



In the Kitchen

with Barb Agee ~ September 2015

Polenta: Perfected

Polenta is one of Italy's beloved starches. Many polenta dishes incorporate an Italian cheese such as Gorgonzola, Parmesan or Mozzarella. This quick easy comfort food can take leftovers to a new level such as pork ragu or spicy beef.

Polenta Layer Cake with Gorgonzola Filling

For Polenta

9 cups cold water
¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
1 teaspoon kosher salt
4 bay leaves
2 cups yellow cornmeal, medium grind

For Filling

4 strips bacon, cut into small pieces
⅓ cup onion, finely chopped
½ cup mushrooms, thinly sliced
3 tablespoons butter, cut into small pieces, divided
2 ounces Gorgonzola cheese, divided
1¼ cups grated Parmesan, divided
1 tablespoon basil, thinly sliced, divided

Combine water, oil, salt and bay leaves in a large pot. Pour in the cornmeal in a steady stream, whisking until incorporated. Bring to a boil over medium heat, stirring often. When thick and bubbling, about 10 minutes, reduce heat to low and partially cover. Cook until glossy, stirring often, for about 25 minutes. In a skillet, brown bacon until just crisp; add the onions and mushrooms and cook for 1 minute. Set aside.

To assemble cake. In a 10-inch skillet or baking pan, spread 2 cups warm polenta. Dot with 1 tablespoon of the butter; spread one-half of the bacon mixture, 1 ounce Gorgonzola cheese, one-half cup Parmesan and one-half of the basil over polenta. Repeat with another layer of polenta, bacon mixture, butter, cheeses and basil. Finish with 2 more cups of polenta spread over mixture. Then sprinkle with 1 tablespoon butter pieces and one-fourth cup of Parmesan. Cover with plastic wrap and chill for 1 to 24 hours. Bake uncovered at 400°F until sizzling and deep golden for 45 to 60 minutes. *Serves 12*

Lemon-Pepper Polenta

1 cup milk
1½ cups water
½ cup yellow cornmeal
2 teaspoons lemon zest
½ teaspoon kosher salt

¼ - ½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
3 ounces cream cheese, cubed
1 tablespoon lemon juice
1 tablespoon lemon peel, *optional*

In a large saucepan, heat milk and water just to a boil. Slowly pour in cornmeal, whisking constantly until cornmeal is incorporated completely. Add lemon zest, salt and pepper, reduce heat to a simmer. Cook polenta until thick, whisking occasionally. Remove from heat, stir in cream cheese until melted. To serve, top with lemon peel and a dash of freshly ground pepper. *Serves 4*

Sausage and Kale Sauté with Polenta

2 tablespoons olive oil, divided
8 ounces sweet Italian sausage, casings removed
4 cups kale, chopped
2 tablespoons water
½ teaspoon freshly ground pepper
1½ cups marinara sauce
2 ounces mozzarella cheese, shredded
Polenta Croutons (*see recipe below*)

Make one recipe of the Polenta Croutons (*see recipe below*) and spread on prepared baking sheet about ¾-inch thick. Chill until firm about 2 hours. Cut eight 3-inch squares, save remaining polenta for croutons or another meal. In a skillet over medium-high heat, add 1 tablespoon olive oil and fry both sides of polenta until lightly browned. Set aside.

Preheat broiler. Heat 1 tablespoon olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat. Add sausage; cook 3 to 4 minutes, stirring to brown. Transfer sausage to a bowl. Add kale, water and pepper to the same skillet. Cover and cook for 5 minutes. Uncover and stir in cooked sausage and marinara sauce. Nestle polenta squares into sausage mixture; sprinkle with cheese. Broil 2 minutes.

Polenta Croutons

3 cups water
1 cup yellow cornmeal
¼ teaspoon kosher salt
⅔ cup heavy cream
1 cup Parmesan cheese, divided
Olive oil
Salt and pepper, to taste

Line a baking sheet (jelly roll pan) with parchment paper. Bring water to a boil in a saucepan. Whisk in cornmeal in a steady stream. Add salt, reduce heat to medium-low and cook, stirring often until thick, about 5 minutes. Stir in cream and ½ cup Parmesan cheese. Spread mixture onto prepared pan about ¾-inch thick and chill until firm about 2 hours. Cut polenta into ¾-inch cubes.

In a hot skillet, pour in oil to just coat bottom of skillet. Fry croutons in batches until golden brown on all sides, turning occasionally. Transfer croutons to a paper-lined plate and season with remaining Parmesan and salt and pepper to taste. Serve immediately on salad or in soup.
Makes about 3 cups



Polenta with Mushrooms

1 cup fine yellow polenta
3½ cups water
Sea salt
freshly ground pepper
3 tablespoons butter
8 ounces mixed mushrooms
2 tablespoons olive oil
2 large garlic cloves, minced
1 teaspoon rosemary, minced
¼ cup Parmesan, grated
¼ cup parsley, torn

In a heavy 3-quart saucepan, whisk polenta into the water. Set over medium-heat high heat and bring to a simmer, stirring occasionally until polenta begins to thicken. Should take about 10 minutes. Reduce heat to low, cover partly and cook, stirring often until polenta is soft and holds its shape, about 25 minutes. When polenta is done, whisk in butter, ¾ teaspoon sea salt and freshly ground pepper.

While polenta is cooking, pan-cook mushrooms. Heat olive oil in a skillet over medium-high heat, add mushrooms and garlic, stir and sear until lightly browned. Add rosemary, salt and pepper to taste.

Spoon polenta into small bowls; top with mushrooms and a sprinkle of Parmesan and parsley.