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DIVAS ON A DIME

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PHOTO CREDIT: www.JasonCoblentz.com

PHOTO CAPTION: Creamy polenta provides the perfect bed for savory Italian sausage, peppers and onions.



The Most Underrated Bargain in the Grocery Store

Every grocery store has an aisle filled with ingredients people buy without thinking. Flour. Rice. Pasta. Oats. Then there's the one ingredient many shoppers pass week after week because they're not quite sure what to do with it. That's polenta. And it might be one of the best bargains in the store.

Polenta isn't fancy. In fact, it's one of the oldest comfort foods around. It's simply coarse cornmeal slowly cooked until creamy, but don't let its humble beginnings fool you.

You see, polenta has a marketing problem. It sounds fancy pants, so shoppers assume it's difficult or expensive. In reality, it's just cornmeal wearing its Italian name tag.

If you're wondering whether polenta is just fancy grits, the answer is ... sort of. They're close cousins. Polenta is usually made from yellow corn and has a heartier texture, while grits are made from white corn and cook up a bit smoother.

A single bag costs just a few dollars yet makes many generous servings. Because its flavor is mild, it happily soaks up whatever you pair it with. A spoonful of butter and Parmesan turns it into comfort food. Top it with hearty meat sauce, roasted vegetables, braised meats, mushrooms or today's Italian sausage and peppers, and suddenly an inexpensive

pantry staple becomes dinner worthy of a cozy Italian restaurant.

The leftovers are where polenta really shines. Once chilled, it's firm enough to slice. Pan-fry the slices until golden, grill them alongside burgers or chicken, or tuck them beneath a fried egg for breakfast.

If you're pressed for time, fully cooked tube polenta is a handy short-cut. Just don't let convenience empty your wallet. Making it from scratch takes only about 20 minutes and costs a fraction of the price.

CREAMY POLENTA

Yield: 4-6 servings

Total Time: 25 mins.

2 cups water

2 cups whole milk

½ teaspoon salt

1 ⅓ cups cornmeal

1 tablespoon butter

4 ounces cream cheese, cubed

1/2 cup grated Parmesan cheese



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Creamy polenta provides the perfect bed for savory Italian sausage, peppers and onions.

In a large saucepan, bring the water, milk and salt to a boil, then reduce heat to low. Add the cornmeal in a steady stream, whisking to avoid lumps. Keep stirring on low heat until thickened, about 15 minutes. Switch to a wooden spoon and add the butter, cream cheese and Parmesan. Keep stirring. You can tell it's done when it

pulls away from the sides of the pot. Serve immediately.

ITALIAN SAUSAGE & PEPPERS WITH POLENTA

Yield: 4-6 servings

Total Time: 30 mins.

1 ½ tablespoons olive oil, divided

1 pound Italian sausage links

1 large yellow onion, chopped

1 red bell pepper, chopped

2 medium zucchinis, sliced

1 teaspoon fresh garlic, minced

1 (15 oz.) can fire-roasted crushed tomatoes

1 teaspoon Italian seasoning

In a large skillet, heat 1/2 tablespoon olive oil and brown the sausages. They will cook more later, so they don't need to cook completely now. Set aside and keep warm.

In the same skillet, add remaining oil and saute the onion until softened. Add the bell pepper and zucchini, continuing to cook until both are mostly cooked through. Add the garlic and stir to combine, followed by the tomatoes and Italian seasoning. Let this come to a simmer and return the sausage links to the skillet and let this cook for 10 minutes to marry the flavors and finish the sausages. Serve over polenta.

Sometimes the smartest grocery bargains are the humble, old-fashioned ingredients patiently waiting on the shelf for someone new to discover them.

Lifestyle expert Patti Diamond is the penny-pinching, party-planning, recipe developer and content creator of the website Divas On A Dime — Where Frugal, Meets Fabulous! Visit Patti at www.divasonadime.com and join the conversation on Facebook at [DivasOnADimeDotCom](https://www.facebook.com/DivasOnADimeDotCom). Email Patti at divapatti@divasonadime.com

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