



# Polenta: pure gold in the pan



A Ticino nun once told me: “For polenta, you need maize semolina, water, salt and – that’s it! Nothing else.” She was, of course, right: the original recipe is as follows: 300g of maize semolina cooked in 1.5 litres of boiling salted water for 45 minutes, stirring continuously. The polenta is ready when it comes away from the edge of the pan while stirring. Watch out for splattering as the polenta thickens, as this can burn the skin. It’s best to use a deep pan (made from cast iron, for example) with a thick base.

Polenta is traditionally served on a wooden board and cut with a string or wire, or a wooden ladle. The wood prevents the polenta from absorbing other odours.

Although making polenta is relatively simple, the devil is in the detail. When you’re pushed for time, it’s very tempting to want to cook a fine “five-minute polenta” – but cooking polenta in a rush merely means it has less time to develop any flavour. It will generally be sticky and have lumps, as the stirring time is shorter. It’s worth using coarse-ground maize, but this also means it needs to be cooked for longer in the pan.

You can cook polenta in vegetable stock instead of water, and you can give it a creamy texture and taste simply by adding full-cream milk (or even just cream). A countrywoman once served me a delicious polenta prepared in freshly pressed apple juice. And polenta cooked in beetroot juice has both a wonderful colour and taste, which means you can use both vegetable and fruit juice for your own polenta creation. You can also refine your concoction, making it smoother and tastier, by adding large knobs of butter to the liquid. If



you have any remaining pesto in the fridge, you can mix it into the polenta at the end, or grate a little – or lots of – Parmesan or mountain cheese over it. For a touch of crispy, autumnal magic, sprinkle some chopped walnuts over the polenta before serving, as maize and walnuts are something of a culinary dream team!

I swear by a big spoonful of Mascarpone I like to stir into the polenta just before serving. At such times, I always apologise under my breath to the Ticino nun, but I know she would have turned a blind eye and enjoyed my polenta anyway!