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Mild-mannered ricotta the star of these Italian-inspired dishes

To those who say that magic doesn't exist, we have one word for you...cheese. Cheese is magical because it can add delicious flavour and texture to almost any dish. For versatility, you can't get better than a fresh and creamy ricotta. Traditionally, made from the leftover whey drained off when making other kinds of cheese, this Italian cheese can be served sweet or savoury.

Ricotta cheese dates back to the Roman countryside in the days when food was cooked in large kettles over an open flame. Its name, originally spelled recocta is Latin for twice-cooked, which was how the Romans got the cheese to separate from the milk.

Today ricotta is easy to find at the supermarket. Always remember to check the best-before date to ensure it's as fresh as possible.

Here we have a pizza that lets ricotta be front and centre, and a comforting gnocchi with a ricotta base and some Parmesan. For extra guidance on how to make Ricotta Gnocchi, have a look at our video tutorial at youtube.com/TheBlueFlameKitchen

Trying using this cheesy hero for your next meal!

SPINACH AND ARTICHOKE PIZZA

1 pkg (10 oz/300 g) frozen chopped spinach, thawed
8 oz (250 g) ricotta cheese
2 green onions, thinly sliced
2 cloves garlic, crushed
1/2 tsp (2 mL) oregano, crumbled
1/2 tsp (2 mL) freshly ground pepper
1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt
1/4 tsp (1 mL) red pepper flakes
1 store-bought pizza crust (12 inch/30 cm)
1 can (14 oz/398 mL) artichoke hearts, drained and quartered
1 cup (250 mL) shredded mozzarella cheese

Squeeze moisture from spinach until dry. Combine spinach with next 7 ingredients (ricotta through pepper flakes). Place bread shell on a cookie sheet. Spread spinach mixture over shell, leaving a 1 inch (2.5 cm)

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border. Top with artichokes and sprinkle with cheese. Bake at 450°F (230°C) for 12 - 15 minutes or until cheese is lightly browned and pizza is heated through. Serves 4.

Cook's Note: For additional colour, add sliced ripe olives, slivered oil-packed dried tomatoes or canned roasted red peppers along with artichokes.

RICOTTA GNOCCHI

1 cup ricotta cheese
1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
2 large eggs
1/8 tsp salt
1/8 tsp freshly ground pepper
1 1/3 cups all-purpose flour, divided

1. Stir together ricotta cheese, Parmesan cheese, eggs, salt and pepper in a bowl until blended.
2. Stir in 1 cup flour until dough comes together; gradually stir in remaining 1/3 cup flour, 1 tbs at a time, if dough is too sticky.
3. Turn dough out onto a well-floured surface. Knead dough for 3 minutes.
4. Dust dough with flour and divide dough into four pieces. On a lightly floured surface, roll each piece into a rope 1/2 inch in diameter. Cut each rope into 1/2 inch pieces.
5. Gnocchi may be prepared to this point and frozen. If freezing, place gnocchi in a single layer on a lightly floured tray; cover and freeze. Once gnocchi are frozen, transfer gnocchi to an airtight container and freeze for up to 1 month. Do not thaw before cooking.
6. Cook gnocchi in batches in boiling salted water until gnocchi float to surface and are tender, about 1 - 2 minutes if fresh and 3 - 4 minutes if frozen.
7. Remove gnocchi with a slotted spoon and transfer to a serving dish.
8. Serve immediately with a sauce.