



ANSON MILLS

Polenta Soup (Polentina)

Yield

6 first course portions

Time

About 1 hour, not including the chicken stock

Cooking Remarks

Add the warm stock just as the dry polenta becomes fragrant with a light, toasted aroma: don't wait for an assertively toasted fragrance or you will lose the lovely fresh flavors.

Fresh polenta “starches out” boldly when simmered; toasted polenta starches out over a much longer simmering period. Here is the paradigm: toasting dramatically lowers polenta's thickening capacity compared with the same measure of fresh polenta in any recipe. It is this unexpected derivative lightness and silky finish we strive for in *polentina*—a delicate texture and finish that fresh polenta cannot produce.

This recipe may be adjusted down (or up) easily: use 1 tablespoon (2.2 ounces) of polenta to thicken 1 cup (8 fluid ounces) of stock.

Baking Notes

We use 2-ounce metal ramekins for our timbales—the sort restaurants use to serve drawn butter. They are narrower at the bottom than the top, and thus custards baked in them look elegant when unmolded. Tiny demitasse cups would be pretty, too. Straight-sided ceramic ramekins are tricky to unmold because they have a second depression around the lip, and are not as attractive crowning the soup.

The ramekins do not have to be exactly 2 ounces in capacity, nor must you pour exactly 1½ ounces of custard base into them. The volume of custard base in the recipe accommodates some flex in ramekin sizes. What is important, however, is that the crouton bolster corresponds in size to—or is slightly larger than—the top circumference of the ramekin. This will help the custard unmold properly.

We took a shortcut with the crouton garnish—right down Pepperidge Farm Lane. Because we wanted a tiny something that was crisp, buttery and rocking a big garlic flavor, the vehicle for delivery became almost secondary. Do use homemade or bakery bread if you have it—our Rich Sandwich Bread would be an excellent choice.

Equipment Mise en Place

For the croutons, custards, and garnish, you will need a digital kitchen scale, a small skillet, a 2¼-inch biscuit cutter (or one that corresponds in size to the top circumference of the ramekins you're using), a pastry brush, six 2-ounce ramekins or demitasse cups, two medium

heavy-bottomed saucepans, a footed colander, a whisk, a fine-mesh sieve, a 2-cup glass measuring cup or a pitcher, a shallow glass baking dish or pie pan, an instant-read thermometer, a pair of tongs, a large skillet, and a thin metal spatula or a sharp paring knife.

For the soup, you will need a medium saucepan, a large heavy-bottomed saucepan, a whisk, and a ladle.

Ingredients

1 large leek (6 to 8 ounces)

for the garlic croutons

1.5 ounces (3 tablespoons) unsalted butter

3 garlic cloves, peeled and sliced

6 slices white bread or brioche

for the custards

1 cup whole milk

1 cup heavy cream

Scant ½ teaspoon fine sea salt

½ teaspoon whole black peppercorns

⅛ teaspoon fresh, good-quality curry powder

Sliced leeks (see step 1)

2 large eggs

3 large egg yolks

for the leek salad garnish

Julienned leeks (see step 1)

Fine sea salt

¼ teaspoon finely grated lemon zest

2 to 3 teaspoons juice from 1 lemon

Splash of mild, fruity olive oil

Freshly ground black pepper

for the soup

1½ quarts (1½ recipes) Rich Homemade Chicken Stock

2 ounces (6 tablespoons) Anson Mills Artisan Handmade Fine Yellow Polenta

2 strips zest from 1 lemon

Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Directions

1. Prepare the leek: Trim away the root end and the tough or ragged green top ends of the leek. Cut the leek crosswise where the light and dark green parts meet. Slice each piece in half lengthwise and wash well. Cut the white and light green parts into half moons (you should have about 2 ounces, or ¾ cup) and set them aside for the custard base. Separate the dark green parts into 6- to 7-inch lengths and cut them into fine julienne. Set them aside for the garnish.

2. Start the garlic croutons: Melt the butter in a small skillet over low heat until foamy. Add the sliced garlic and sauté until fragrant and golden, but not brown, 30 to 45 seconds, stirring frequently. Use a 2¼-inch biscuit cutter (or one that corresponds in size to the top circumference of the ramekins you're using) to stamp out 6 rounds from 6 slices of white bread or brioche. Brush the rounds on both sides with garlic butter and set them aside. Brush six 2-ounce metal ramekins with the remaining garlic butter and set them aside.

3. Start the custard base: Pour the cream and milk into a medium heavy-bottomed saucepan and place it over low heat. Add the salt, peppercorns, curry powder, and the sliced leeks and bring to a simmer. Remove the pan from the heat and let the mixture steep.

4. Make the leek salad garnish: Fill a medium saucepan with water and bring it to a boil over high heat. As soon as the water boils, salt it generously. Add the julienned leek greens and cook, stirring, until tender, less than 1 minute. Drain the leeks in a footed colander and refresh with cold water. Dry them on paper towels. Place the leeks in a small bowl and add the lemon zest and juice, olive oil, and salt and pepper to taste. Toss to combine, then taste for seasoning. Cover and set aside.

5. Bake the custards: Adjust a rack to the middle position and heat the oven to 300 degrees. Set a kettle of water on the stove to boil. Combine the whole eggs and egg yolks in a bowl and whisk them well. Whisk the warm cream mixture into the eggs a little at a time until well combined. Strain the custard base through a fine-mesh sieve into a 2-cup glass measuring cup or a pitcher, pushing on the solids with a wooden spoon to extract all the liquid. Arrange the buttered ramekins in a shallow glass baking dish or pie pan. Pour the custard base into the ramekins, dividing it evenly; depending on the size of your ramekins, you may have some leftover. Place the baking dish on the oven rack and pour boiling water into the dish to come halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake until the custards are just set and register 160 degrees on an instant-read thermometer, about 20 minutes. Remove the dish from the oven. Using tongs, transfer the ramekins from the water bath to a plate and cover with a clean towel to keep them warm. Turn off the oven and place 6 shallow soup plates in the oven to warm them.

6. Prepare the soup: While the timbales are baking, heat the chicken stock in a medium saucepan over medium heat. Turn the polenta into a large heavy-bottomed saucepan lightly toast the polenta over low heat, stirring frequently, until it smells sweetly of corn but has not colored, about 10 minutes. Remove the pan from the heat and whisk the hot stock into the polenta 1 ladleful at a time, whisking well to keep the polenta smooth. Return the pan to the burner and cook over medium-low heat, whisking frequently, until the polenta thickens the broth and is soft but firm to the tooth, about 20 minutes. Do not allow the soup to approach a full boil. Add the lemon zest strips during the final 10 minutes of cooking. Season the soup with salt and pepper to taste. Remove and discard the lemon zest.

7. Brown the croutons: Heat the skillet in which the garlic butter was made over medium-low heat. Add the buttered bread rounds and cook until golden brown, about 2 minutes. Turn and brown the second sides, about 2 minutes. Remove from the heat, but leave the croutons in the skillet to keep them warm.

8. *To serve:* Remove the soup bowls from the oven. Run a thin metal spatula or sharp paring knife around the perimeter of each custard. Place a garlic crouton over the top of a ramekin. Invert the two together and gently shake the custard out onto the crouton. Place the custard-topped crouton in the center of a soup bowl. Top with leek salad twirled into a wreath. Repeat with the remaining croutons and custards. Ladle 1 cup of hot soup into each bowl and serve at once.