



Polenta:

The Ultimate Comfort Food

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MY FIRST TASTE of traditional Italian polenta took place in the beautiful Trentino-Alto Adige region of northeastern Italy. I was visiting an Italian friend and her family in a tiny *frazione*, or village, nestled among the dramatic, snow-capped peaks of the Dolomites. Hungry from the fresh mountain air and long days of skiing, I enjoyed the variety of meals that my friend's mother prepared with local ingredients and fresh vegetables from her garden. One dish, however, always appeared on the table each evening: polenta.

My friend's mother cooked polenta the traditional way, in a large copper pot, or *paiolo*, while stirring with a long wooden stick called a *mescola*. Her polenta didn't resemble the pre-cooked "logs" I'd bought at supermarkets in the U.S. This polenta was hearty, richly textured and served as a delicious accompaniment for a range of dishes: chicken, fish, sausage and mushrooms. For dessert, we'd scrape the crunchy pieces from the pot and eat them with Nutella.

For many of us, polenta is a recent discovery. In Italy, however, it's long been a beloved staple. The history of polenta dates back to ancient times, when the Roman legions satisfied their appetites with a similar food, *pulmentum*, cooked in a porridge or cake-like form. A flour-based polenta was also a fundamental part of the *cucina povera*, or the food of the working poor. Later, after maize was introduced from the Americas, corn became the primary ingredient. Today, polenta is prepared throughout Italy, where every region has its own particular blend of yellow or white cornmeal.

In the United States, polenta can now be found in most supermarkets and in many restaurants. Given its versatility, simplicity and flavor, polenta's growing popularity comes as no surprise. Fresh polenta can take 45 to 50 minutes to cook, which may seem like a lifetime in today's fast food cul-

ture. However, you can easily save time in the kitchen by making one big batch to be sliced and reheated throughout the week.

Polenta offers a wonderful alternative to bread, rice or potatoes, and like those starches, it can be combined with virtually anything: roasted meats, poultry, game, seafood and vegetables. Enjoy it sautéed or baked, grilled or fried, as a main course or as a base for a delicious bruschetta. However you eat polenta, you're guaranteed to enjoy it.

WHITE POLENTA RING

For the polenta:

- 1 bay leaf
- 1 clove garlic
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons salt
- 2 cups white polenta
- butter

For the topping:

- ½ pound broccoli, divided
- 4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided
- 1 clove garlic, minced
- 1 stalk celery, minced
- 1 medium carrot, minced
- ½ onion, minced
- 2½ pounds octopus, gutted and cleaned, cut into 2-inch pieces
- 1 cup dry white wine
- salt

Prepare the polenta: Bring a large pot of water to a boil. Add the bay leaf and garlic, but remove both before boiling. Add the olive oil and salt. Slowly add in the white polenta, stirring constantly to prevent lumps. Lower the heat and simmer for 50 minutes, stirring the polenta often. Lightly brush a ring mold with butter and set aside.

Meanwhile, prepare the broccoli: Boil ⅔ of the broccoli and reserve ⅓ to sauté. In a skillet over medium heat, warm 2 tablespoons of olive oil. Add the garlic and sauté until golden. Add the remaining broccoli and sauté until wilted. Remove from heat and set aside.

In a large bowl, combine the polenta and