

Polenta Pasticciata con Ragù di Carne

polenta casserole with meat sauce

Immediately after cooking in liquid, polenta is soft and creamy and can be served as is, usually as a bed for stews or sauces. Or it can be allowed to set up in a shallow pan or bowl and then cut into slices or wedges.

These firm pieces can be grilled or fried and used in place of bread for crostini (see page 49) or layered, as in this dish, and baked with a meat sauce and cheese.

Other cheeses, such as Fontina or young pecorino, can replace the mozzarella, and a plain tomato sauce or mushroom sauce can stand in for the ragù.

Although polenta is usually associated with northern Italy, this is a southern Italian dish. It's perfect to double or triple for a crowd, and can be assembled a day or two ahead of time and baked just before serving.

POLENTA

8 cups (64 fl oz/2 l) water

2 cups (10 oz/315 g) polenta (coarse yellow cornmeal)

1 tablespoon salt

SAUCE

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

2 tablespoons olive oil

1 yellow onion, chopped

1 carrot, peeled and chopped

1 celery stalk, chopped

1 clove garlic, chopped

½ lb (250 g) ground (minced) beef or veal

½ cup (4 fl oz/125 ml) dry red wine

1 can (28 oz/875 g) plum (Roma) tomatoes with juice

salt and freshly ground pepper

½ lb (250 g) fresh mozzarella cheese, sliced

¼ cup (1 oz/30 g) grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

☞ To make the polenta, in a saucepan, bring the water to a boil. Dribble the cornmeal into the water in a very thin, steady stream, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon to prevent lumps. Add the salt. When the polenta begins to boil, reduce the heat to low. Cook, stirring frequently, until it is thick and pulls away from the sides of the pot, 30–40 minutes.

☞ Meanwhile, oil two 8-inch (20-cm) square baking pans. Pour the polenta into the prepared pans, dividing it evenly and spreading it flat with a rubber spatula moistened with cold water. Let cool until firm. (The polenta can be made up to 24 hours ahead. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate.)

☞ To make the sauce, in a large saucepan over medium heat, melt the butter with the olive oil. Add the onion, carrot, and celery and cook, stirring, until tender but not browned, about 10 minutes. Stir in the garlic. Add the meat and cook, stirring to break up any lumps, until browned, about 10 minutes. Add the wine and cook until the liquid evaporates, about 2 minutes more. Pass the tomatoes and their juice through a food mill or sieve directly into the saucepan. Add salt and pepper and simmer, uncovered, until thickened, 30–45 minutes.

☞ Preheat an oven to 400°F (200°C). Oil a large square or rectangular baking dish.

☞ Cut the polenta into eight 4-inch (10-cm) squares and arrange half of the squares in the bottom of the baking dish. Spoon on half of the sauce, covering evenly, and top with half of the mozzarella cheese slices. Repeat the layers using the remaining ingredients. Sprinkle the Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese evenly over the top.

☞ Bake until the cheese melts and the sauce is bubbling, about 40 minutes. Let stand for 5 minutes, then serve hot directly from the baking dish.

serves 4