

Fancy Polenta Cakes

Serves 36 | Active Time: 1 hour | Total Time: 2 hours

Swick

Chef's Notes

These flavorful polenta cakes are softer than the packaged polenta you can buy in the store. They are also more flavorful, as they are filled with chunks of yummy ingredients.

They are pretty and unusual as a side dish.

You can come up with endless flavor variations to use in them. Try using feta, roasted red pepper and parsley, or sun-dried tomato and fresh basil, or ham and green peas with mint. Try different cheeses and ingredients that compliment your main course.

I enjoy the baked polenta cakes along with warm spinach as sides to a meat dish.

The fried polenta cakes are tasty as an appetizer on their own, while the baked polenta cakes could use some kind of topping to become an appetizer.

The fried cakes are more gooey and sinful, and therefore tend to be the popular favorites.

I'd love to hear about other flavor combinations you use when making these.

Step 1: Prepare Your Mise en Place

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| • 1 cup corn meal | Finely chop the whites and greens of the green onions |
| • 2 cups corn nibblets | Grate approx. 1½ cups of cheese, and cut the other 1/2 cup into small cubes. |
| • 2 cups cheddar cheese | Boil the frozen corn nibblets in salted water for about 2 minutes, then rinse under cold water and drain. |
| • 3-6 slices bacon (optional) | If using bacon, cut it into cubes, fry until crispy, and drain. |
| • 3 large green onions | Measure out 1 cup of corn meal and 2 cups of corn nibblets. |
| • dried chili pepper flakes (optional) | |

Step 2: Cooking the Polenta

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| • 3 cups water | Bring 3 cups of salted water to a boil. Add the cornmeal very slowly to the boiling water while stirring. |
| • salt | You can use a whisk or a wooden spoon – the goal is to ensure the polenta doesn't form into lumps as it's added to the water. Use a long handled tool and be careful not to let it splatter and burn you. Reduce the heat to low and cook, stirring constantly with a wooden spoon, for 10-20 minutes or until it's quite thick and pulling away from the sides of the pot. If it thickens too quickly at first, you can add a bit more water as you stir. |
| • sugar | |
| • cayenne pepper | When it's ready, add a pinch of salt and sugar and a tiny bit of cayenne pepper. (careful, it's very spicy!) Set aside to cool. |

Step 3: Forming the Polenta Cakes

When the polenta is cool, mix in the corn, cheese, green onions, bacon (optional) and dried chili pepper flakes (optional).

The chili flakes can be quite hot, so add according to taste – the cayenne pepper by itself can give enough of a little kick if you don't like too much heat. Add salt and pepper to taste.

Once evenly mixed, scoop the mixture onto parchment paper and pat it down with your hands, until it's smooth and about ½ inch thick. Cover with a cloth and let it sit for 1 hour at room temperature.

When it's ready, you can use a knife or round cutter to cut it into shapes. If you are baking them, you can use more complicated shapes – I used stars once, which were very pretty. If you are frying them you might want to stick to a simple shape like circles or squares, as they get quite soft and can be hard to flip. Also, the corn niblets can make it hard to get clean edges on complicated cuts.

Step 4: Frying the Polenta Cakes

Heat a frying pan over medium heat. Add enough oil to coat the bottom, and a pat of butter. Flick water drops into the pan to test the heat – when they sizzle, add the polenta cakes. You may want to reduce the heat a bit. Fry until golden brown, about 3-4 minutes, then gently flip them over and fry the other sides. They will get gooey and a bit hard to flip – try using a spatula along with a fork or spoon to help keep them together. When both sides are golden, transfer them to a cooling rack. Serve immediately – they are best when hot and crispy.

Step 5: Baking the Polenta Cakes

Preheat your oven to 375 F. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. Arrange the polenta cakes on the paper and brush the tops with a bit of melted butter or flavored oil. (optional) Bake for 20 minutes, then transfer to a cooling rack and serve immediately. They are best when they're warm and the cheese is melted. These don't get as brown as the fried cakes, but are a lighter alternative, both taste and calorie-wise.