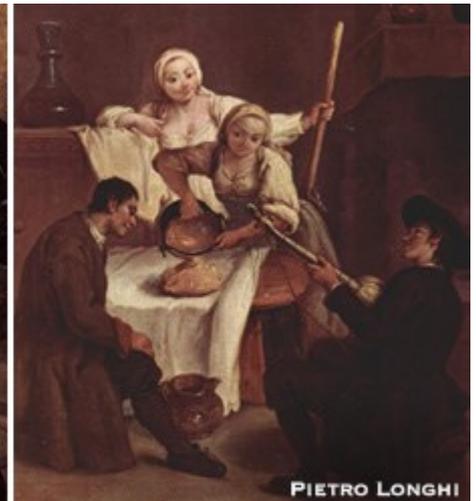


Polenta from A to Z

26 things to know about polenta

Art. It is speculated that Peter Bruegel's "Wedding Banquet" (1568) depicts plates of polenta. And it is definitely polenta in Pietro Longhi's painting "La polenta", from the second half of the 1700s.



Buckwheat. Before the discovery of corn, not to mention spelt, barley, millet, and rye, polenta was made with buckwheat. It's still made that way sometimes in Italy, and is called "taragna".

Cruchade. In French Gascony, polenta is cooked with milk and rum. Once it has been spread out, it's cut into disks, fried, and sprinkled with sugar. It was once a simple meal for country families (but cooked in a vegetable broth).

Dracula. In 1897, Irish writer Bram Stoker mentioned polenta in his novel inspired by Vlad III of Wallachia: "[...] I had for breakfast more paprika, and a sort of porridge of maize flour which they said was 'mamaliga', and egg-plant stuffed with minced meat, [...]."

Et Bulli. At the legendary restaurant in Roses, the dishes include "polenta and Parmesan snow", a surprising gelato from chef Ferran Adrià.

Funchi. In the Antilles, polenta is called funchi (or cou-cou). It goes nicely with meat stews, fish (with fried flying fish it's considered the national dish of Barbados), vegetables (such as callaloo from Trinidad e Tobago), and sometimes stands in for bread or rice.

Gluten free. Since corn contains no gluten, it's clearly suitable for sufferers of celiac disease and for those who choose a gluten free diet.

Hungary. In addition to accompanying gulasch, polenta (puliszka) is also prepared adding meat and/or vegetables while cooking for a single hearty dish.



Italy. Describing all the many varieties of polenta in Italy would take an entire encyclopaedia! We'll just say here that it has been part of the Italian culinary tradition since the dawn of time, it can be found in practically every region of the country.

Jam. Jam and polenta is a sweet divertissement typical of many Hungarian families, but it has also cropped up in offerings from Michelin chef Claudio Vicina, chef at Eataly Lingotto in Turin.

Kcal. On its own, polenta has fewer calories than a plate of pasta: 80 to 130 Kcal for every 100 g. It's also diet-friendly because it gives an immediate feeling of satiety, and because it's gluten free, it doesn't cause water retention, making it perfect for fighting cellulite.

London. In Soho there is a 100% gluten-free restaurant called "La Polenteria" that has pinned everything on polenta, adapting it to British tastes from breakfast on up. So, polenta for breakfast (muffins, cupcakes, brownies), polenta for lunch and dinner, including dessert (crepes, cheesecake), and even for tea time.

Mieliepap. South African polenta. Made with either white or yellow corn meal, it goes with stews and spicy meat sauces (like chakalaka), barbeque, or tomato or onion soups. You'll also find it at breakfast, hot with cold milk, sugar, and butter.



Nutritional facts. Polenta is not nourishing. In the past, it was the simple meal par excellence, able to appease hunger. That said, it does contain starch, carbohydrates, calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, potassium, sodium, and A and B group vitamins.

Osojaniza. Typical of the Friuli area in northeastern Italy, this is a soft polenta flavoured with butter and stravecchio or smoked ricotta cheese. There is also a version called muscnijk, with butter, milk, and... coffee!

Puls. Polenta has always been talked about, and it seems that the term commonly used today derives from the Latin "puls", which referred to a mixture based on spelt flour. It was served with legumes, small salted fish, meat, fruit, or cheese.

Question mark. If it's true that corn wasn't exported from the Americas until 1525 by Christopher Columbus, and that before that polenta was made with other grains, why were corn kernels found in an Egyptian tomb in Thebes?

Romania. Polenta, or mamaliga, is the undisputed queen of Romanian cuisine. Its form, thickness, size, and of course condiments, can vary. It's cooked in a ceaun, a special-shaped cast iron pot.



Serbia. Here it is prepared cooked with fresh dairy products. It's served with main courses or with milk, yogurt, sour cream, or buttermilk. "Proja", a polenta bread, is also typical: cooked with cheese (like kajmak, similar to English clotted cream), the polenta is spread onto a roasting pan and put in the oven.

Tarwasht. Even in the sun-drenched lands of the Moroccan Sahara, polenta has a special place: it's called tarwasht and is spread through the Berber tribes.

Ukraine & USA. In the Caucasus, it's called mamalyga and it's cooked with white cheese. In American, in the eastern and southeast states, it's called cornmeal mush. In most cook books, it appears cooked first in water or milk, and then is cooled, sliced, fried, and served plain or with maple syrup or molasses.

Veg. Beloved by vegans and vegetarians, polenta lends itself to infinite variation: simple or refined dishes, and not infrequently Michelin-starred, like Pietro Leeman's "cheese fondue with turnips, buckwheat polenta, and pumpkin".

White. Polenta can also be white (white "biancoperla" corn meal). Typical of Northern Italy, it is more delicate than yellow corn. The white variety is found in Serbia too: it's called "belmuž", and it's cooked with fresh, unsalted goat's milk and served hot with sour milk (always goat's).

XV Century. With the introduction of maize to Europe, polenta made a forceful entrance to the pantries of the day. Its virtues are two-fold: it helped ease the hunger of generations of Europeans, and gave rise to a rich culinary tradition.

Yellow. Classic polenta meal is yellow, with a range of hues, and in certain varieties or depending on the grinding technique, it can tend toward orange-red (this is true of Bramata meal, which is moderately coarse).



Zganci. This special polenta comes from the Slovenian peasant tradition: very fine corn meal is not stirred, but is cooked until it forms a ball. After it is poured out, it's crumbled and served with stews, but also fried with pieces of lard or dunked in milk or yogurt with honey.

