

Cowboy Pasta Salad – Easy Potluck Favorite

When you need a reliable, go-to recipe for a crowd, this **Cowboy Pasta Salad** is the ultimate potluck favorite. It is an incredibly easy and satisfying dish that truly has it all. We are talking tender pasta, savory seasoned beef, and crispy bacon, all tossed with colorful, fresh vegetables like corn, tomatoes, and beans. A creamy, tangy barbecue-style dressing ties everything together. This hearty salad is simple to prepare ahead of time, travels beautifully, and disappears fast at any gathering.

The Heart and Soul of a Great Cowboy Pasta Salad

The Flavorful Beef and Bacon Foundation

What sets this **Cowboy Pasta Salad** apart from lighter veggie-based salads is its robust, meaty foundation. We start by browning lean ground beef and seasoning it with a classic southwest blend of chili powder, cumin, garlic, and onion powder. This step builds a deep, savory base flavor. In addition, crispy, chopped bacon is folded in, adding essential pops of smoky, salty flavor and a fantastic crunchy texture. This combination makes the salad satisfying enough to be a main course.

Fresh Ingredients That Make a Difference

While the meat provides the heartiness, the fresh ingredients provide the “salad” aspect. Using fresh corn, straight from the cob, offers a sweet, crisp pop that canned corn simply cannot match. Halved cherry tomatoes burst with juicy acidity, balancing the rich dressing. Furthermore, a chopped green bell pepper and red onion provide a sharp, aromatic crunch. Finally, rinsed black beans add a pleasant, creamy texture and extra plant-based protein, making the salad even more substantial.

Cowboy Pasta Salad

Cowboy Pasta Salad – Easy Potluck Favorite

No reviews

- Author: [Aaron recipes](#)
- Total Time: [25](#)
- Yield: [10–12 servings](#) [1x](#)

[Print Recipe](#)

[Pin Recipe](#)

Description

This Cowboy Pasta Salad is purely addicting loaded with juicy ground beef, bacon, sweet corn, black beans, tomatoes and cheese smothered in tangy, creamy southwest barbecue sauce! Perfect for potlucks or make ahead dinners!

Ingredients

Copy to clipboard

Scale 1x 2x 3x

- ☐ 1 pound mini farfalle or other small pasta such as rigatoni or shells
- ☐ 1 pound lean ground beef or turkey
- ☐ 1 4 oz. can mild diced green chiles
- ☐ 1 tsp EACH chili powder, ground cumin
- ☐ 3/4 tsp EACH garlic powder, onion powder, salt (omit salt if using ground turkey and bouillon)
- ☐ 4–6 tablespoons diced canned/pickled jalapeno peppers (from 4 oz. can)
- ☐ 1 green bell pepper chopped
- ☐ 1 15 oz. can black beans rinsed and drained
- ☐ corn from 1 ear sweet corn
- ☐ 1 pint cherry tomatoes halved
- ☐ 1 cup cubed sharp cheddar cheese
- ☐ 1/4 small red onion chopped
- ☐ 1/4 cup chopped cilantro
- ☐ 1/2 pound thick center cut bacon cooked and chopped
- ☐ 1/3 cup ketchup
- ☐ 1/3 cup mayonnaise
- ☐ 1/3 cup sour cream may sub plain Greek yogurt
- ☐ 1/4 cup salsa medium if you like a kick

- ☐ 1 1/2 tablespoons brown sugar
 - ☐ 1 tablespoon Worcestershire sauce
 - ☐ 1 tablespoon yellow mustard
 - ☐ 1 tablespoon apple cider vinegar, plus more to taste
 - ☐ 1/4 tsp EACH smoked paprika, salt, pepper
 - ☐ Hot sauce/Tabasco to taste
 - ☐ Cook Mode Prevent your screen from going dark
-

Instructions

1. Whisk together all of the Dressing ingredients in a medium bowl. Add plenty of Tabasco to taste. Set aside.
2. Cook pasta just until al dente according to package directions. Rinse with cold water and drain. Add to a large serving bowl and toss with half of the dressing.
3. Brown meat in a large skillet over medium heat. Drain off excess grease. Stir in green chiles and all spices. Set aside to cool while you chop your veggies.
4. Add beef and all remaining salad ingredients to pasta except bacon.
5. If serving immediately, add bacon and stir in desired amount of dressing. If not serving immediately, hold bacon and dressing and add when ready to serve. Add hot sauce for spicier, apple cider vinegar for tangier, brown sugar for less tangy if desired.
6. Cowboy Pasta Salad can be served slightly chilled, at room temperature, or heated through. Leftovers are equally delicious heated in the microwave.

Notes

- *Turkey Substitute. You can substitute the lean ground beef with turkey in this Cowboy Pasta Salad. If you do this, I like to brown my turkey with a little olive oil and 2 teaspoons beef bouillon. If you add beef bouillon, omit the salt called for in the recipe.
- *Pasta Substitute. I like to use mini farfalle in this Cowboy Pasta Salad recipe but any medium or small pasta will work great. Rigatoni as well as macaroni would work great.
- *Don't overcook pasta. No one wants a mushy Cowboy Pasta Salad! It is important to not overcook your pasta – you want it al dente so it still has a little bite otherwise the pasta salad will be soggy.

*Stop Pasta from Cooking. To stop your pasta from cooking after it's removed from the heat, rinse and drain it in cold water then stir in some of the dressing to keep it from sticking together.

*Thick-Cut Bacon. It is essential to use thick-cut bacon in this Cowboy Pasta Salad recipe so it retains its meaty texture when covered in the creamy dressing.

*Cool Pasta. Unlike vinaigrette dressings, you will want to make sure the pasta is completely cool before mixing in the creamy dressing to ensure the dressing doesn't separate.

*Customize Veggies. Feel free to add/substitute any other veggies your heart desires like avocado!

*Canned Jalapenos. I highly recommend canned jalapenos as opposed to fresh because they are pickled which adds a fabulous tang that compliments the richness of the dressing.

*Customize Dressing. You can also choose to make your dressing tangier by additional apple cider vinegar or sweeter by the addition of brown sugar. Make it spicier by adding hot sauce to taste, keeping in mind the salad will also have chopped canned jalapeno peppers.

*Prep Dressing Ahead. You can make the dressing ahead of time and store in an airtight container in the refrigerator until ready to use.

*Make Salad Ahead. This Cowboy Pasta Salad keeps fabulously with the exception of the bacon. If you know you are going to have leftovers and want the bacon to stay crispy, then hold the bacon and add to individual servings or just part of the salad you're serving.

- Prep Time: 15
- Cook Time: 10
- Category: Side Dish
- Cuisine: American

Did you make this recipe?

Share a photo and tag us-we can't wait to see what you've made!

The Easiest Creamy BBQ Dressing You'll Ever Make

Simple Ingredients, Big Flavor

You do not need to buy a store-bought dressing for this recipe. This homemade creamy southwest sauce is whipped up in minutes using pantry staples. The base is a simple mix of ketchup, mayonnaise, and sour cream, which provides the perfect balance of sweetness, richness, and tang. This creamy trio is the perfect canvas for building a dressing that complements the **Cowboy Pasta Salad** ingredients perfectly. You can easily create this flavor profile at home.

Customizing the Tang and Spice

Once the base is mixed, you customize it. A bit of salsa adds zesty flavor and texture. Brown sugar is used to balance the acidity, while Worcestershire sauce adds a deep, savory umami flavor that

complements the beef. Yellow mustard and apple cider vinegar are the secret weapons, cutting through the richness and making the entire salad taste bright and fresh. You have complete control: add more hot sauce for a spicier kick or a little extra vinegar for a tangier finish.

Step-by-Step Assembly for Perfect Results

Cooking the Pasta and Meat

First, you will want to get your two cooked components cooling. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil and cook your pasta. It is critical to cook it just until *al dente* (firm to the bite) according to the package directions. Mushy pasta will ruin the salad. Immediately drain the pasta and rinse it under cold water to stop the cooking process. While the pasta cooks, brown your ground beef in a skillet, drain the fat, and stir in the spices and green chiles. Set both the pasta and beef aside to cool completely.

Combining and Chilling Your Salad

Assembly is simple once everything is prepped. In a very large bowl, add the cooled pasta and drizzle it with about half of your prepared dressing. Toss gently to coat. This prevents the pasta from soaking up all the dressing later and keeps it from clumping. Next, add the cooled beef mixture, black beans, corn, tomatoes, bell pepper, red onion, and cubed cheddar cheese. Gently fold everything together until just combined. You can serve it immediately or, for best results, cover and chill it for at least an hour to let the flavors meld.

How to Serve This Easy Potluck Favorite

Hot, Cold, or Room Temperature?

This **Cowboy Pasta Salad** is incredibly versatile in its serving style. It is most commonly served chilled or at room temperature, which makes it the perfect stress-free potluck dish. You can pull it from the refrigerator just before leaving the house, and it will be perfect by the time you arrive. Interestingly, the leftovers are also fantastic when gently heated in the microwave for a quick, hearty lunch the next day.

Perfect Pairings for Your BBQ

As a potluck favorite, this salad plays well with almost any main dish. It is a natural fit for classic American barbecue, such as pulled pork sandwiches, grilled chicken breasts, or smoked brisket. It is also hearty enough to stand next to simple grilled hamburgers and hot dogs. If you love this recipe's convenience, you should also try our [Pesto Tortellini Pasta Salad](#) for another perfect summer potluck option that comes together in minutes.

Smart Tips and Easy Variations

Healthy Swaps and Add-Ins

It is very easy to adjust this **Cowboy Pasta Salad** to fit your preferences. For a lighter version, you can substitute the lean ground beef with ground turkey; just be sure to add a little beef bouillon

during browning to maintain that savory flavor. You can also swap the sour cream for plain Greek yogurt for a protein boost and extra tang. For added creaminess, stir in a diced avocado just before serving.

Storing Leftovers Safely

This recipe makes a large batch, so you will likely have leftovers. Store them in an airtight container in the refrigerator, where they will keep well for 3-4 days. The pasta will continue to absorb the dressing, so it may seem drier the next day. You can easily refresh it by stirring in a spoonful of mayonnaise or sour cream and a splash of vinegar. For the best texture, always store the crispy bacon separately and add it to individual portions just before eating.

Component	Substitution Option 1	Substitution Option 2
Ground Beef	Ground Turkey (add bouillon)	Vegetarian “Beef” Crumbles
Sour Cream	Plain Greek Yogurt	Blended Cottage Cheese
Mini Farfalle	Rigatoni	Shells or Macaroni
Cheddar Cheese	Pepper Jack (for a kick)	Colby Jack
Green Bell Pepper	Red or Orange Bell Pepper	Diced Celery (for crunch)

Frequently Asked Questions

What’s the best pasta shape for this Cowboy Pasta Salad?

The best pasta shapes are those that can hold onto the creamy dressing and small ingredients. Mini farfalle (bowties) are excellent. Other great choices include medium shells, rigatoni, or even classic elbow macaroni.³ Avoid long, thin pastas like spaghetti or angel hair.

Can I use ground turkey instead of ground beef?

Yes, ground turkey is a great, lighter substitute for ground beef in this Cowboy Pasta Salad. Because turkey is leaner, I recommend browning it with one or two teaspoons of beef bouillon (and a little olive oil). This adds back the rich, beefy flavor you would otherwise miss. If you use bouillon, be sure to omit the salt called for in the recipe.

Why is my pasta salad dry? (And how to fix it!)

Pasta salads often become dry because the pasta absorbs the dressing as it sits.⁴ This is completely normal. First, make sure you toss the freshly rinsed, cooled pasta with half the dressing right away to “seal” it. If it is still dry before serving, simply whisk together a small amount of extra dressing (e.g., a tablespoon each of mayo, sour cream, and salsa) and stir it in.

Conclusion

For a guaranteed potluck hit that is both easy to make and incredibly delicious, this **Cowboy Pasta Salad** is the only recipe you need. It is the perfect balance of hearty, savory, and fresh flavors, all coated in a tangy dressing that everyone loves. This dish is built to be a crowd-pleaser and is tough to mess up. Because it is so simple to prepare ahead of time, it takes the stress out of party prep. Make this **Cowboy Pasta Salad** once, and it will instantly become your new favorite.
