

Polenta

Polenta: Italy's Other National Dish

For Italians, it always seems both pasta and pizza are the cornerstones of what makes Italian food "Italian". However, there is a staple food of Northern Italy that does not get the recognition, but certainly makes up the third aspect of the Italian food trinity; humble, yet versatile and satisfying, polenta. Italian cuisine has been characterized by being the food of the peasant. Just as poor Southern Italians worked the fields with their bellies full of pasta, Northern Italians subsisted on little more than polenta for centuries. In this way, polenta is truly an Italian national dish, and may have a history much more ancient than either pizza or pasta.

Polenta has been dubbed by some "Italian grits" and there are similarities to the hominy grits that are so popular in the Southern United States. In this way polenta, grits and other "mush" type foods share a common link as the food of poverty. However in ancient times, what would later be called polenta started out as one of the earliest and simplest foods made from grain. Made from wild grains and later from primitive wheat, faro (a popular Italian grain), millet, spelt or chickpeas, the grain was mixed with water to form a paste that was then cooked on a hot stone. In this way, early polenta may have pre-dated leavened bread, since yeasts were often hard to come by and milling techniques were not yet refined.

History of Polenta

In Roman times, polenta was the staple of the mighty Roman Legions and would eat it in either porridge or in a hard cake like form, much like today. However even though bread was widely available in Ancient Rome, the legions and the poor alike preferred the simplicity and tastiness of their early polenta. For the next few centuries, nothing changed in the history of polenta, much like the living conditions of those who ate it most - the peasantry.

Buckwheat polenta would eventually fall out of favor when a crop from the New World arrived in Italy sometime in the 15th or 16th centuries known as maize. The new crop was a perfect match for the farms of Northern Italy, where landowners could grow vast fields of corn for profit, while forcing the peasantry to subsist on cornmeal. This new form of polenta was abundant, but seriously lacking in nutrients compared to earlier forms of the dish.

However cornmeal polenta is very tasty and filling, and therefore continued to be a staple long after conditions improved for the poor. Amazingly, this simple act of greed on the part of landowners helped shape a major component of Italian cooking. From then on most of Italy's polenta consumption was made from corn, which ranges in color from golden yellow to the Veneto's white polenta.

Making Polenta

In the world of cooking, few dishes have the stigma attached to their preparation as polenta does. Much of Italy's polenta is still made the tedious old-fashioned way using a round bottom copper pot and a long wooden spoon.. The process to make a soft polenta involves a 3 to 1 ratio of water to polenta and constant stirring for up to 50 minutes. Today in a modern kitchen with a good heavy pot, polenta preparation is not so painstaking, but it still needs attention and occasional stirring. Cooking polenta using a double boiler method is even easier. There are now instant polentas - but the less said about it the better. When finished, the polenta can be served in this soft form or poured out onto a slab or mold and allowed to cool.

Serving Polenta

The key to the popularity of Polenta is its sheer versatility. It can be served with nearly anything and that is why it has spread to every corner of Italy, always making use of what is locally grown or raised. Soft polenta is often a replacement for bread during a meal, or instead of the pasta course, served with butter and cheese and possibly shaved truffles. Polenta can also be served as a contorno (side dish) to regional meat dishes such as Osso Bucco, waterfowl and fish. Polenta in cake form can be layered with Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and baked.

Polenta can also be grilled and served with Bruschetta-like toppings like mushrooms and tomatoes. Leftover polenta is also very versatile as it can be fried and covered in butter, or melted cheese. In many ways, polenta reflects the people who have relied upon it for so long - those long suffering peasants that had to make do with what they had. They have left Italian cooking the legacy of an eminently flavorful, filling and versatile dish known as polenta.