



NICHOLAS RIZZO'S POLENTA

Polenta is a dish of boiled cornmeal. It may be consumed hot as a porridge or allowed to cool and solidify into a loaf, which is then baked, fried, or grilled. Latin polenta covered any hulled and crushed grain, especially barley-meal, and is derived from Latin pollen 'fine flour', which shares a root with pulvis 'dust'. As it is known today, polenta derives from earlier forms of grain mush (known as puls or pulmentum in Latin or more commonly as gruel or porridge), commonly eaten since Roman times. Before the introduction of corn (maize) from the New World in the 16th century, polenta was made with such starchy ingredients as farro, chestnut flour, millet, spelt, and chickpeas.

Historically, polenta was served as a peasant food in North America and Europe. The reliance on maize, which lacks readily accessible niacin unless cooked with alkali to release it, as a staple caused outbreaks of pellagra throughout the American South and much of Europe until the 20th century. In the 1940s and 1950s, polenta was often eaten with salted anchovy or herring, sometimes topped with sauces.

Classically, during preparation, the polenta was stirred with a large wooden stick called a cannella (traditionally made of walnut) until it becomes thick enough to support the stirring rod on its own. Polenta has a creamy texture due to the gelatinization of starch in the grain. However, its consistency may not be completely homogeneous if a coarse grind or hard grain such as flint corn is used. This recipe is based on the Cook's Country recipe for "Fluffy Baked Polenta with Red Sauce", with a few important changes. Note: this recipe is for a firm polenta that is cut into shapes prior to serving. If a thinner, spoon-able polenta is desired, add extra half-and half until the desired consistency is reached.



Ingredients

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 3 garlic cloves, smashed and peeled
- 7 cups water
- 1 ½ teaspoons chicken broth base (Recommended: Superior Touch Better than Bouillon Chicken Base)
- ½ teaspoon white pepper
- 1 ½ cups cornmeal (Recommended: Quaker Yellow Cornmeal)
- 3 ounces Pecorino Romano cheese, grated (about 1 ½ cups) (Get real cheese, grate it yourself, and measure on a scale accurately. It makes a difference here.)
- ¼ cup half-and-half



1. Lightly grease and 8-inch square baking pan. Heat butter and oil in a Dutch oven or large pot over medium heat until butter is melted. Add the garlic and cook until lightly golden, about 4 to 5 minutes. Discard garlic.
2. In a bowl, combine 2 cups of the water with the corn meal. Mix well to make a thick slurry. (This prevents clumping when adding to the boiling water.)
3. Add the remaining 5 cups of water, salt, and pepper to butter mixture. Increase heat to medium-high and bring to a boil.
4. Add cornmeal gradually, whisking constantly. (It's important to use a whisk here instead of a spoon.) Reduce heat to medium-low and continue to cook, whisking frequently and scraping sides and bottom of pot, until mixture is thick and cornmeal is tender, about 20 minutes.
5. Off heat, whisk in Pecorino and half-and-half. Pour into to the prepared pan and let cool completely on a wire rack. Once cooled, cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate until completely chilled, at least 3 hours.
6. When ready to serve, adjust oven rack to middle position and heat oven to 375 degrees. Line rimmed baking sheet with parchment paper, then grease parchment with olive oil. Cut chilled polenta into 6 equal pieces (about 4 x 2 2/3 inches each). Place on prepared sheet and bake until heated through and beginning to brown on bottom, about 30 minutes. Serve each portion covered with about 1/2 cup of red sauce.



Other serving ideas include deep-frying or grilling the pieces, cutting into thinner sticks and serving the red sauce alongside as a dipping sauce, or using the polenta as a creamy or solid base for a larger dish as pictured.