

Lasagna Bolognese Simplified

Could we adapt and simplify this northern Italian classic for the American kitchen?

BY SEAN LAWLER

In most American lasagnas, the meat is merely an afterthought—bits of sausage or hamburger lost in gooey layers of cheese and tomato sauce. In an authentic lasagna Bolognese, however, meat is the main idea. Three kinds of meat, in fact: beef, pork, and veal simmered until tender and delicately sweet in a slowly reducing sauce of milk, wine, and tomatoes. This rich sauce is bound between thin sheets of pasta with a creamy béchamel sauce and Parmesan cheese. Hold the mozzarella and ricotta, please.

The unrivaled richness of this northern Italian classic may elicit objections from dieters, but certainly not from the poor cook who slaved over it. He or she has likely been up since dawn rolling out fresh pasta sheets and tending an all-day meat sauce, and thus feels entitled to indulge. In this case, the poor cook was me. I made several of these monsters, using our existing recipes for fresh pasta dough, béchamel, and the meat sauce, or *ragù*, and managed to get them on the table in just under . . . six hours. I was told they were delicious. I was too tired to taste them.

Lasagna Bolognese was never going to be a quick Tuesday-night supper, but there had to be a way to make it something less than an all-day affair. The *ragù* was a time-consuming but largely unattended labor. It was the kneading, rolling, cutting, blanching, shocking, and drying of the lasagna noodles that was the most arduous task. The test kitchen had already developed several recipes that put no-boil noodles to good use, and, though purists might consider it a sacrilege, I could not resist their convenience.

Use Your Noodle

Sticking close to our existing sauce recipes for now, I prepared a lasagna with five layers of no-boil noodles. I followed the assembly guidelines of a traditional lasagna Bolognese recipe, spreading $\frac{2}{3}$ cup of *ragù* over each layer, followed by several tablespoons of Parmesan and béchamel, the flour-thickened cream sauce that “glues” the layers together. The top layer of noodles was then coated with a thin layer of béchamel and more cheese to prevent the noodles from drying out in the oven. I followed the instructions on the package of noodles, baking for 50 minutes, covered with foil for all but the last 10 minutes.



No-boil noodles and a quick meat sauce turn an all-day Italian recipe into a manageable project that yields excellent results.

My worries about the pasta had been unfounded. The taste and texture of the noodles were fine. (Lasagna Bolognese with homemade pasta is indeed better—and traditional—but the extra labor put this recipe into the “once in a lifetime” category.) Noodles aside, though, the dish had come out dry as a bone, and when I peeled back the layers I discovered nothing but dried-out bits of meat and the chalky white remains of a béchamel. The no-boil noodles had absorbed most of the moisture, leaving none behind in the sauce. Increasing the quantity of the meat sauce didn’t make the dish any saucier; there was simply more dried-out meat between the noodles.

While developing a recipe for spinach lasagna (March/April 2004), the test kitchen had presoaked no-boil noodles in hot tap water. Thinking that this technique might help to solve the dry sauce problem (the noodles might absorb less liquid during cooking), I tested it. This lasagna, made with noodles that had been soaked for five minutes, was slightly saucier but still nowhere close to saucy enough—a few drops in a drought. During 10- and 15-minute soaks, the

noodles absorbed even more water but then proceeded to turn flabby and mushy in the oven. So a five-minute soak was helpful, but I would have to make other adjustments.

Keep Your (Sauce) Cool

I now turned back to the preparation of the *ragù*, which traditionally is simmered for hours to evaporate excess moisture and produce a thick, rich sauce. Because I needed extra moisture in this lasagna, this last step seemed counterproductive. Abbreviating this final step not only would save hours but also would leave me with a wetter sauce. Thinking along the same lines, I thinned out the béchamel by doubling the quantity of milk.

To say that this idea didn’t work out as planned would be an understatement. No-boil noodles expand during cooking, which means that when the lasagna is assembled, there is quite a bit of space around the edges of the pan. The thin sauce ran off the noodles and puddled in this space, carrying chunks of meat with it. This problem worsened in the oven, and the result, to put it mildly, was an unattractive lasagna with a sunken center and blown-out edges erupting with ground meat.

What I needed was a sauce that was stiff enough to stay put between the noodles during assembly but that also had enough moisture to rehydrate the noodles in the oven. One afternoon, as I was reheating a batch of the previous day’s *ragù*, I noticed that the cold sauce seemed quite thick—too thick, in fact, to be spread easily across the noodles. But when gently warmed to just above room temperature, the texture of the sauce was much closer to what I’d been looking for. As for the béchamel, it also thickened considerably as it cooled, and I found that it performed its adhesive duties more readily in this state.

As the *ragù* cooled, however, some of the excess liquid separated out from the sauce, leaving it looking watery and greasy. What if I were to use a small portion of the cooled béchamel to thicken the *ragù*, then assemble the lasagna as before? Even before the lasagna went into the oven, I knew I was onto something. Adding just $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the cooled béchamel to the *ragù* kept the water and fat in emulsion. Thickened, but easy to spread, the sauce now stayed in place between the noodles as they expanded, yet it still

contained enough moisture to cook the noodles. Finally, I had made a perfectly respectable lasagna Bolognese in about two hours using no-boil noodles, a far cry from the usual all-day affair. Almost as good as the authentic northern Italian dish—and I wasn't too tired to eat it!

LASAGNA BOLOGNESE, SIMPLIFIED

SERVES 8

For assembly, both the meat sauce and the béchamel should be just warm to the touch, not piping hot. Both sauces can be made, cooled, and refrigerated up to 2 days ahead, then gently reheated until warm. In terms of flavor and texture, we find that Barilla no-boil noodles are the closest to fresh, but this recipe will work with all major brands of no-boil noodles.

Meat Sauce (*Ragù*)

- 1 medium carrot, peeled and roughly chopped
- 1 medium celery rib, roughly chopped
- ½ small onion, roughly chopped
- 1 can (28 ounces) whole tomatoes with juice
- 2 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 ounces ground beef, preferably 90 percent lean
- 8 ounces ground pork
- 8 ounces ground veal
- 1½ cups whole milk
- 1½ cups dry white wine
- 2 tablespoons tomato paste
- 1 teaspoon table salt
- ¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

Béchamel

- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- ¼ cup all-purpose flour
- 4 cups whole milk
- ¾ teaspoon table salt

Noodles and Cheese

- 15 sheets (9 ounces) no-boil lasagna noodles
- 4 ounces Parmesan, grated (2 cups)

1. FOR THE MEAT SAUCE: Process carrot, celery, and onion in food processor until finely chopped, about ten 1-second pulses, scraping down bowl as necessary; transfer mixture to small bowl. Wipe out food processor workbowl; process tomatoes and juice until finely chopped, six to eight 1-second pulses. Heat butter in heavy-bottomed Dutch oven over medium heat until foaming; add carrot, celery, and onion and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened but not browned, about 4 minutes. Add ground meats and cook, breaking meat into 1-inch pieces with wooden spoon, about 1 minute. Add milk and stir, breaking meat into ½-inch bits; bring to simmer and cook, stirring to break meat into small pieces, until almost all liquid has evaporated, 20 to 30 minutes. Using potato masher or wooden spoon, break up any remaining clumps of meat

Two Common Lasagna Problems



THE CENTER DOES NOT HOLD

If the meat sauce is too thin, it will pool at the edges, resulting in a lasagna with a sunken center. Thickening the *ragù* with some béchamel solves this problem.



THE DISH IS TOO DRY

Use plenty of sauce and cover the dish with foil to avoid a dry lasagna. Soaking the no-boil noodles in hot water before using them also helps.

noodles occasionally to prevent sticking. Remove noodles from water, place in single layer on kitchen towel, and pat dry. Wipe out baking dish and spray lightly with nonstick cooking spray. Stir béchamel to recombine; mix ¾ cup warm béchamel into warm meat sauce until thoroughly combined.

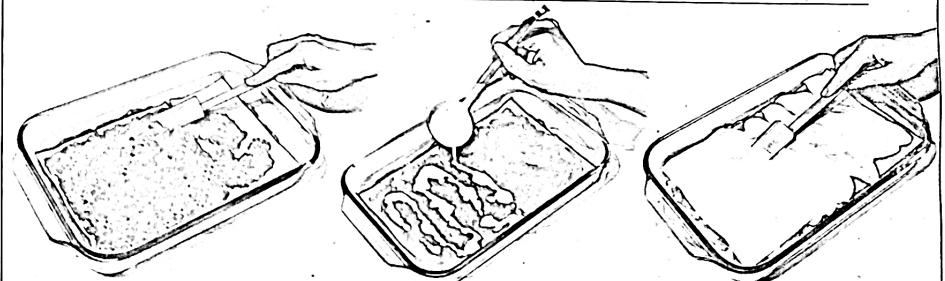
2. FOR THE BÉCHAMEL: While meat sauce simmers, melt butter in medium saucepan over medium heat until foaming; add flour and cook, whisking constantly, until thoroughly combined, about 1½ minutes; mixture should not brown. Gradually whisk in milk; increase heat to medium-high and bring to full boil, whisking frequently. Add salt, reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer 10 minutes, stirring occasionally with heatproof rubber spatula or wooden spoon, making sure to scrape bottom and corners of saucepan. (You should have about 3½ cups.) Transfer béchamel to bowl and cool until just warm to touch, about 30 minutes.

3. TO ASSEMBLE AND BAKE: Adjust oven rack to middle position; heat oven to 425 degrees. Place noodles in 13 by 9-inch baking dish and cover with very hot tap water; soak 5 minutes, agitating

4. Distribute 1 cup béchamel-enriched meat sauce in baking dish. Place three noodles in single layer on top of sauce, arranging them close together, but not touching, at center of pan. Spread 1¼ cups béchamel-enriched meat sauce evenly over noodles, spreading sauce to edge of noodles but not to edge of dish (see illustration 1 below). Drizzle ½ cup béchamel evenly over meat sauce (illustration 2). Sprinkle ½ cup Parmesan evenly over béchamel. Repeat layering of noodles, béchamel-enriched meat sauce, béchamel, and cheese 3 more times. Place final 3 noodles on top and cover completely with remaining béchamel, spreading béchamel with rubber spatula and allowing it to spill over noodles (illustration 3). Sprinkle evenly with remaining Parmesan.

5. Spray large sheet foil with nonstick cooking spray and cover lasagna; bake until bubbling, about 30 minutes. Remove foil, increase heat to 450 degrees, and continue to bake until surface is spotty brown, about 15 minutes. Cool 15 minutes; cut into pieces and serve.

STEP-BY-STEP | ASSEMBLING THE LASAGNA



1. Cover noodles with 1¼ cups of ragù, spreading sauce to edge of noodles but not edge of pan.

2. Drizzle ½ cup of béchamel evenly over ragù.

3. Cover top layer of noodles with remaining béchamel, spreading sauce to completely cover noodles.