

COOK'S
ILLUSTRATED

Creamy Parmesan Polenta

WHY THIS RECIPE WORKS

For quick polenta with a creamy texture and deep corn flavor, we searched for the right type of cornmeal and a technique to hasten its cooking. Coarse-ground, degerminated cornmeal gave us the soft but hearty texture and nutty flavor we were looking for. A pinch of baking soda cut cooking time in half and eliminated the need for stirring, giving us the best quick polenta recipe.



INGREDIENTS

- 7 ½** cups water
- 1 ½** teaspoons table salt
pinch baking soda (see note)
- 1 ½** cups coarse-ground cornmeal (see note)
- 2** tablespoons unsalted butter
- 4** ounces good-quality Parmesan cheese, grated (about 2 cups), plus extra for serving
- ground black pepper

INSTRUCTIONS

SERVES 4 AS A MAIN COURSE WITH A TOPPING OR 6 TO 8 AS A SIDE DISH

Coarse-ground degerminated cornmeal such as yellow grits (with grains the size of couscous) works best in this recipe. Avoid instant and quick-cooking products, as well as whole-grain, stone-ground, and regular cornmeal. Do not omit the baking soda—it reduces the cooking time and makes for a creamier polenta. The polenta should do little more than release wisps of steam. If it bubbles or sputters even slightly after the first 10 minutes, the heat is too high and you may need a flame tamer, available at most kitchen supply stores. Alternatively, fashion your own from a ring of foil (see Homemade Flame Tamer step by step below). For a main course, serve the polenta with a topping (see related recipes) or with a wedge of rich cheese or a meat sauce. Served plain, the polenta makes a great accompaniment to stews and braises.

1. Bring water to boil in heavy-bottomed 4-quart saucepan over medium-high heat. Stir in salt and baking soda. Slowly pour cornmeal into water in steady stream, while stirring back and forth with wooden spoon or rubber spatula. Bring mixture to boil, stirring constantly, about 1 minute. Reduce heat to lowest possible setting and cover.

2. After 5 minutes, whisk polenta to smooth out any lumps that may have formed, about 15 seconds. (Make sure to scrape down sides and bottom of pan.) Cover and continue to cook, without stirring, until

grains of polenta are tender but slightly al dente, about 25 minutes longer. (Polenta should be loose and barely hold its shape but will continue to thicken as it cools.)

3. Remove from heat, stir in butter and Parmesan, and season to taste with black pepper. Let stand, covered, 5 minutes. Serve, passing Parmesan separately.

Step-by-Step

Shortening Cooking Time with Baking Soda

For polenta to lose its hard, gritty texture and turn creamy, enough water must penetrate the corn's cell walls that the starch granules within swell and burst (or "gelatinize"). Baking soda added to the cooking liquid can reduce the time it takes for gelatinization to occur, thus shortening cooking time.

Here's why: Corn cell walls are held together by pectin. When alkaline sodium bicarbonate (a.k.a. baking soda) is present, the pectin breaks down, weakening the corn's structure and allowing water to enter and gelatinize the starch in less than half the time.



BREAKIN' IT DOWN

Technique

Almost Stir-Free Polenta



Through the simple (untraditional) step of covering the pot, we virtually eliminated the need for stirring the polenta, without jeopardizing its creamy texture.

Technique

Homemade Flame Tamer

Our recipe for Creamy Parmesan Polenta relies on heat so low it barely disturbs the pot's contents. A flame tamer can help to ensure the heat is

as gentle as possible.



Squeeze a 3-foot length of aluminum foil into a 1/2-inch rope. Twist the rope into a ring the size of the burner.