

# Introducing Risi e Bisi

Brothier than risotto but thicker than soup, this Venetian classic requires a not-so-gentle touch.

BY STEVE DUNN

Venetians have a centuries-old tradition of dishing up *risi e bisi* (rice and peas) every April 25, St. Mark's Day, to celebrate spring's first peas and to honor the importance of rice production in the Veneto region. Thinner than a traditional risotto yet thicker than soup, the dish's unique consistency and fresh flavors make it the ideal ambassador for the season: a light and vibrant—yet still satisfying—escape from heavier winter fare.

The classic version is made with arborio rice and fresh spring peas along with onion, garlic, Parmesan cheese, and pancetta. Most recipes adhere to the long-established risotto method of vigorously stirring broth into the rice in multiple additions. Extra broth is then poured in at the end to create something looser than a creamy risotto.

Since my goal was not to create a rich, velvety consistency, I was fairly certain I could jettison the laborious stirring routine and simply cook the dish more like a soup. I was right. I sautéed finely chopped pancetta, onion, and garlic until the meat rendered its fat and the onion turned translucent; added the rice; poured in hot broth all at once; brought the mixture to a boil; and then let it simmer, adding the peas and Parmesan last.

I then focused on the peas. Since fresh pea season is fleeting at best, I'd have to rely on the frozen kind. Stirring them in thawed at the end of cooking, just to warm them through, was key to preserve their texture and verdant color. I also sought out petite peas, which were noticeably sweeter and more tender than full-size peas.

As for the broth, recipes are divided on whether to use chicken or vegetable. I conducted a few tests, ultimately finding that chicken broth diluted with water struck just the right balance of savoriness and lightness. Unfortunately, the consistency of the broth itself was too thin. I tried adding a few pats of butter, but this masked the dish's delicate flavors.

## INGREDIENT SPOTLIGHT

### PETITE PEAS

Petite, or baby, peas boast a sweeter flavor and a less starchy texture than their larger counterparts, which have tougher skins and mealier interiors.



SO SWEET



*Risi e bisi* is the no-fail alternative to risotto.

I realized that my hands-off approach was freeing little starch from the rice. Maybe I needed to stir the rice after all? Indeed, aggressively whisking just before adding the peas and Parmesan loosened just enough starch to lightly thicken the broth.

And with that, I gave this simple supper a final nod to spring, adding a spritz of lemon juice and a sprinkle of minced fresh parsley.

## RISI E BISI

SERVES 4 TO 6

We use frozen petite peas here, but regular frozen peas can be substituted, if desired. For the proper consistency, make sure to cook the rice at a gentle boil. Our favorite arborio rice is from RiceSelect.

- 4 cups chicken broth
- 1 1/2 cups water
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces pancetta, chopped fine
- 1 onion, chopped fine
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup arborio rice
- 2 cups frozen petite peas, thawed
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (1/2 cup), plus extra for serving

- 3 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice, plus lemon wedges for serving
- Salt and pepper

1. Bring broth and water to boil in large saucepan over high heat. Remove from heat and cover to keep warm.

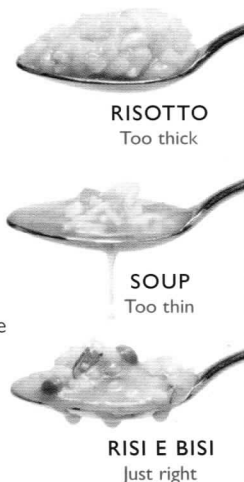
2. Cook oil and pancetta in Dutch oven over medium-low heat until pancetta is browned and rendered, 5 to 7 minutes. Add onion and cook, stirring frequently, until softened, 4 to 5 minutes. Add garlic and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds. Add rice and stir to coat, about 1 minute.

3. Add 5 cups broth mixture, increase heat to high, and bring to boil. Reduce heat to medium-low, cover, and boil gently until rice is tender but not mushy, about 15 minutes, stirring every 5 minutes to ensure that rice is gently boiling.

4. Remove pot from heat and whisk rice vigorously until broth has thickened slightly, 15 seconds. Stir in peas, Parmesan, parsley, and lemon juice. Season with salt and pepper to taste. Adjust consistency with remaining 1/2 cup broth mixture as needed. Serve, passing extra Parmesan and lemon wedges separately.

## Getting the Right Consistency

The consistency of *risi e bisi* is thinner than risotto but thicker than soup: It's lightly thickened yet still fluid. The proper texture is easy to achieve by using a 5:1 ratio of liquid to rice and vigorously whisking toward the end of cooking to free enough starch from the rice to give the broth body.



See the Proper Technique  
A step-by-step video is available at [CookIllustrated.com/june17](http://CookIllustrated.com/june17)

