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New York Breakfast Casserole

Yield: Serves 8 to 10

I'm not sure how it is where you live, but in New York City there are few more popular breakfasts than (1) an egg and cheese on a roll or (2) cream cheese and lox on a bagel. You can get either made to order frighteningly cheap anywhere – the deli, the bodega, some bars, the average corner store, where you can stock up on beer, lottery tickets, or cat litter along with breakfast. The randomness of these transactions is one of my favorite things about New York.

Does New York need an all-purpose breakfast vehicle like the one below? Arguably, no. But I came up with it one day as an attempt at a Yankee spin on the kinds of breakfast casseroles I've had in the South – usually with Tater Tots, lots of cheese, and bacon or ham; and, yes, they are insanely delicious – and got back to the corner-store breakfast (minus the pack of cigarettes and bottle of vitamin water). I found it to be better balanced than your average egg sandwich – which always feels too heavy on the bread for me – and was delighted to discover that, in the oven, bits of cream cheese puff and bronze like tiny marshmallows. Plus, as I always prefer, it serves a crowd, and can be assembled in advance, even the night before it is needed.

8 cups bagels cut into 1-inch cubes
(from approximately 1-1/2 pounds or 570 grams bagels, see cooking note)
8 ounces (225 grams) cream cheese, chilled, cut into irregular small bits
1/4 medium red onion, halved lengthwise, thinly sliced (quarter-moons)
1-1/2 cups (1 pint or 10 ounces) tomatoes, preferably grape or cherry tomatoes,
cut in half, or quartered if on the large side
8 large eggs
2-1/3 (555ml) milk or half-and-half
1 teaspoon table salt
Freshly ground black pepper
Capers, for serving
Lox or bacon, for serving

Prepare Casserole - Spread a third of the bagel cubes in a 9-by-13-inch pan (or other 4-quart baking dish, if necessary). Dot the bagels with a third of the cream cheese bits, and mix in the red onion and cherry tomatoes. Repeat in two more alternating layers. Whisk with milk, salt, and freshly ground black pepper. Pour the egg mixture over bagel-and-cheese mixture, and feel free to turn any seedy sides of the bagel croutons face up, in order to pretty up the dish. Cover tightly with plastic wrap, and refrigerate overnight.

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To Cook - The next morning – I mean, whenever you are forced from bed – remove casserole from the fridge and preheat your oven to 350 degrees. Bake on a tray, in the middle of the oven until it has puffed, turned golden brown, and cooked through (a knife inserted into the center of the casserole and rotated slightly shouldn't release any liquid), for 1 to 1-1/4 hours. Let it rest 10 minutes before serving.

To Serve - Serve in big scoops with a sprinkle of capers and a side of lox. Or bacon.

Cooking Note - Bagel sizes tend to be very inconsistent, making it difficult to estimate the number you will need. You might need up to a dozen freezer-aisle bagels or merely four or five large ones from a bagel shop. Do your best to eyeball what you'll need and if you overestimate, well, nobody ever complained about a freezer full of bagels.