

## Tomato, aubergine, spinach and lentil lasagne



### Ingredients (10 portions)

#### Main sauce

2 medium onions finely sliced  
2 tbs mixed dried herbs  
3 medium aubergines  
400g fresh swiss chard / spinach  
120g puy lentils  
1.3l tomato passata - see note in recipe below  
800g tomato chunks (you can use good tinned tomatoes)  
salt to taste  
15 sheets of lasagne

#### Topping

40g butter  
40g plain flour  
0.8l milk  
3 x 125g mozzarella torn / chopped into small pieces  
250g parmesan cheese grated  
about half a nutmeg freshly grated  
salt  
generous grind of pepper

Preheat the oven to 200 degrees C

To make the sauce begin by putting the lentils on to cook in a pan of boiling water for about half an hour (cook until just tender). Next prepare the aubergines cutting them into quarter moon pieces about 1cm thick. Toss them in a little olive oil and roast in the oven until they are cooked through and golden brown but not too far gone - probably about 20 minutes.

While the lentils and aubergines are cooking start the tomato sauce. Slice the onion quite finely (don't worry about being too precise) and sauté in olive oil for a few minutes until it begins to soften and colour a little. Add the dried herbs and mix in. At this stage you can also add a little bit of chilli powder / finely chopped dried chilli which gives the flavours a slight lift. You don't want it to actually be spicy (unless you are really addicted to hot food) - one time I cooked this I added the chilli at the end of the cooking and possibly overdid the amount / didn't allow for it being more potent from not cooking which spoiled the flavour a bit.

While the onion is cooking wash and coarsely chop the fresh swiss chard / spinach. If you are using chard separate the stems from the leaves, chop them and cook with the onion for a couple of minutes before adding the leaves. Keep some of the water on the leaves as this will help in the cooking. Add the leaves in to the onion, turn the heat right down and cover. Check and stir every minute or so. Once the spinach / chard has all wilted it's time to add the tomato and turn the heat back up.

At this point I have to say something about the tomato passata. We are very lucky indeed to be given cases of freshly made passata in old beer bottles (hence the odd amount in the recipe above) by our neighbours. It is not only very tasty but a good deal more liquid than the passata on sale in England as I remember it and this could have an effect on the cooking of the lasagne. Until someone has given it a try I'm not sure if the relative dryness of the sauce is a problem for anyone wanting to try this in England. A possible solution would be to reduce the amount of passata and add more tinned tomato which tends to be a bit wetter.

I usually cook the sauce for a couple of minutes uncovered to evaporate a little of the liquid then for about 15 minutes covered. The aim is to develop the flavour of the tomato while keeping it quite runny as it will be better for cooking the lasagne - it looks a bit more like a soup than a thick sauce.

Hopefully by now your aubergines will be ready and the lentils almost there too. Once they are just add them into the sauce, mix well and add salt to taste. Turn off the heat but keep covered.

I quite often leave the tomato sauce for half a day before actually cooking the lasagne. I think it helps the flavours develop a bit but I do it more for convenience than anything else. The bechamel sauce can also be made in advance but may go a bit lumpy when you reheat it.

To make the bechamel feel free to follow your own recipe (there is nothing particularly special about this one). If you don't have your own recipe make sure you have got a good whisk for making sauces (I use a little spring one rather than a big balloon whisk) and get

started by melting the butter in a sauce pan over a gentle heat then adding the flour and stirring together well with a wooden spoon.

Add about a quarter of the milk, turn up the heat and begin whisking. As the sauce thickens add more milk. You don't want to end up with a really thick sauce (it will thicken a lot more when it cooks in the oven) so you may find that you don't really thicken up the last quarter or so of the milk you add - you want to end up with something with the consistency of pouring cream rather than custard. Grate the nutmeg into the sauce and add salt and pepper stirring in well and tasting it to check you've got enough seasoning.

In England I would probably use a nice cheddar rather than shelling out lots of money on mozzarella and parmesan - the flavour will be a bit different but it will still work well. Whichever cheese you settle on grate the cheddar / parmesan and tear up the mozzarella into small chunks (or chop with a knife if it doesn't want to be broken by hand).

You're now ready to layer and bake the lasagne. Hopefully your lasagne sheets will not require pre boiling (very few makes do but best to double check). If your tomato sauce cooled down you need to heat it up again now.

Start by adding quite a thin layer of the sauce followed by sheets of lasagne. They should have a couple of centimetres of border around them to allow for expansion. I find that I add about a ladleful of sauce per sheet of lasagne.

Add another two layers of sauce and two sets of lasagne sheets pressing the lasagne down to flatten out any lumps if necessary. Finish with a layer of bechemel and finally the cheese. I usually find I've got a bit of sauce left - better than not having enough - let it cool and stick it in the fridge to have another day with rice / cous cous / quinoa (or more pasta!).

It is important to cook the lasagne for about half the total time covered so that the cheese does not burn. The exact time it takes will depend on your oven and the size of tray / trays you use.

I use two trays one of which fits 3 pieces of lasagne per layer and the other of which fits two. They take about 45 minutes on a high heat to cook - 20 minutes covered and 25 uncovered. The lasagne is done once the pasta is cooked through (check with a knife), the cheese has gone golden brown and the sauce has thickened to your taste.

As this is not a dry lasagne you may find it a bit tricky to serve out - make sure you have a couple of fish slices and a big serving spoon ready to help. Cut your portions right through to the bottom of the dish with a good knife and make sure nothing is stuck to the sides. Good luck!