



ANSON MILLS

Polenta Croutons with Pan-Seared Vegetables

Yield

8 first course portions

Time

About 45 minutes, not including the polenta cooking and chilling time

Equipment Mise en Place

For this recipe, you will need a large well-seasoned cast-iron skillet; a pair of tongs; a metal spatula; two baking sheets; and a small, sharp knife.

Ingredients

1 medium globe eggplant (about 1 pound), sliced into $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-thick rounds

Fine sea salt

Good-quality virgin olive oil

1 medium zucchini, sliced into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick rounds

Freshly ground black pepper

1 large orange or yellow bell pepper, top and bottom lopped off, cage slit open and sliced into triangular wedges, ribs and seeds removed

1 small red onion, peeled and sliced into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick rounds

2 ripe plum tomatoes, sliced into $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-thick rounds

1 recipe Poured Polenta, cut into quadrants and each quadrant quartered on the diagonal to form 16 triangles

1 tablespoon finely grated Parmesan Reggiano

Condiment-quality balsamic vinegar

$\frac{1}{4}$ cup shredded fresh basil leaves

Directions

1. Place a large, well-seasoned cast-iron skillet over medium-high heat for 5 minutes. Sprinkle both sides of the eggplant slices lightly with salt and place them on a large plate in a single layer. Set aside. Add a small amount olive oil (about $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon) to the skillet and tilt the pan to coat the bottom with oil. Arrange the zucchini in a single layer in the skillet (the pieces should sizzle when they hit pan) and sear without moving them until spotty brown, 20 to 30 seconds. Turn the zucchini with tongs and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Sear the second sides in the same manner. Using a spatula, transfer the zucchini to a baking sheet.

2. Leave the skillet over medium-high heat and carefully wipe it out with a wad of paper towels. Add a small amount of olive oil to the pan, tilt to coat with oil, and sear the bell pepper wedges, pressing with a spatula to flatten them and blacken the edges, 30 to 40 seconds per side. Season with salt and pepper and transfer to the baking sheet with the zucchini. Maintaining the temperature and wiping the skillet between batches, sear the onion and tomatoes in sequence until slightly softened and the edges blacken. Season with salt and pepper and transfer to the

baking sheet. 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 tilt to coat with oil. Working in 2 batches if needed, sear the eggplant slices for 30 to 40 seconds per side. Transfer to the baking sheet with the zucchini.

3. Adjust the oven racks to the highest and lowest positions and heat the broiler. Brush both sides of the polenta triangles with olive oil and arrange them in a single layer on a second baking sheet. Place the baking sheet with the seared vegetables on the bottom oven 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. Turn off the broiler, sprinkle the polenta with the Parmesan, and return the baking sheet to the oven to melt the cheese using the oven's residual heat.

4. Arrange 2 hot polenta croutons on each of 8 plates, then stack an assortment of warm seared vegetables over them. Drizzle lightly with balsamic vinegar and sprinkle with basil. Serve immediately.