

Aubergine and mushroom ragout with baked polenta

Serves 4 - 6, takes an hour but will be better if you can leave it to simmer for longer

Earthy, hearty, comforting, delicious. It's easy to put together and will make the kitchen smell DELICIOUS. Polenta isn't a grain I usually cook with, but it makes the perfect fuss-free (and gluten free, if you're into that) accompaniment to soak up the juices. The melted cheese adds some lux to the dish, which you can skip if you'd prefer something lighter.

- * *Aubergine - 2*
- * *Dried mixed mushrooms - 15g*
- * *Olive oil - a few glugs*
- * *Onion - 1 large, peeled and roughly diced*
- * *Thyme - a few springs*
- * *Sage - 3 leaves, chopped*
- * *Paprika - 2 tbsp*
- * *Garlic - 3 cloves, peeled and chopped*
- * *Mushrooms - 400g, sliced*
- * *Tomatoes - 5, ripe and roughly chopped*
- * *Red wine - a glass*
- * *Tomato purée - 2 tbsp*
- * *Balsamic vinegar - 1 tbsp*
- * *Salt - 2 tsp*
- * *Sugar - 1 tbsp*

- * *Quick cook polenta - 200g*
- * *Taleggio/mozarella - 200g*

- * *Parmesan - to serve*

Cut each aubergine in half lengthways and salt the flesh. Layer between paper towels and leave to sweat (or leave to drain in a colander).

Place the dried mushrooms in a small bowl and soak in a cup of boiling water.

In a large casserole pan, fry the onions with a generous glug of olive oil, the thyme, sage and paprika over a medium heat. Once they're sizzling nicely, add a splash of water, cover and leave to steam for 5 minutes.

Add the garlic to the casserole and fry for a couple more minutes. Next add the fresh, sliced mushrooms. Turn up the heat a little and fry for another 5 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Add the tomatoes, wine, tomato puree, vinegar, salt, sugar and plenty of black pepper. Strain the dried mushroom liquid into the casserole, roughly chop the soaked mushrooms and add them too. Bring to a simmer and cover.

Cut the aubergine into 2 inch slices.

If you're feeling lazy or pushed for time, you can skip this next step and just add aubergines to the casserole. No-one will judge you.

If not, heat another couple of glugs of olive oil in a large frying pan over a high heat. Place the aubergine slices flesh side down in the pan to sear. You'll probably need to do this in two batches. The aim is to brown the aubergines on one side, which will give them a more caramel-like flavour. Add them to the casserole and stir through.

Check the sauce for seasoning. Add more salt/sugar/vinegar/pepper according to taste. Leave to simmer for at least another 15 minutes, or for as long as you can before eating. The flavours will only get better.

Prepare the polenta thirty minutes before you want to eat. Preheat the oven to 200 degrees.

Place the polenta in a medium sized oven dish - I used an oval dish about 20cm long and 15cm wide. Add 3.5 cups of water (you need 3.5 times the volume of liquid to polenta), and a few pinches of salt. Stir well and place in the oven for 25 minutes.

Slice the cheese. Remove the polenta from the oven and arrange the slices on top. Turn on the oven grill and grill for about five minutes, until the cheese is turning golden and bubbly.

Serve generous labels of ragout over a pile of polenta and grated parmesan over the top.