I found ideas for adding things like ginger, honey, or orange juice, and if I have any of those on hand, I do add them. It makes canned carrots into something absolutely delicious. The only thing better is fresh sweet carrots right out of your own garden. But if you're using canned carrots, this is a great dress-up.

With canned corn I like to add a little bit of pimentos if I have them, a sprinkle of garlic salt or powder, and just a dash of hot pepper flakes. If I'm willing to take the time, I sautee onions in coconut oil, then add the corn and all the other stuff, along with enough water to barely cover. Corn is pretty good right out of the can, but if you're bored, you can do things to it.

I've never altered canned peas, so here's another area where I'm open to ideas. To me, they're adequate just the way they come, but I love to try new things.

Pork & Beans aren't a vegetable, they're a legume, but I'm putting them here because a lot of people consider them a side dish, like vegetables. A regular can of pork & beans becomes a gourmet dish with the addition of a little ketchup, a little mustard, and a tablespoon or two of brown sugar. Stir it in right away and let it simmer and glaze as the beans heat.

Here come my onions! I like to sautee onions and then add the pork & beans and the rest of the stuff. You can use honey or molasses instead of brown sugar. You can use maple syrup but it should be real maple syrup and not a maple-flavored syrup made from corn syrup. The flavor comes out kind of icky with the imitation pancake syrup. If you're using honey, molasses or real maple syrup, go easy on it until you figure out how much tastes good to you. It's easy to over-do the flavor with these sweeteners.

There are other vegetables, but many of them don't come canned, such as broccoli. I've written about the ones that I stock in my own cupboard.

Canned Fruit

I'm pretty sure a lot of people have done the things I'm about to write about, but here goes anyway.

Applesauce is a standard food in our house. Every generation of our family likes it. I know it's not 'cool' to add sugar to things, and a lot of people buy them with no added sugar. I do too, and then I add sugar and cinnamon. But the reason I add my own is that I like to use brown sugar in applesauce, with the cinnamon. It's really good that way. I go easy on it so we're not just having sugar with applesauce, but I do add it.

I've added finely chopped almonds, pecans, or walnuts to canned peaches. I like to dice up the peaches and stir them together with the chopped nuts, and cream cheese, yogurt or cool whip. I've yet to stir it with cottage cheese but I bet it would be delicious. Kids that don't like fruit will often dig right in to this.

Whole-berry cranberry sauce is something a lot of people don't like. I love the stuff. But half of my family didn't. One year I stirred in a can of mandarin oranges and I brought a few more people over to my side! The rest still thought it was pretty yucky stuff. I also like to throw some nuts in the blender and then stir them in to my cranberry concoction.

I like canned pears with a drop of vanilla and a little bit of brown sugar stirred in. I don't put sugar on fresh fruit, but I do put it on canned fruit, unless it's already so over-sugared I can hardly stand to eat it as it is. But when I can buy unsweetened or lightly-sweetened, I do. I suppose for the same price I could get the sugar included, but it's about more than saving a penny to me. I'm frugal but I have a place where I like to step over the line.

Adding your own sugar also opens up more options for people who, for medical reasons, can't eat sugar. They can add splenda or whatever alternative sweetener they use. A person could also add honey instead of sugar, for those who like honey or find it healthier than sugar. It does have health benefits sugar doesn't have, so it's a good choice.

Canned mandarin oranges...you can add whole berry cranberry sauce to them. Ha ha, I'm just being funny now. I'm sure you figured that out! We use mandarin oranges primarily in or next to Asian dishes and seldom eat it as a true fruit. So I'll leave that one alone.

Boxed Desserts

Pudding is the first thing that hopped into my mind. Our favorite is to start with chocolate pudding and add some peanut butter and cool whip. Crumbled graham crackers or 'nilla wafers sprinkled on it dress it up a bit. You can add colored sprinkles or chocolate jimmies to make it look festive.

Mix a tablespoon or two of almond butter into chocolate pudding and it tastes like a Hershey bar with almonds. If you're making those no-bake chocolate/oatmeal cookies and you usually stir peanut butter into them, try using almond butter in them instead. Delicious! Of course, this is if you like almonds and no one has an allergy to them. Same with peanut butter, but you probably know what your family likes or can and can't eat.

These things all work with vanilla pudding, even the peanut butter. I haven't tried it with butterscotch or other puddings. I have a friend that loves crumbled Ritz crackers in butterscotch pudding. I'll have to try it someday.

Crumbled cookies are great in pudding. You don't have to use oreos. Chocolate chip, peanut butter, sugar, and oatmeal cookies are just a few of the ones I've crumbled up and put in pudding.

One of my daughters wanted a 'pudding cake' for her birthday one year. She really meant pudding, not a cake mix with pudding in it. So we made a graham cracker crust like you would for a cream pie, and spread it in the bottom of a cake pan. We spread the pudding over it and after it chilled, we spread cool whip on it and put it in the freezer.

A few hours later we took it out and decorated on top of the cool whip with frosting tubes and sprinkles. We ate it while it was partially frozen, and it was easy to cut and lift out of the pan.

Cake mixes and another boxed dessert you can play with, and may already have. I cut up peach slices and put them in yellow cake mix batter. I've also used pineapple and had a version of pineapple upside-down cake, which I 'frosted' with a thin layer of brown sugar and a pinch of cinnamon, mixed with melted butter.

You can put crumbled cookies of any kind in cake batter and bake it. Just don't put too many cookie pieces in or the cake won't bake properly.

One time I used the water drained off a jar of home-canned cherries and used it in place of the water in a chocolate cake mix. That was the best chocolate-cherry cake I ever ate! If I'd have had a jar of maraschino cherries I would have scattered those on top of the chocolate frosting, but it was good the way I served it.

You can put marshmallows in your cake batter. Either use minmarshmallows or cut up your regular-sized marshmallows. Nuts, especially chopped or slivered nuts, are good

in cake mix, but make sure everyone who will eat the cake likes and can eat the nuts you use. Save some of the nuts to sprinkle on the frosting for an extra touch.

Add blueberries, strawberries, cherries, or raspberries to boxed cheesecake mix. You can drain and stir in about half the can, then serve the rest on the side. It's not the same as using pie filling, which is usually spooned on top. But pie filling is so expensive, and I've never learned how to make the canned fruit into a glaze. I think it has something to do with heating the liquid with corn starch. They must add color and flavor, because my attempts were bland and colorless.

For a quick cobbler, open a can of fruit and pour it into a greased bread pan. Add a quarter cup sugar to a cup of bisquick (or a quarter cup for each cup of bisquick) and mix it as though you were going to bake biscuits. Spread it on top of the fruit and bake it for about 15 to 20 minutes at 350. If it's not quite done, give it another five minutes.

You can use boxed Jiffy pie crust mix instead. It's already a bit sweetened but you can add more sugar if you want. Drop pieces of the prepared crust mix onto the fruit until it's pretty well covered, then bake.

When it comes out of the oven and it's still hot, spread some butter on top and let it melt. If you're a sugar-aholic, sprinkle brown sugar on top of the melted butter. You can go one better and have ice cream or cool whip with it. Vanilla yogurt is another good choice to eat with the cobbler.

In Closing

I know none of my ideas are probably original, but if we don't tell each other about these things, some of us might miss out on it. Yes, cookbooks and idea books will cross over with other books, and I hope you enjoy those books as well. I know I will!

Meanwhile, I hope you've had fun glancing through my ideas, and that your culinary experiences are joyful! Home-made food with fresh ingredients will always taste better and be more nutritious, but in the real world, it doesn't always happen that way.

Happy cooking!

Susan

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