

Ultimate Ragu alla Bolognese

Our goal was the richest, most savory interpretation of this famous meat sauce. But how many meats did that require—and would the dairy have to go?

≧ BY BRYAN ROOF ≦

Ragu alla Bolognese, the hearty meat sauce native to the northern Italian city for which it is named, has always been a simple concept—but with a lot of complications to hamper its simplicity. Despite its undisputed Bolognese pedigree, there are countless “authentic” interpretations on record. While ground beef is the common starting point, many versions add ground pork and often veal as well. Others supplement the ground meat with finely chopped *salumi*, usually pancetta or prosciutto. Some recipes call for brightening the ragu with crushed tomatoes; others lean toward the drier, more concentrated depth of tomato paste. One version may call for white wine, another for red—some may call for no wine at all. Cooking times range from 90 minutes to 3 hours.

But the most controversial point of all? Dairy. Depending on which source you consult, milk and/or cream is either an essential component, lending further richness and supposedly tenderizing the long-cooked meat, or it has no place in the sauce whatsoever. In other words, what constitutes “real” ragu Bolognese is largely a matter of interpretation.

The only thing that all Italian cooks seem to agree on is this: The end product should be hearty and rich but not cloying, with a velvety texture that lightly clings to the noodles, and tomatoes should be a bit player in this show. The true star is the meat.

I’d never felt strongly about the dairy issue myself, until recently, when I sampled a Bolognese sauce made by Dante de Magistris, an Italian chef in Boston with a big following. His version was by far the meatiest, most complex version I’d ever had. I was so taken with it that I asked him for a breakdown of the recipe. Two points stood out. First, he used a whopping six meats: ground beef, pork, and veal; pancetta; mortadella (bologna-like Italian deli meat); and, to my surprise, chicken livers. Second, de Magistris stood squarely in the no-dairy camp, claiming that when he



A little gelatin gives this sauce a silky, glossy texture despite the lack of long-simmered, collagen-rich *brodo*.

learned to make the dish in Bologna, milk and cream were definitely not included.

Those clues—plus the test kitchen’s library of Italian cookbooks—were enough to get me started on my own dairy-free Bolognese. I was determined to make my version home cook-friendly and yet satisfying to even the most discriminating Italian palate.

The Meat of the Matter

I started with a test batch that I cobbled based on de Magistris’s version, loading up the pot with the components of the flavor base, or *soffritto* (chopped carrot, celery, and onion), followed by five different meats. (I wasn’t sure I really needed the chicken livers, so I left them out for the time being.) I then stirred in crushed tomatoes.

I let it all simmer, covered, for a couple of hours. The result was acceptably rich and flavorful, but I still had a good bit of tweaking to do, to both the ingredient list and the technique.

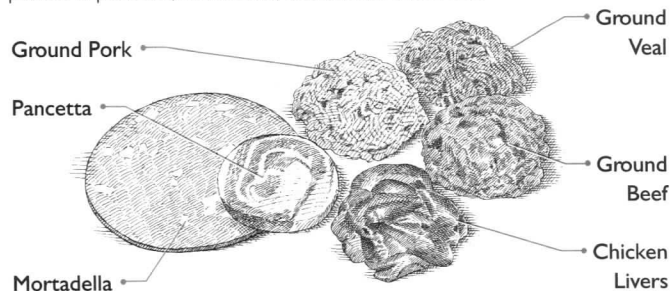
I made several more batches, adding a fistful of minced sage to the meat—considered an essential component by some sources—and trying various proportions of all five meats until I landed on an easy 1:1 ratio of the ground beef, pork, and veal and 4 ounces each of pancetta and mortadella. Some of the other classic Bolognese recipes I’d consulted specified that the ground meat should be cooked only until it loses its pink color, lest the browning lead to toughness. But I found the textural compromise to be far subtler than the flavor benefit of a good sear. I also decided to ignore tradition and add the meat to the pot before the soffritto. Without the interference of moisture from the vegetables, I could get a much better sear on the meat, plus sautéing the veggies in the meats’ rendered fat built up even richer flavor.

What gave me pause was a more minor complaint: finely chopping the pancetta and mortadella. It was tedious work, so I called on my food processor to take over. The job was literally done with the push of a button. In fact, the appliance worked so efficiently that I also pulsed the soffritto components before sautéing them in the meats’ rendered fat.

I moved on to the next major decision: the best kind of tomato product to use. The recipes I’d read didn’t help narrow things down—I’d seen everything from the crushed tomatoes I had been using up until now, to sauce, to paste. One source I consulted even suggested that tomatoes were not originally part of the sauce. That idea reminded me that I liked the unobtrusive texture of tomato paste in de Magistris’s version, so I added a healthy dollop to the pot, and then let the mixture go. Once the fond had taken on a deep rust tone, I poured in a few

The Mother of All Meat Sauces

For the meatiest-ever ragu alla Bolognese, we didn’t stop at ground beef—even at pork and veal. To bolster the sauce’s complex, savory flavor, we packed in pancetta, mortadella, and chicken livers, too.



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big glugs of red wine, deglazed the pan by scraping up the browned bits with a wooden spoon, and let the sauce simmer gently for the better part of two hours. When the sauce was nearly done, I boiled some pasta and tossed the noodles with the ragu.

Flavorwise, the sauce was in good shape: rich and complex and, thanks to the wine and tomato paste, balanced with just enough acidity. But as my tasters noted, this ragu had a textural flaw: Its consistency was pebbly, dry, and not particularly saucelike.

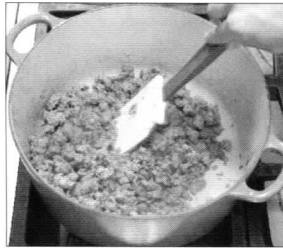
Velvet Underground

There was one element of de Magistris's recipe that I had overlooked in my earlier attempts: Just before the long simmering step, he ladled some homemade *brodo* (or broth) into the ragu, repeating the step twice more during cooking to moisten the reduced sauce. I suspected that the *brodo*—and the technique of adding the *brodo*—had an important effect on the texture of Bolognese. Besides boosting the meaty flavor, the bones used to make the broth give up lots of gelatin as they simmer, which renders the liquid glossy and viscous. The more the broth reduced in the Bolognese, the more savory and satiny it became. But homemade broth was out of the question for me. Simmering bones for hours on top of making the ragu was just too much fuss; I'd have to make do with commercial broth.

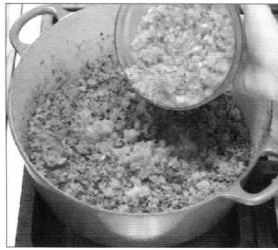
No surprise here: The ragus I made with store-bought broth didn't measure up to the Bolognese made with homemade broth—especially in regard to texture. I started brainstorming other ways to mimic the velvetiness contributed by the gelatin in real *brodo*—and realized that the answer was right in front of me: powdered gelatin. It's a trick we've used to lend suppleness to all-beef meatloaf and viscosity to beef stew—two qualities that I was looking for in my ragu. I prepped multiple batches of the sauce, blooming varying amounts of gelatin—from 1 teaspoon all the way up to a whopping 8—in a combination of canned beef and chicken broth (1 cup each) before proceeding with the recipe. Every batch was an improvement over the gelatin-free ragus, but the powder's effect was relatively subtle until I got up into the higher amounts, which rendered the sauce ultra-silky. That settled it: Eight teaspoons it was.

I had one more thought about the canned broth: Since the flavor and body of the canned stuff hardly equaled that of a real *brodo*, I wondered if the reduction step was really doing that much for the sauce. One side-by-side test gave me my answer: The batch into which I'd added all the broth at once boasted just as much meatiness and body as the one with the staggered additions. It also finished cooking in about 90 minutes.

STEP BY STEP | BUILDING A MEATY, SATINY-TEXTURED BOLOGNESE



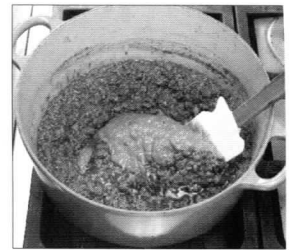
1. COOK the ground meats; add depth by sautéing the chopped mortadella, pancetta, and sage in the rendered fat.



2. ADD the soffritto and sweat it until softened and then add concentrated tomato flavor in the form of tomato paste.



3. DEGLAZE the pot with wine; stir in the broth plus the bloomed gelatin to develop luxurious silky texture.



4. STIR in the pureed chicken livers for subtle but rich taste.

And yet while canned broth plus gelatin nicely solved the texture problem, the sauce still lacked a certain depth and roundness of flavor. Fortunately, I still had one card left to play: chicken livers. They'd seemed superfluous to me at first, but I wondered if finely chopping them and tossing them in at the end might get at the complexity I was after. That they did—but according to my tasters, their effect was a bit too strong. Pureeing them in the food processor worked much better; this way, their rich, gamy flavor incorporated seamlessly into the sauce.

Though my sauce could hardly get any more perfect, I just couldn't push away the thought that kept sneaking into my head: What would happen if the sauce included a little dairy? I made one last batch, adding 1 cup of milk along with the broth. But when my tasters sampled this latest version, the consensus was unanimous: Dairy muted its meaty flavor, and they liked it better without.

Without dairy, I knew that some Italian cooks out there would not consider my recipe authentic. But no matter: The sauce was undeniably complex, rich-tasting, and lusciously silky. And besides, how could any version be Bolognese without a little controversy?

RAGU ALLA BOLOGNESE

MAKES ABOUT 6 CUPS

This recipe makes enough sauce to coat 2 pounds of pasta. Leftover sauce may be refrigerated for up to three days or frozen for up to one month. Eight teaspoons of gelatin is equivalent to one (1-ounce) box of gelatin. If you can't find ground veal, use an additional $\frac{3}{4}$ pound of ground beef.

- 1 cup low-sodium chicken broth
- 1 cup beef broth
- 8 teaspoons unflavored gelatin
- 1 onion, chopped coarse
- 1 large carrot, peeled and chopped coarse
- 1 celery rib, chopped coarse
- 4 ounces pancetta, chopped fine
- 4 ounces mortadella, chopped
- 6 ounces chicken livers, trimmed
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound 85 percent lean ground beef

- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound ground veal
- $\frac{3}{4}$ pound ground pork
- 3 tablespoons minced fresh sage
- 1 (6-ounce) can tomato paste
- 2 cups dry red wine
- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound pappardelle or tagliatelle pasta
- Parmesan cheese, grated, for serving

1. Combine chicken broth and beef broth in a large Dutch oven; sprinkle gelatin over top and set aside. Pulse onion, carrot, and celery in food processor until finely chopped, about 10 pulses, scraping down bowl as needed; transfer to separate bowl. Pulse pancetta and mortadella in now-empty food processor until finely chopped, about 25 pulses, scraping down bowl as needed; transfer to second bowl. Process chicken livers in now-empty food processor until pureed, about 5 seconds; transfer to third bowl.

2. Heat oil in large Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add beef, veal, and pork; cook, breaking up pieces with spoon, until all liquid has evaporated and meat begins to sizzle, 10 to 15 minutes. Add chopped pancetta mixture and sage; cook, stirring frequently, until pancetta translucent, 5 to 7 minutes, adjusting heat to keep fond from burning. Add chopped vegetables and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 5 to 7 minutes. Add tomato paste and cook, stirring constantly until rust-colored and fragrant, about 3 minutes.

3. Stir in wine, scraping pan with wooden spoon to loosen fond. Simmer until sauce has thickened about 5 minutes. Stir in broth mixture and return to simmer. Reduce heat to low and cook at low simmer until thickened (wooden spoon should leave trail when dragged through sauce), about 1½ hours.

4. Stir in pureed chicken livers, bring to boil, and remove from heat. Season with salt and pepper to taste; cover and keep warm.

5. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large pot. Add pasta and 1 tablespoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Reserve $\frac{3}{4}$ cup cooking water, then drain pasta and return it to pot. Add half of sauce and cooking water to pasta and toss to combine. Transfer to serving bowl and serve, passing Parmesan cheese separately.