



Cooking with  
Viola Buitoni

## Italy by Ingredient: Polenta 2/24/2022

Textured, versatile, fragrant, flexible, easy – I might as well be describing the ideal life partner, but I am talking about polenta. The uses for this flavorful corn based porridge span from budget-conscious, simple meals for a large family to elegant offering at an intimate dinner party. In savory and sweet preparations, with a texture from runny and waxy to compact and bouncy, for use and re-use with different shapes and tastes, polenta's aroma and flavor hold countless memories for generations of Italians.

Etymologically derived from the latin puls – also the root for the word pulses – polenta has been around since ancient times, as a mix of ground cereals and/or legumes with occasional appearances by wild seasonal foods. What we know as polenta today, corn ground into coarse meal and cooked in water until tender, is just the latest incarnation of this staple. Indeed, corn's tenure in the European diet started when white settlers were first exposed to it on American soil.

Polenta owes its unique, engaging texture to the breed of corn used to make it and the way it is milled. Flint corn – *otto file* in Italian – has a rounded top kernel shaped by the hard starch of an outer skin that fully covers the endosperm. The kernels undergo reduction milling – repeated grinding that yield gradually smaller and more uniform granules for even cooking. Additionally, because the technique maintains low heat, the flavor and texture of the corn stay intact.

In the Italian peninsula this resilient crop found a good home in the cold valleys of the north and hills of the center. While still more popular in the upper half of the country, polenta has become a well loved ingredient of national fame. Unsurprisingly, there are many hyperlocal interpretations of polenta, but the most common kind by far is *polenta gialla* – yellow corn, followed by *polenta bianca* – white corn, and *polenta taragna* – a mix of yellow corn and buckwheat.

In the United States polenta has become a mainstay. Its place under the American sun is well established and ever growing, as people become increasingly aware of gluten sensitivities but still crave their carbs.

To circumvent the long cooking and stirring time required by polenta, quick, instant and even pre-cooked polenta are available. But while the timing cannot be changed, there is a way to obtain perfect polenta by leaving it largely unattended during cooking.

Follow me into the kitchen to discover how polenta can be a delicious and low maintenance mainstay in your home kitchen.

## Polenta a bagno maria

Double boiler polenta cooking method

I switched to this well documented method several years ago after an exploding air bubble in the polenta. I was meticulously stirring for a party burnt my hand badly enough that I had to recuse myself from the rest of the evening.

In addition to improving safety, double boiling polenta also has the advantage of being a largely unattended method. It does take time, but not attention. Get it going before you even pull out the ingredients for the rest of dinner; by the time the table is set and the food ready, your polenta will be cooked.

Select a heatproof bowl that sits snugly in one of your pots.

Fill the pot with enough water to reach up the sides of the bowl, and set the pot on the stove to come to a boil.

Pour 4 cups of water into the bowl and add the salt and polenta. The water should not come more than half way up the bowl, as the corn will swell considerable in cooking. Whisk until well blended.

Set the bowl on top of the pan of boiling water, cover and reduce the heat to medium low. Cover the bowl and cook for about 30 minutes, adjusting the heat if necessary to make sure the water in the pot doesn't boil over.

Stir the polenta, check its density and add water if necessary. Whisk, cover again and keep cooking for another 15 to 20 minutes.

Taste to ensure it is well cooked: 45 minutes are usually enough, though coarser grinds and whole grain polenta might need a little longer.

When ready, stir in the butter and adjust salt and pepper to suit your taste.

A few notes:

- 4 wet to 1 dry is the standard suggestions for polenta, but as you get used to this method, you can play with the proportions to get a denser or runnier polenta.
- I have used milk with this method for a sweet breakfast porridge and for dumplings. The timing is a little longer, as the absorption rate is different.
- For a vegan or lighter version, you can add olive oil instead of butter at the end. It will not have the same creaminess but it will still be quite good.



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## **Polenta bramata gialla ai funghi di Borgotaro IGP**

Coarse yellow polenta with IGP Borgotaro porcini

for 6 people

1.5oz dried IGP Borgotaro porcini  
1 cup coarse yellow polenta  
salt as needed  
2 tablespoons butter  
1 shallot  
1.5 pound shiitake or oyster mushrooms or chanterelles  
1 cup loosely packed parsley leaves  
3 anchovy fillets  
3 to 4 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
1 cup dry white wine  
pepper to taste  
grated Grana Padano for serving (optional)

Rinse the porcini, cover them with 2 cups of boiling hot water and leave them to soak.

Prepare the polenta following the double boiler method. While the polenta is cooking, make the sauce.

Peel the shallot and grate it on the small side of a box grater.

Clean the mushrooms and slice them.

Chop the parsley finely.

Rinse and mince the anchovies.

Strain the porcini, saving the soaking liquid. Lightly squeeze and chop them.

Generously coat the bottom of a skillet with the olive oil and heat it over a medium low flame. When the aroma of the oil reaches your nostrils while you're standing by the stove, toss in the grated shallot, anchovies and half the parsley. Stir until the shallot is hazily translucent and soft and the fragrance hardly resistible.

Raise the heat all the way up and add the sliced mushrooms. Season with half a teaspoon of salt and twirl around to coat in yumminess. Stir in the porcini and douse with the wine.



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After the first punch to your nose of the alcohol has transformed into a sugary caress to your eyes, add the porcini water threading it through a tight mesh strainer.

As soon as the liquid comes to a boil, turn the heat down to medium low and partially cover the pan. Continue cooking for 15 to 20 minutes, stirring often and adding moisture if necessary. It is ready when it is loose but not watery.

Sample and adjust salt and pepper to suite your palate. Keep warm.

When the polenta is ready, adjust salt and pepper and pour it on a warm platter. Spoon the mushrooms sauce all over it and garnish with the remaining parsley.

Serve while still steaming hot with the grated cheese on the side.



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## **Calamari al pomodoro con polenta bianca**

Calamari in tomato with white polenta

for 6 people

1 cup uncooked white polenta  
salt as needed  
2 to 3 tablespoons unsalted butter  
1.5 lb uncleaned calamari (or 1 pound clean)  
1 garlic clove  
1 handful parsley  
14oz can peeled Sanmarzano tomatoes  
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
red chili flakes

Set the polenta to cook following the double boiler method.

To clean the squid, divide the bodies from the tentacles. Clean the body by squeezing out the guts and carefully pulling out the bone. Turn the tentacles over and squeeze out the beak at the center. Turn back over, poke the eyes and squeeze out the eyeballs. Rinse the cleaned squid, and pat dry. Or you can use cleaned squid, but I kind of like the whole messy process.

Smash and peel the garlic clove. Pick and chop the parsley leaves.

Pour the tomatoes in a bowl and mash them to chunks with your hands or a potato masher. Fill the empty can with about 1" of warm water and swirl it to collect the tomato pure clinging to the sides. Add to the tomato bowl.

Pour the olive oil with the garlic in a skillet or sauté pan over medium low heat. When the oil and garlic's fragrance wafts effortlessly to your nose, add a tablespoon of parsley followed by the calamari.

Turn the heat to high and sauté quickly until the calamari changes color to pink. Pour in the tomatoes. Lower the heat to medium and cook until the squid is tender. Depending on the size of the squid, it can take anywhere from 10 to 20 minutes. Taste and adjust salt and red chili flakes to suit your palate.

The polenta should be ready by now. Stir in the butter and adjust the seasonings. Pour it in a warm shallow bowl, top with the squid and sprinkle with the remaining parsley. Serve hot.



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## **Polenta taragna al Gorgonzola DOP**

Buckwheat polenta with Gorgonzola

for 6 people

1 cup polenta taragna  
salt as needed  
2 tablespoons butter  
1 pound Gorgonzola dolce

Cook the polenta according to the double boiler method instructions. Sample and adjust salt and pepper to suite your palate.

Split the Gorgonzola evenly among 6 warm dinner bowls.

Spoon the steaming hot polenta over the cheese and serve to your guests, instructing them to stir the rapidly melting Gorgonzola and the hot polenta.



## **Shopping List**

### Produce

- 1 shallot
- 1 garlic cloves
- 1 bunch parsley
- 1.5 pounds shiitake or oyster mushrooms or chanterelle

### Dairy

- 1 stick butter
- 1 pound Gorgonzola dolce (or other creamy blue cheese)
- 1/2 cup grated Grana Padano (or Parmigiano Reggiano)

### Protein

- 1.5 pounds unclean calamari (or 1 pound clean)

### Pantry

- 1 bag yellow polenta (bramata or fioretto both work)
- 1 bag white polenta – see shopping notes
- 1 bag polenta taragna – see shopping notes
- 1.5 oz dried Borgotaro IGP porcini – see shopping notes
- 14 oz can of peeled Sanmarzano tomatoes
- 3 anchovies fillets in oil
- 1 cup dry white wine
- extra virgin olive oil
- salt
- pepper
- red chili flakes

### **Shopping notes:**

**Polenta:** Yellow polenta is very easy to find. For the white and the taragna go to Boulette's Larder in the Ferry Building in SF. In the East Bay you will find it at Market Hall Foods in Berkeley or Oakland – they have a website if you need it shipped <https://www.markethallfoods.com/collections/rice-grains-beans>.

I also love Anson Mills in South Carolina, they work exclusively with heirloom grains and grind very mindfully maintaining all the nutritional properties of the kernels. They ship all over the country and their website is amazing. <https://ansonmills.com/>

**Mushrooms:** Any dried porcini will work but if you want the best, splurge on the Borgotaro ones, they really are incredible. You can find them at <https://www.gustiamo.com/dried-porcini-mushroom-by-borgotaro-funghi-funghi/> remember to enter *gustilovesviola* at check out for a 10% discount on anything you buy.

**Gorgonzola:** Makes sure you get the dolce kind or it will not melt.



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### **Equipment List**

- apron
- kitchen rags
- 1 big bowl for refuse
- 3 double boiler set ups as described in first recipe
- 4 or 5 small and medium bowls
- chef's, paring knives
- bowl lined with colander
- 2 skillets or sauté pans (1 for the calamari and 1 for the mushrooms)
- whisk
- wooden spoons
- measuring cups and spoons
- spatulas
- handheld strainer or spider
- box grater
- tight mesh strainer
- serving bowl
- tasting spoons
- 2 warm serving platters

### **Prepping List**

- set polenta(s) in double boiler to cook 1 hour before class
- clean calamari
- clean wild mushrooms if needed
- soak porcini
- print recipes
- pull all ingredients and divide according to recipe
- pull all equipment and have within arm's reach