

Ragu Bolognese

During my two extended stays in Bologna, I was fortunate to learn from several of my local friends how to make the "perfect" traditional ragu Bolognese, a sauce that serves as the basis for traditional tagliatelle and lasagna Bolognese. Unlike the American concept of a meat sauce which is basically a tomato sauce with meat, this is just the reverse—a meat sauce with some tomato. Although some people do not use milk to make this, I like the mellow and soft mouth feel it adds to the flavors. I owe a great debt of gratitude to the wonderful friends who generously shared their guarded secret recipes, from which I adapted this one.

INGREDIENTS

- 1 kg. (1000 g.) (approximately 4 lbs.) lean beef, minced or ground
- 500 g. (1 lb.+) pork, minced or ground
- 200 g. (a little over ½ lb.) pancetta, minced or ground
- 2 medium onions, diced
- 2 celery stalks, diced
- 1 carrot, diced
- 1 large clove garlic, minced (optional)
- 2 C white wine
- 3 tbs. tomato paste
- 1 8 oz can tomato sauce (or more to taste)
- 4 cups hot milk (or more as needed) (whole milk is best, though 2% or non fat will also work)
- 2 cups beef broth*
- 2 cups chicken broth*
- Water as needed
- Kosher (or sea) salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
- Pinch of freshly grated nutmeg (optional)
- * Or 4 cups Italian Brodo (see linked recipe)

DIRECTIONS

In a bowl, mix the beef and pork together and gently stir in wine to loosen it. (I like to add a few pinches of salt and a little pepper to the meat mixture first.)

Over medium heat, sauté the pancetta in 2 tbs. olive oil until it has rendered its fat (approximately 3 minutes). Add the onions and sauté for about 2 minutes and then add the celery and carrots, sprinkle with a little salt and cook for another 5 minutes or until the vegetables begin to soften. Add the garlic, and sauté for a minute or so and then move the mixture to the side of pan, turn the heat up to medium high and add the meat previously mixed with the wine. Brown the meat on its own for a few minutes and then mix all of the ingredients in the pan together. Continue cooking the meat until it begins to release its fat and juices. Continue cooking at a medium high heat 30-45 minutes until all of the liquid has disappeared. Stir occasionally and lower heat as necessary to avoid burning.

Make an open space and add the tomato paste to toast it a bit and then mix it into the ingredients. Stir in the tomato sauce and let mixture cook for 2-3 minutes. Add approximately 2 C hot milk (just to the top level of the meat) and stir into the meat cleaning off any caramelized bits on the bottom of the pan to avoid burning. Bring the mixture to an active simmer, cover and adjust to a slow, steady cooking level with small bubbles just breaking the surface. Check every 20 minutes or so adding more hot milk, and then broth or water as needed (and perhaps more tomato sauce) again just to the top level of the meat, as needed, adjusting the heat as necessary to avoid too much evaporation or burning. You might not need to use all of the broth. Cook approximately 3 hours at which time it should be mostly meat. Season with salt to taste and add optional nutmeg if desired.

Traditionally this is served with tagliatelle (a fresh flat pasta), but feel free to serve it on any pasta you prefer. When serving with pasta, heat some of the ragu in a pan and add the cooked pasta along with a little of the cooking water to the pan, stirring to combine. The

sauce should just coat the pasta (think salad dressing). Sprinkle freshly grate (or good quality grated) Parmigiano Reggiano (Parmesan) cheese over the top as desired.

This also serves as the basic filling for Lasagna Bolognese which is made with fresh spinach pasta and béchamel sauce.