

A Very Good Lasagna

Serves 6–10

In my quest to improve upon a classic lasagna, I fussed with it here and there, adding this, replacing that. But to be totally honest, at the end of a few failed attempts to improve upon the original, I realized the only thing I thought would improve it would be to construct a lasagna pan that was just all edges. But product invention isn't really my game.

For me, a very good lasagna isn't overly cheesy or too saucy or insanely indulgent—there should be a proper ratio of pasta:sauce:cheese so that each slice feels satisfying but also balanced. While I do love a creamy lasagna, I find bechamels a bit unnecessary and instead use heavy cream in conjunction with the ricotta and mozzarella to keep things nice and saucy. So, here it is, a recipe for a Very Good Lasagna. Nothing insane, no sneaky anchovies (just kidding—there are anchovies if you want) or expensive, hard-to-find cheeses. Just some good ol' basic stuff layered in a baking dish and baked until melty, bubbly, and satisfying as well.

I do have two pieces of advice: First, don't skip the two-bake process—the initial bake (foil on!) is the shorter of the two, only meant to melt the cheese and warm the sauce through, and the second bake (foil off!) is where things get good, and by good I mean golden brown, crispy-edged, and impossibly delicious. During this step the sauce will also continue to cook the al dente noodles, which makes for deeply seasoned pasta and eliminates any excess water, preventing a soggy, runny lasagna. Second, when you think you've baked it as long as you can, maybe bake it a little longer—the browner the better here.

For the sauce:

2 tablespoons olive oil
1 large yellow onion, finely chopped
4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
6 anchovy fillets, optional
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
2 tablespoons tomato paste, optional
1 28-ounce can whole peeled tomatoes
1 28-ounce can crushed tomatoes

For the assembly:

1½ pounds fresh mozzarella, grated or shredded
16 ounces (2 cups) whole-milk ricotta
1 cup coarsely grated Parmesan, plus more
½ cup heavy cream
Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 garlic clove, finely grated
1 pound dried lasagna noodles (not the no-boil variety)
Olive oil, for drizzling

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1. Make the sauce. Heat the olive oil in a large, heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat. Add the onion, garlic and anchovies and season with salt and pepper. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is totally softened and translucent (without letting it brown), 8-10 minutes. Add the tomato paste if using and continue to cook, stirring, until the tomato paste has turned a deeper brick red color, about 2 minutes.
2. Using your hands, crush the whole tomatoes into smaller, bite-sized pieces and add them and the crushed tomatoes to the pot, stirring to scrape up any bits from the bottom. Fill one of the tomato cans halfway with water, swirl it around to get all the bits in the can and add it to the pot. Season with salt and pepper. Bring to a simmer and cook, stirring occasionally, until the tomato sauce has thickened and flavors have come together, 35-45 minutes. You want it to be as thick as tomato sauce from a jar — any looser and the lasagna will be too wet to cut into nice pieces.
3. Preheat the oven to 425°F and set a large pot of salted water to boil.
4. Assemble the lasagna. Set aside 1 cup mozzarella. In a medium bowl, combine the remaining mozzarella, the ricotta, Parmesan, cream, and grated garlic clove; season with salt and pepper.
5. Cook the lasagna noodles in the boiling water until just softened (before al dente), 4 to 5 minutes. Drain and separate any noodles that are trying to stick together, drizzling them with a bit of olive oil to prevent them from sticking further.
6. Spoon a bit of sauce on the bottom of a 3-quart baking dish and top with a layer of noodles, avoiding any heavy overlap (some overlap is fine and inevitable). Top with about 1¼ cups of sauce and dollop one-fourth of the cheese mixture over. Top with another layer of noodles and repeat three more times, ending with the last of the noodles (depending on size of the noodle/shape of the baking dish, you may have a few extra noodles) and the last of the sauce. Top with the reserved 1 cup mozzarella and more Parmesan, if you like.
7. Cover loosely with aluminum foil and place the baking dish on a foil-lined rimmed baking sheet (to prevent any overflow from burning on the bottom of your oven). Bake until the pasta is completely tender and cooked through and the sauce is bubbling up around the edges, 25-30 minutes. Remove the foil and continue to bake until the lasagna is golden brown on top with frilly, crispy edges and corners, another 35-45 minutes. Let cool slightly before eating.

DO AHEAD: The sauce can be made up to 1 week ahead, covered, and refrigerated. The lasagna can be baked up to 3 days ahead, wrapped tightly, and refrigerated (or up to 1 month, tightly wrapped and frozen—thaw before reheating). To reheat, cover with foil and bake at 375°F for 25 to 45 minutes.

EAT WITH: Crunchy iceberg salad and garlic bread.