

Sangiovese • California Style Lasagna

The Lodi area was a mecca for Italian settlers in the late 1800's and early 1900's. Robert and Peter Mondavi grew up on Pine Street in Lodi. Earnest and Julio Gallo grew up just east of Lodi in Jackson. The Franzia brothers grew up in Ripon, just south of Lodi. Ironically, these wine industry giants steered away from Italian grape varietals. Italian grapes were finicky and not as economical to grow as Zinfandel or Chenin blanc, but you can bet these Italians were never far from a good glass of Chianti. Well, Lodi wine grape growers are not only a hearty bunch, but some of them are a bit crazy. They get passionate about something and will spend their last dollar to make it happen. A few dreamers planted **Sangiovese** (pronounced san-joe-VAY-say), erroneously thinking that the hot dry climate of Lodi was similar to that of Tuscany. Nevertheless, with a tremendous amount of work, they have been pretty successful.

Origin: Sangiovese is a red Italian wine grape variety that derives its name from the Latin, *sanguis Jovis*, ("the blood of Jupiter"). It's the main component of the ubiquitous Italian wine, Chianti. DNA tests show that it is, well, all Italian. It's a cross between Ciliegiolo and Calabrese Montenuovo, both indigenous to Italy. Chianti is a place designation, so only wines from grapes grown there bear the name.

Tasting and Serving: Sangiovese is lighter in color than a Cab or Zinfandel, having a slight brownish tint. A good Sangiovese has aromas of cherry with subtle notes of, believe it or not, tomato. A Lodi Sangiovese will be a little more jammy than a Chianti, giving you notes of chocolate and anise (black licorice), and possibly caramelized sugar. It's a moderately acidic and tannic wine, creating a noticeable but not overpowering drying sensation in your mouth. Serve Sangiovese at 60 to 65 degrees (10 to 15 minutes in a refrigerator).

Pairing: Sangiovese wine is considered to be savory. It pairs best with hearty Italian dishes that have lots of herbs and tomatoes, which tend to bring out the fruit flavors of the wine. You also want a dish that has enough fat or oil to cut through the tannins in the wine. I chose Sorelle Winery 2014 Sangiovese to pair with my California Style Lasagna. The dish, while light on the meat, is rich in herbs and tomatoes, and the ricotta cheese and olive oil provide just enough fat to cut through the wine's tannins. Mike and Joanne Scott started Sorelle Winery at the historic Dodge House to get their daughters Kim and Melissa involved in the business ("Sorelle" is Italian for sisters). They planted Italian varietals, Sangiovese and Barbera, on their four acres because of Joanne's Italian ancestry. With help from winemaker Chad Joseph, the Scotts made their first estate Sangiovese in 2009 and opened their tasting room in 2010. Sangiovese is difficult to grow in this area and even more difficult to turn into a great wine. The grape clusters have to be situated just right on the vine, not touching each other, and the Scotts must carefully sort the ripe and unripe berries as the grapes come in from harvest. A lot of work and attention to detail during the week. On weekends, you can find Scott family members in the tasting room sneaking tastes of their award-winning Estate Sangiovese and best-of-class Estate Barbera between visitors.

150 Lodi Wine and Food

California Style Lasagna

A journey through Lodi Wine Country would not be complete without some Italian wine and food. Around the turn of the century (the last century, that is), many Italian families settled in the Lodi and Linden areas. As much as I love Italian food (especially the great ravioli at Angelina's Spaghetti House), when I got into my 20's and worried about eating healthier, I started making this lighter but flavorful lasagna that I call "California Style." I used chicken instead of ground beef, low fat cheeses, low salt tomato sauce, and lots of spinach. I would make it on Sunday and take pieces to work for the next four days.



Ingredients

- 1 TBS canola oil
- 1 large yellow onion, chopped small dice (page 65)
- 2 tsp dried basil
- 1 tsp dried oregano
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 tsp black pepper
- 2 tsp salt
- 6 cloves garlic, cut fine brunoise
- 1/3 cup Sangiovese wine
- 1 pound boneless, skinless chicken thighs, cut small dice
- 2 15-ounce cans diced tomatoes (low sodium preferred)
- 1/4 cup tomato paste (low sodium preferred)
- 1 TBS Old Uncle Lester's Pepper Sauce
- 1-1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese
- 2 cups ricotta cheese (part-skim preferred)
- 1 pound fresh spinach, washed, drained, and cut to large dice (with stems removed),
or a 10-ounce box of frozen chopped spinach (defrosted and drained)
- 1/2 tsp freshly ground nutmeg
- 1/2 tsp cream of tartar
- 9 ruffle-edged lasagna noodles (cooked according to package instructions)
- 1-1/2 cup shredded mozzarella cheese

Preparing the Fillings:

Heat a large skillet using medium heat. Add canola oil to coat the bottom. Add the onion, basil, oregano, bay leaf, 1 tsp salt, and black pepper. Cook until the onion softens (about 5 minutes). Add the garlic and cook until you smell the garlic (about 30 seconds). Add the wine and cook until the liquid is gone ("au sec," about 3 to 5 minutes). Add the chicken and cook, stirring, until it is browned on all sides (about 5 minutes). Add the tomatoes, tomato paste, and pepper sauce and stir. Reduce heat to simmer. Let simmer, uncovered, for 20 minutes. Remove the bay leaves and set the mixture aside on a trivet.



Mise en place for the meat filling



"Au sec" after the wine is cooked off

Mix 3/4 cup of Parmesan cheese, ricotta cheese, spinach, 3/4 cup mozzarella, and the cream of tartar in a bowl. Sprinkle with freshly ground nutmeg. The photo at the right shows the fresh whole nutmeg being ground on a microplane.

Boil the lasagna noodles according to instructions on the box. If you have a pot with a pasta insert, use that. Add 1 tsp salt to the water while heating it up.



Building the Layers

Spread half the chicken mix on the bottom of a 9 x 13-inch, 3-quart baking dish. Cover chicken mix with a layer of pasta noodles. Spread half the spinach/cheese mix to cover the noodles. Cover spinach/cheese mix with a layer of pasta noodles. Spread the remaining chicken mix on the noodles. Cover with a final layer of noodles. Spread the remaining spinach/cheese mix over the noodles. Sprinkle the remaining Parmesan cheese over the top. Cover the lasagna with aluminum foil and bake at 375 degrees for 25 minutes. Uncover and sprinkle the remaining mozzarella cheese over the top. Bake, uncovered, for another 10 minutes. Let cool for 15 minutes before serving.



Presentation:

Serving lasagna is pretty simple. Carefully cut a piece out with a metal turner or spatula and try to keep it all together while transferring it to the plate.

The California Ingredient:

Though tomatoes are grown just about everywhere in the southern half of the United States, California produces 90% of the nation's and nearly half the world's processed tomatoes (for juice, sauce, paste, salsa, etc.). Almost all of these are grown right here in the Central Valley, between Yuba City and Bakersfield. Southeast of Lodi, Linden has many large tomato farms. Several canneries are located in the Stockton and Modesto areas.

Tips and Tricks:

Time (and timing) is the key to success for this dish. The entire process takes about three hours. *Mise en place* takes about 45 minutes, if you use fresh spinach. You can reduce this to a half hour by using a package of frozen chopped spinach, but the fresh taste is worth the extra 15 minutes. Cooking the noodles takes about 20 minutes (including getting the water to boil), but you can do this while chopping, as long as you check and stir the noodles often to keep them from sticking together. Cooking the chicken and sauce takes about 40 minutes, the final 20 minutes of which is simmering, during which time you can mix the cheese and spinach, as long as you keep an eye on the simmering sauce. Assembling the layers takes another 10 to 15 minutes. Baking and cooling down takes an hour.

Chopping raw chicken is difficult, even with a sharp knife, because of the smooth membrane. Also, raw chicken meat is somewhat fluid and will spread out from under the knife when you push down. Hold the chicken part firmly and use a sawing motion with your chef's knife, with very light downward pressure. The raw chicken will then cut like butter. To get small dice, first cut the pieces to a large dice, then chop the pieces smaller using the tip fulcrum method with the heel of your non-knife hand on the spline. You can also use a meat grinder if you have one.

You want the noodles to stay separate and not stick together. If you lump them together after cooking, they will stick to each other as they dry and could tear when you try to separate them. A good way to prepare lasagna noodles is to boil 3 to 4 noodles at a time, carefully lift them out with a slotted pasta fork or tongs, and lay them flat on a plate to cool. By the time the next batch of noodles is done, the first batch will be cool and fairly dry, and you can lay the freshly cooked noodles on top of them, crosswise. If sticking together is still a problem, you can use wax paper to separate the layers of noodles.