

Polenta aplenty

Comforting and deliciously satisfying polenta is a winter staple in Italy. **Luca Ciano** shows you how to make a perfect batch and turn it into great dishes.

PHOTOGRAPHY BRETT STEVENS | STYLING MICHAELA LE COMPTE

Growing up in Milan, I ate tonnes of polenta during winter. This cornmeal, made from yellow or white corn and ground either coarse or fine, is both a staple and a specialty in the northern region of Italy. My mum would make it in a traditional copper pot, stirring as she cooked until the polenta pulled away from the sides before serving it plain as a side dish or transforming it into something fancier. But my favourite polenta dish is *concia*, which we'd eat while on holidays in the Valle d'Aosta region. Simply polenta layered with cheese and butter, it might not sound very exciting but it sure tastes amazing! And it's the very sort of dish that shows off all the great possibilities of polenta. In these pages, I share my master recipe for polenta and five different ways you can enjoy it.

FOOD PREPARATION Sarah Allchurch

Polenta with slow-cooked baby octopus, p96



MASTER RECIPE: LUCA'S POLENTA

SERVES 4 **PREP** 10mins **COOK** 55mins
HALVE IT • SUPER EASY

You'll know the polenta is cooked once it comes away from the sides of the pan. To make and serve it traditionally, cook it in a *paiolo*, or traditional copper polenta pot, and then drop the polenta in one go onto a wooden chopping board. Place any other ingredients straight onto the board to mix with the polenta, then serve it from the board.

1½ tbsp olive oil
1 rosemary sprig
1 sage sprig
2 tsp salt
2 cups (340g) polenta

1 Bring 6 cups water to boil in a large saucepan on high heat. Add oil, herbs and salt. Simmer for 5 mins, then remove herbs.
2 Gradually whisk in polenta until well combined. Reduce heat to low and cook, stirring constantly, for 45 mins, until polenta is very smooth. Alternatively, place saucepan over a pan of simmering water, cover and cook, stirring only occasionally, for 45 mins. (Cooking polenta in a bain marie, or water bath, like this stops it sticking to base of pan when it is not being stirred.) Season to taste. Serve immediately.
In each serve 1448 kilojoules, 7g protein, 9g total fat (1g sat fat), 59g carbohydrate (1g sugar), 2g fibre, 1188mg sodium.

tip} Polenta is available in both coarse and fine varieties. Coarse is more readily available and produces a better result when cooked. Cooked fine polenta is smoother and is often used in cakes.

"Polenta is a staple in *cucina povera*, or peasant cooking, as it has always been affordable and filling. But when you cook this humble ingredient properly, it makes you feel rich eating it!" **Luca**

{ Polenta taragna with chicken & porcini

SERVES 4 **PREP** 20mins **COOK** 1hr
GLUTEN FREE • 2 OF 5-A-DAY • DOUBLE IT

I love any polenta, but polenta taragna, which combines cornmeal with buckwheat flour, takes me back to the traditions of home. A classic from Valtellina in the Lombardy region, it has a nuttier flavour and is coarser than plain polenta.

2 tbsp olive oil, plus 1 tbsp extra

3 tsp salt

150g polenta

1½ cups (250g) buckwheat flour

200g fontina cheese, diced

50g unsalted butter, diced

20g dried porcini mushrooms

½ onion, finely chopped

½ carrot, finely chopped

½ celery stalk, finely chopped

2 garlic cloves, crushed

4 juniper berries

4 black peppercorns

8 (1.2kg) chicken drumsticks

½ cup (125ml) white wine

3 cups (780g) tomato passata

1 bay leaf

1 Heat 6 cups water, oil and salt in a large saucepan on high until boiling. Gradually add polenta and buckwheat flour, whisking constantly, until well combined. Cover and

cook in a bain marie (see step 2 in Master recipe left), stirring occasionally, for 45 mins, until smooth. Remove from heat. Stir through cheese and butter until melted. Season to taste.

2 Meanwhile, place porcini mushrooms in a small bowl. Cover with water. Stand for 15 mins to soften. Drain well and chop.

3 Heat extra oil in a large saucepan on medium. Cook onion, carrot, celery, garlic, juniper berries and peppercorns for 3-5 mins, until vegetables soften. Increase heat to high. Add chicken and cook in batches, turning, for 4-5 mins, until lightly browned all over. Return all of chicken to pan and add softened porcini mushrooms and wine. Cook for 2-3 mins, until wine is reduced by half. Season. Add tomato passata and bay leaf and simmer, stirring occasionally, for 45 mins, until chicken is cooked. Serve chicken with warm polenta.

In each serve 4711 kilojoules, 61g protein, 60g total fat (24g sat fat), 83g carbohydrate (11g sugar), 14g fibre, 2860mg sodium.

tips} You can substitute the polenta and buckwheat flour in this recipe with 400g store-bought polenta taragna, which is available from Italian delicatessens.

• **Instead of porcini, you can use 150g chopped shiitake, oyster, portobello or Swiss brown mushrooms. Cook in 20g butter on high heat and then add with the chicken.**



Polenta taragna with chicken & porcini

COMFORT
FOOD

"I always make a little extra polenta on purpose so I have leftovers to make chips. They are great to serve with drinks at dinner parties." **Luca**

Polenta concia with Italian sausages

FAMILY
FAVOURITE

{ Polenta concia with Italian sausages

SERVES 6 PREP 15mins COOK 40mins
HALVE IT • REHEAT IT

This is exactly what I think of as comfort food: polenta layered with cheeses. It's the perfect excuse to open a good bottle of red.

- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 1 large potato, cut into 5mm cubes
- 2 carrots, cut into 5mm cubes
- 1 garlic clove, crushed
- 6 thin Italian veal sausages
- 6 thin Italian pork sausages
- ½ cup (125ml) white wine
- 1½ cups (375ml) veal or beef stock
- 1 quantity cooked polenta (see recipe, p92)
- 150g fontina cheese, diced
- 90g Gorgonzola cheese, diced
- 50g grated parmesan
- 15g unsalted butter, diced

1 Heat oil in a heavy-based saucepan on low. Cook onion for 10 mins, until soft and lightly browned. Add potato, carrot and garlic and cook for 2 mins, until starting to soften. Increase heat to medium, add sausages and cook, turning, for 5-7 mins, until browned on all sides. Add wine and simmer for 2-3 mins, until reduced by half. Add stock and simmer for 20 mins, until sausages are cooked. Season.

2 Meanwhile, spread one-third of polenta over base of a large shallow bowl. Top with half each of fontina, Gorgonzola, parmesan and butter. Repeat layers once more, finishing with polenta. Cover and set aside for 10 mins, until polenta is firm and cheese has melted. Serve with sausages.

In each serve 3877 kilojoules, 41g protein, 60g total fat (27g sat fat), 52g carbohydrate (4g sugar), 7g fibre, 2586mg sodium.

MAKE IT
AHEAD

{ Polenta chips with spicy tomato sauce

SERVES 4 PREP 10mins COOK 25mins
GLUTEN FREE • VEGETARIAN • DOUBLE IT

- ½ quantity cooked polenta (see recipe, p92)
- 4 cups (1L) vegetable oil, to deep-fry
- spicy tomato sauce**
- ¼ cup (55g) raw sugar
- juice of ½ lemon
- 1 tbsp red wine vinegar
- 300g tomato passata
- 1 long red chilli, thinly sliced
- 1 bay leaf

1 Spread cooked polenta over a baking tray to a thickness of 2mm. Smooth surface with

a spatula. Set aside to cool, then refrigerate for 15 mins, until firm.

2 Meanwhile, make spicy tomato sauce. Heat sugar, lemon juice and vinegar on low, stirring, until sugar dissolves. Add passata, chilli and bay leaf. Increase heat to medium and boil. Reduce heat to low, cover and simmer for 15 mins. Remove lid. Simmer for 5 mins, until thickened.

3 Cut polenta into 7cm-long chips. Heat oil in a deep-fryer to 190C or in a large heavy-based saucepan until a cube of bread sizzles on contact. Deep-fry polenta chips in batches for 1-2 mins, until golden and crisp. Drain on paper towel. Season with salt. Serve with sauce.

In each serve 1722 kilojoules, 5g protein, 23g total fat (3g sat fat), 47g carbohydrate (17g sugar), 3g fibre, 1332mg sodium.



Polenta with slow-cooked baby octopus

LOW IN
SAT FAT

Polenta with slow-cooked baby octopus

SERVES 6 PREP 15mins COOK 1hr 15mins
GLUTEN FREE • HALVE IT

Octopus, like squid, should be cooked either briefly or for a long time to get a tender result. In this stew, the octopus infuses the dish with a delicate flavour.

1/3 cup (80ml) extra virgin olive oil

1 onion, thinly sliced

2 garlic cloves, crushed

1 tsp dried chilli flakes

55g anchovy fillets, drained

1kg baby octopus, cleaned

1 1/2 cups (225g) pitted kalamata olives

1 1/2 tbsp capers, rinsed, drained

1 1/4 cups (310ml) white wine

2 x 400g cans cherry tomatoes

1/2 cup chopped flat leaf parsley

1 quantity cooked polenta (see recipe, p92)

1 Heat oil in a large saucepan on medium. Cook onion, garlic and chilli for 5 mins, until onion is soft. Add anchovies and cook, stirring, for 2-3 mins, until dissolved. Add octopus and cook, turning, for 5 mins, until seared all over. Stir through olives and capers.

2 Increase heat to high. Add wine, bring to boil and cook for 2-3 mins, until reduced by half. Stir through tomatoes and season. Cover and cook for 40 mins. Remove lid and simmer for another 20 mins, until sauce has thickened and octopus is very tender.

3 Scatter over parsley and serve with polenta.
In each serve 2711 kilojoules, 43g protein, 29g total fat (5g sat fat), 48g carbohydrate (7g sugar), 6g fibre, 2297mg sodium.

tip} For more flavoursome polenta, swap the 6 cups water you cook it in with 4 cups fish stock and 2 cups milk. For a lighter flavour, use 3 cups each water and milk.

Grilled polenta with prawns & pancetta

SERVES 6 PREP 15mins COOK 10mins
GLUTEN FREE • HALVE IT • SUPER EASY

Transform simple polenta into this tasty dish that's impressive enough for a dinner party.

1 quantity cooked polenta (see recipe, p92)

12 medium green prawns, peeled, deveined, tails intact

12 slices pancetta

1/4 cup (60ml) extra virgin olive oil

1 tbsp balsamic vinegar

1 garlic clove, crushed

1 tsp chopped rosemary

4 cups salad greens

1 Spread polenta into a 20cm square cake pan. Smooth surface. Cool. Chill for 15 mins.

2 Preheat oven to 220C or 200C fan. Lightly grease a baking tray.

3 Invert set polenta onto a board and cut into 12 rectangles. Spray a chargrill with cooking oil and heat on high. Cook polenta for 3 mins each side, until golden. Top each piece of polenta with a prawn, then wrap with a slice of pancetta. Place on tray. Bake for 4-5 mins, until prawns are cooked and pancetta is crisp.

4 Combine oil, vinegar, garlic and rosemary and mix well. Season. Add salad and toss. Serve with polenta, prawn and pancetta.

In each serve 1620 kilojoules, 16g protein, 17g total fat (3g sat fat), 40g carbohydrate (1g sugar), 2g fibre, 1152mg sodium.

tip} These polenta parcels will keep in the fridge for 12 hours. Stand at room temperature for 10 minutes, then serve.