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How to cook perfect lasagne

Just to be clear, that's 'lasagne' as in a baked dish of flat pasta and bolognese sauce. Do you prefer the British, American or Italian style?



Felicity's perfect lasagne. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Ah, the homely lasagne: a dish which, if not exactly lost in translation has, in the grand British tradition, been considerably mangled. I was quite taken aback the first time I encountered the real thing – or a London delicatessen's version of the real thing, which arrived in our mouldy student dwelling courtesy of a parent visiting from the Big Smoke. As a pasta dish which contained neither tuna nor sweetcorn, it was bound to be a marvel, but there were other reasons for falling upon this manna from heaven – or, at least, Highgate.

The most striking thing about the new arrival was its proud and noble bearing – it stood up straight, rather than oozing saucily outwards across the plate like the stuff which came out of the college kitchen. In fact, Giorgio Locatelli describes lasagne in *Made in Italy: Food and Stories* as a "sturdy, quite dry pasta dish" which would come as news to fans of even the poshest of supermarket versions. "What I see is not lasagne," he scolds, "but a version of shepherd's pie, only made with pasta instead of potato." All credit to us for our inspired fusion cooking – sometimes a gloopy, cheese feast just hits the spot – but I sense that a perfect lasagne will need to be truer to the original spirit of the dish to really cut the mostarda.

While we're beating ourselves with the authenticity stick, even the name's misleading: strictly, lasagne refers to flat, thin sheets of pasta – the same ones used in what is correctly referred to as lasagne al forno – baked lasagne, which, in the UK at least, tends to mean lasagne alla bolognese, or lasagne with a meaty, tomatoey sauce. It's a bit like referring to steak and ale pie as simply "pie" – you've got a rough idea of what you're going to get, but the all-important specifics are missing. So, for the avoidance of doubt, this article refers to a baked dish of lasagne and bolognese sauce – those in search of the perfect [sausage and garlic](#), or [chicken tikka](#) versions must continue their quest elsewhere. Sorry.

Meat

Although we're not aiming for "sheets of pasta floating in minced beef", as Locatelli has it, as the principle flavour of any such lasagne, the meat aspect still deserves careful consideration. At Locanda Locatelli, they make it with their standard ragù alla bolognese, which, having tried and found wanting, I'm substituting for my own [perfect bolognese sauce](#), which gently fries a mixture of coarsely minced beef, streaky bacon and finely chopped chicken livers with onion, carrot and celery, then slow-cooks the lot with milk, white wine and chopped tomatoes.

Layered, in the Locatelli fashion, with béchamel sauce and fresh egg pasta, and topped with "lots of grated parmesan that will crisp up in the oven", I'm pretty pleased with this first attempt – the lasagne has plenty of structural integrity, and a rich meaty flavour that works as well here as the spaghetti it was originally designed to complement.

It's an undeniably lengthy process, however, and I'm seduced by the recipe in [The Silver Spoon](#), which simmers its minced beef sauce for just 30 minutes before assembling the lasagne. Despite similar ingredients, I'm disappointed by the results – in the grand scheme of things, this is a decent dish, but the robustly savoury slow-cooked version is a hard act to follow.

[Angela Hartnett compromises](#) on a two-hour simmer for her sauce, but with the important distinction of using finely diced chuck or rump steak instead of minced beef – more Italian, apparently. Trimming and chopping 750g of chuck doesn't immediately endear me to her recipe, but I'm surprised at how much we all enjoy the finished dish – I found steak too chewy with spaghetti, but it seems to work much better with the softer, oven-baked pasta and the creamy béchamel sauce, making the whole thing meatier and more robust. I'd prefer a little more liquid though: although well-flavoured, without the tomatoes and wine of the other recipes it's drier than surely even Locatelli could intend. Tasty, but not quite perfect. Not yet.



Gennaro Contaldo recipe gran lasagne. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Gennaro Contaldo has an even more unusual take – a [Gran Lasagne](#), which is a traditional pre-Lenten dish in Naples, rather like our own pancakes, except much, much fancier. Instead of a meaty ragù, it uses walnut-sized meatballs of beef and pork (yes, more meatballs), fried until golden, and then added to a simple tomato and onion sauce. The lasagne looks impressive, with its topping of grilled meatballs and vivid yellow egg yolks (of which more later) but as soon as I cut into my lumpy slab, the meatballs fall out. Not ideal.

I decide to opt for Angela's chopped steak, slow-cooked with a couple of chicken livers for richness. Simon Hopkinson and Lindsay Bareham use 200g of livers to 500g minced beef in the Prawn Cocktail Years recipe, but I find the flavour a bit overpowering: 50g gives the sauce a more subtle richness.

Pasta



Prawn Cocktail Years recipe lasagne. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

Locatelli specifies [fresh egg pasta](#), rolled very thinly and blanched before baking – I make a batch, and lovingly send it twice through my pasta roller's thinnest setting (hey, I'm no nonna), but I can't see that it's worth the effort: after 40 minutes in the oven, it's too soft for my taste. Even worse, the Prawn Cocktail Years version, cooked until tender before baking, almost melts in the mouth.

Angela Hartnett uses blanched dried pasta, which is both much quicker to prepare, and far more robust: even after baking, it holds its shape beautifully. You can get away without pre-cooking, but you'll end up with a crisper, drier result, as the pasta will soak up much of the sauce as it cooks.

I prefer to use dried egg pasta, as in Simon and Lindsey's recipe, rather than the flour and water variety, because the richer flavour is more of a match for the ragù and béchamel – as the dish's most important ingredient it would be a shame to let the pasta fade into the background.

Other elements

I'm surprised to learn that béchamel sauce is not a tradition that has been honoured in the Italian-American community – in fact, I found one poster on an [American food forum](#) lamenting that their husband "loves lasagne. Unfortunately I don't like ricotta. It's a texture thing. Would love to see if someone has a really good recipe that would satisfy both our taste buds."



Lidia Bastianich recipe lasagne. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

This intrigues me – I've never thought of putting anything other than parmesan into a beef lasagne before (well, OK, my sister's mother-in-law makes a fabulous lasagne topped with lots of lovely Scottish cheddar, but apart from that), so I do some research on Italian-American lasagne, and one name keeps recurring: Lidia Bastianich, a chef born in Istria, who emigrated to the States in the late 1950s.

[Her recipe](#) calls for layers of meat sauce, a ricotta and egg mixture, pasta and sliced mozzarella – it's incredibly rich, and quite a different dish to the simple flavours of the Angela Hartnett recipe. Even the tester who claims that a lasagne can "never have too much cheese" is put off by the grainy texture of the ricotta.

Gennaro Contaldo also uses layers of ricotta, mozzarella and egg, although in the case of his lasagne di carnevale, the last is in hard-boiled form, which makes things even weirder – and distinctly more rubbery. Unless you need to use up a few eggs, I'd advise confining them to the pasta here.

In keeping with the generous amount of chicken liver in their recipe, Simon Hopkinson and Lindsay Bareham suggest a rich take on the classic béchamel, infusing the milk with onion and cloves, in the manner of a bread sauce, and then thinning the result with double cream. As well as sacrificing the velvety texture of the original, it makes the dish a bit sickly for my taste – I like the blandness of the sauce as a foil to the intense savouriness of the ragù. The Silver Spoon's chopped butter between the layers, meanwhile just makes the dish a bit greasy.



Silver Spoon recipe lasagne. Photograph: Felicity Cloake

I don't like the simple tomato and onion sauce in Gennaro's southern meatball lasagne – a meaty bolognese ragù packs a lot more punch. Locatelli's red wine seems to work better with Angela's chopped steak than my original white, although I'm keeping the nutmeg and the tomatoes. I also like his idea of a cheese-free white sauce, but instead of confining the grated parmesan to the top of the lasagne, where it will toast to a golden brown, I'm stealing an idea from the Silver Spoon, and adding it in layers in the dish itself.

Perfect lasagne alla bolognese



Felicity's perfect lasagne.

Photograph: Felicity Cloake

As with so many classic Italian dishes, lasagne alla bolognese should be kept simple – a robustly savoury meat sauce, creamy b chamel, and just a hint of cheese, all deferring to the real star of the show, the pasta. It may take a little more time to make than you're used to, but I promise you, it's worth it.

Serves 6

- 2 tbsp olive oil, plus extra to cook the pasta**
- 1 onion, finely chopped**
- 1 carrot, finely chopped**
- 1 stick of celery, finely chopped**
- 500g chuck steak, cut into small dice**
- 50g chicken livers, trimmed and finely chopped**
- 100ml red wine**
- 400ml passata**
- Grated nutmeg**
- 50g butter**
- 50g plain flour**
- 600ml whole milk**
- About 9 sheets dried egg lasagne (depending on the size of the sheets and your dish - you'll need 3 layers of pasta)**
- 100g grated parmesan**

1. Heat the oil in a large, heavy-based frying pan and gently fry the onion until softened. Add the carrot and continue to cook for 5 minutes,

then add the celery and cook for another 2 minutes. Turn up the heat, add the chopped beef and cook until browned all over, then stir in the chopped livers and cook for 3 minutes.

2. Pour in the wine and passata, season with salt, pepper and a pinch of grated nutmeg, then bring to a simmer. Cover partially, turn the heat down, and leave to simmer gently for 2 hours. Uncover, and simmer for another 30 minutes, or until the sauce is well flavoured and almost dry.

3. Pre-heat the oven to 200C. To make the béchamel, melt the butter in a medium pan, and then whisk in the flour. Cook for a couple of minutes, stirring, then gradually whisk in the milk, and bring to the boil, still stirring. Season and simmer for about 5 minutes until thickened.

4. Bring a large pan of salted water to the boil and add a couple of drops of olive oil. Blanch the pasta, in batches to stop it clumping together, for 1 minute, then drain, separate and leave to dry on a tea towel or greased plate or board.

5. To assemble the lasagne, take a deep, wide dish and coat the bottom with a third of the meat sauce, topped with a quarter of the béchamel, and a sprinkling of parmesan, and finally a layer of blanched pasta. Repeat two more layers, and then top the last layer of pasta with the rest of the béchamel, and the remaining parmesan. Grate a little nutmeg over the top, and cook for 40 minutes, until golden and bubbling.

6. Allow to rest for at least 20 minutes before serving – lasagne is better warm than hot, and even better the next day.

Is there any point in making your own pasta for this dish, and do you prefer British, American or Italian lasagne – and what's your favourite filling?

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