

Risotto

Whether you are looking for "something different" for dinner or a fabulous side dish, Risotto comes out on top. It's simple in preparation and complex in texture, creamy consistency with an al dente rice, and combinations are as limitless as your imagination as Risotto spans the range from a simple rice dish to an Italian classic combination to a hearty one dish meal.

Traveling through Italy recently, risotta came up in conversation as becoming a "sweetheart" of Italian cooking. Italians serve risotto as a first course -- in the same league as their beloved pasta. However, like pasta in recent years, it is fast becoming "the" entree for their late dinners.

Risotto calls for arborio rice, which is a short grain Italian rice which has a hard starch center covered with a soft starch shell --- as one Italian said "sort of a reverse M & M". When this Italian rice is cooked properly, the core of the rice, sometimes called the pearl, remains firm to the bite or "al dente" and the soft starchiness cooks to a classic creamy texture.

As you probably can tell, it became one of my favorites. However, in different sections of Italy, it was prepared differently. I found that those not cooked in the proper manner did not boast the wonderful creaminess and distinct contrast in texture that is unique to this rice dish. Part of the reason is the time it takes to add the warm broth in small batches, stirring constantly, is not conducive to large restaurant cooking. However, I find it soothing and therapeutic after a busy day -- and the results more than warrant the 20 or so minutes of stirring. I hope you agree.

The four building blocks of Risotto offer endless combinations of flavor:

The Brodo (BRO doh) is the broth and obviously home-made broth is the best. Make sure you use fat free or low fat broth that is also low in sodium to get a true clean taste. Also, you need to keep it warm on the stove as you add it gradually to the rice to release the rice's starch, which makes it creamy. Use a ladle that holds approximately 1/2 cup.

The Soffrito (so FREE toh) is the Italian name for a flavoring mixture that's going to be used to cook something else. It's made of diced aromatics like chopped onion, carrots, or celery and cooked in oil or butter.

The Riso is the rice and short-grained rice, preferably Italian arborio (currently on sale at Jungle Jim's) is a must to absorb great quantities of liquid without losing its shape or turning mushy.

The Condimenti are the flavors that provide the different variations. These are ended last, and there are no rules here to follow. Herbs, cheese, vegetables, tomatoes, seafoods, and meats can be added here.

Basic Risotto

3 1/2 oz. low fat, less sodium chicken or vegetable broth
(or 5 Cups homemade broth)
2 Tab. Olive Oil or Butter
1/2 Cup Onions, finely minced
1 1/2 Cups Arborio Rice

1/2 Cup Dry white wine
1/4 - 1/2 Cup Grated Parmesan Cheese, preferably Parmigiano-Reggiano
(See below for various additions)

Bring broth to a simmer in medium saucepan (do not boil) and keep warm over low heat.

Heat oil in a heavy saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onion and saute 3 minutes or until tender. Add Rice and cook 1 minute more, stirring constantly. Stir in wine and cook 1 minute or until nearly absorbed, stirring constantly. Add 1 Cup of warm broth, stirring constantly until liquid is absorbed. Repeat, adding approximately 1/2 Cup of warm broth, stirring constantly until each portion of broth is absorbed before adding the next. (If you are adding any Condimenti, do so the last five minutes of cooking). When rice is al dente and texture is creamy, remove from heat and add cheese. (I also like adding 1/4 - 1/2 teaspoon of pepper and 2 Tablespoons of chopped fresh Herbs, parsley and basil being my first choice, but try thyme and oregano also. see below for more suggestions)

Variations:

Shrimp and Snow Peas

Last three-five minutes of cooking:

1/4 lb. of peeled and deveined shrimp
1 cup of fresh, 1/2" diagonally slice snow peas
until shrimp are opaque

Take from heat and add:

1/4 Cup Parmesan cheese
1 1/2 Teaspoon of thyme
1 Teaspoon of Lemon Zest
1/4 Teaspoon of Black Pepper, freshly ground
(Can also substitute 2 - 8 oz. bottles of Clam Juice and 3 Cups of Water for the Chicken Broth)

Fresh Tomato, Basil, and Mozzarella

Combine:

1 1/2 Cups of diced, peeled and seeded plum tomatoes
2 Tablespoons of chopped fresh Basil
1 Tablespoon of Olive oil (optional)
1 clove of garlic, minced

Add above mixture last 2 minutes of cooking. Remove from heat and add

2 Tablespoons fresh Parmesan
1/2 Cup diced mozzarella cheese
1/2 Teaspoon freshly ground pepper

Arugula, Toasted Garlic, and Portobello

Brush Portobellos with Olive Oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper and grill several minutes per side or roast in oven at 500 degrees, four minutes a side prior to starting Risotto. Set aside.

Slice 3 cloves of garlic and toast in oil prior to sautéing onions, remove and set aside.

Trim stems from 1 -2 cups of fresh Arugula. Set aside.

Stir in mushrooms last couple minutes of cooking to heat through. Take from heat, add 2 tablespoons of parmesan cheese, the toasted garlic, 1/4 teaspoon of freshly ground pepper and the arugula.

Some more ideas:

Add chopped pieces of prosciutto or other Italian meats, try Asiago cheese in lieu of the Parmesan or leave out both and add 1/2 cup of Feta or Gorgonzola after removing from heat. Sun-dried tomatoes go great with parsley, rosemary, and garlic and Feta is a good addition here, too. Here's the place to use those fresh herbs from your garden -- 2 Tablespoons will do just fine. Spring asparagus is classic.

Possibilities are endless. That and the fact that we get the opportunity to slow down, stir a pot on the stove of aromatic, delicious Risotto to feed our family and friends, while we take the time to reflect on our blessings and catch up with our loved ones. There truly is joy in cooking --- a lesson well-learned from our Italian neighbors.

Mille Grazie! Margie Potts