

## Polenta Croutons with Pan-Seared Vegetables

**Time:** 1 hour to cook polenta, additional 45 minutes active prep time

This is a poured polenta recipe, meaning that the polenta is cooked to a stout consistency on the stove, poured onto a greased slab (in this case, an 8-inch baking pan), chilled, cut, and browned. Feel free to prepare the croutons without the vegetables, if you wish, following steps 1 and 3 in the recipe. The croutons have enough structural integrity to be grilled as well. In fact, this entire operation could be transferred outdoors to the grill.

### Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe you will need an 8-inch square baking pan, a heavy-bottomed 2 1/2-quart saucepan (preferably one with fluted sides), a wooden spoon, a large well-seasoned cast-iron skillet, a set of tongs, a metal spatula, 2 sheet pans, and a small sharp knife.

### Working Ahead

You can make the basic polenta recipe the day before you plan to serve the dish.

### Ingredients

*For the polenta:*

Olive oil to brush the pan

1 cup (6 ounces) Anson Mills Artisan Fine White or Yellow Polenta

4 cups spring or filtered water

1 teaspoon fine sea salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 tablespoon unsalted butter

4 tablespoons finely grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

*For the vegetables:*

1 small eggplant, rinsed and sliced 3/8 inch thick

Fine sea salt

Good-quality virgin olive oil

1 medium zucchini, scrubbed and sliced 1/4 inch thick

1 large orange or yellow pepper, washed, top and bottom lobbed off, cage slit and opened, ribs and seeds removed, and sliced into triangular wedges

1 small red onion, peeled and sliced 1/4 inch thick

2 medium-ripe plum tomatoes, washed and sliced 1/4 inch thick

Freshly ground black pepper

Condiment-quality balsamic vinegar

1/4 cup shredded fresh basil leaves

## Directions

**1. For the polenta:** Brush or spray an 8-inch square baking dish with olive oil and set aside. Place the polenta and water in a heavy-bottomed 2 1/2-quart saucepan (preferably one with fluted sides), and stir to combine. Set the pan over medium-high heat and bring to a simmer, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, until the first starch takes hold, 5 to 8 minutes. Reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring frequently, until the grains are soft and hold their shape on a spoon, about an hour. Whisk in salt, pepper, butter, and 3 tablespoons Parmesan. Turn the polenta into the prepared pan and smooth the surface with a greased offset spatula or a spoon. Cover and refrigerate until completely cold.

**2. For the vegetables:** Sprinkle both sides of the eggplant slices lightly with sea salt and arrange on a large plate or platter in a single layer. Set aside. Place a large, seasoned cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat for 5 minutes. Add a small amount olive oil (about 1/2 teaspoon), and tilt the pan to coat the bottom with oil. Arrange the zucchini in a single layer and sear without moving, 20 to 30 seconds (the vegetables should sizzle when they hit pan). Turn the zucchini with tongs—first side should be spotty brown—and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Sear the second side in the same manner. Using a spatula, transfer the zucchini to a sheet pan to cool.

**3.** Wipe the hot skillet with a wad of paper towels, but leave it on the burner. Add a small amount of olive oil to the pan, tilt to coat with oil, and sear the pepper wedges, pressing them with a spatula to flatten and blacken the edges, 30 to 40 seconds per side. Season and transfer to the sheet pan with the zucchini. Maintaining the temperature and wiping the skillet between batches, sear the onion and tomatoes in sequence to blacken the edges and soften slightly. Season and transfer to the sheet pan. Wipe the skillet and remove it from the heat. Dry the eggplant slices well with paper towels. Return the skillet to medium-high heat. Add 2 teaspoons olive oil and sear the slices in a single layer (may require 2 batches), 30 to 40 seconds per side. Transfer to the sheet pan and set aside.

**4. To finish:** Place the oven racks on the highest and lowest positions and preheat the broiler. Unmold the chilled polenta onto a cutting board and score it vertically in half with a small, sharp knife. Rotate the board a half turn and score it again to create 4 quadrants. Score each quadrant diagonally in half, then diagonally in half again to create 16 triangles. Brush the top and bottom of each triangle with olive oil and arrange them on a sheet pan or broiler rack. Place the sheet pan with the seared vegetables on the bottom rack to warm. Broil the polenta triangles on the top rack until brown and crisp on both sides, turning once, 5 to 7 minutes total time. Turn off the broiler; leave the polenta in the oven and sprinkle it with Parmesan to melt.

**5. To serve:** Divide the hot polenta croutons equally among 8 plates, and stack an assortment of warm vegetables over them. Drizzle lightly with balsamic vinegar and sprinkle with basil. Serve immediately.

**Serves 8 as a first course**

# Anson Mills

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