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Chai French Toast Casserole

Serves 8

Some of our favorite holiday moments happen over leisurely breakfasts. The trick is to have a plan and do the kitchen prep ahead of time. One of our crowd pleasers that fits the do-ahead profile is a Baked French Toast Casserole. This year, we've shifted the flavors in our latest version of the dish. We've incorporated spices that mimic classic chai flavors -- it turned out better than we hoped! Try this Chai French Toast Casserole that's ready to serve a hungry crowd during this holiday season.

Ingredients:

1 loaf day-old challah bread
6 large eggs
2 cups whole milk
1/2 teaspoon ground cinnamon
1/2 teaspoon ground nutmeg
1/2 teaspoon ground ginger
1/2 teaspoon ground clove
1/4 teaspoon ground cardamom
1/4 teaspoon salt
2 teaspoons pure vanilla extract

Streusel Topping:

2/3 cup packed brown sugar
1/4 cup all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1/2 cup pecan halves
1/2 cup salted butter, cold, diced
1 teaspoon powdered sugar
Maple syrup for serving

Directions:

1. Cut the bread into 1" cubes. Place the cubes in a greased 9" x 13" baking dish. In a medium bowl, whisk together the eggs, milk, cinnamon, nutmeg, ginger, clove, cardamom, salt, and vanilla. Pour the mixture evenly over the cubed bread. Lightly press down on the bread cubes to help absorb the egg mixture.

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2. Cover the chai french toast casserole and refrigerate overnight. If preparing this casserole the day of serving, cover and refrigerate for at least two hours to allow the flavors to develop.
3. When ready to bake, remove the casserole from the refrigerator and preheat the oven to 350°.
4. For the streusel topping, combine the brown sugar, flour, and cinnamon in a small mixing bowl. Cut the butter into small pieces and add it to the dry ingredients, incorporating with fingertips until ingredients are evenly distributed. Finely chop 1/4 cup of the pecans, leaving the rest halved, and add both the chopped and halved pecans to the mixture.
5. Remove the casserole dish from the refrigerator and sprinkle the streusel mix over the cubed bread.
6. Bake the casserole, uncovered, for 35-40 minutes until golden and cooked through. TIP: If you don't have stale bread for this recipe, cut fresh bread into cubes and toast it in the oven at a low temperature, around 250°, for 10 minutes before you assembling.
7. Sprinkle with powdered sugar and serve immediately with warm maple syrup.