

TORTA PASQUALINA

Serves 8 to 10.

By Dennis W. Viau; modified from many cookbook recipes.

Torta Pasqualina is a savory pie that is traditionally served for the Easter holiday in Italy. There are many variations, but they all seem to be made with a flaky crust and contain artichokes and cheese. I chose my own variations. The tissue-thin layers of crust are rolled by hand, but I much prefer using phyllo dough for savory pies. This fancy pie would be appropriate at any special occasion.



Ingredients:

15 ounces (425g) ricotta cheese; well drained

Olive oil for frying

1 medium red onion; chopped

2 large garlic cloves; minced

2½ to 3 ounces (70-80g) fresh mushrooms; chopped (porcini, if you can find them; I used shiitake)

5 to 6 artichoke hearts; coarsely chopped

1 pound fresh spinach; well washed

½ cup (5 ounces/64g) grated Parmesan or Romano cheese

10 sprigs flat leaf (Italian) parsley; leaves only, finely chopped

About ⅛ teaspoon fresh ground nutmeg

Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

6 large eggs

1 box (1 pound/454g) phyllo dough sheets

¼ cup (60ml) clarified butter; melted

¼ cup (60ml) extra virgin olive oil

Equipment needed

9 inch (24cm) springform pan

Directions:

Phyllo dough is usually purchased frozen. Thaw in the refrigerator overnight or for a couple days. I purchased artichoke hearts that were in a jar with oil, vinegar, and water. To remove most of the vinegar flavor I rinsed them well, filled the jar with fresh water, and stored them in the refrigerator overnight. To remove excess moisture from the Ricotta cheese, spread on several layers of paper towels, press more towels on top, and set aside for a while.

Sauté the chopped onion in olive oil until tender, about 5 minutes. Add the minced garlic and cook a minute longer. Remove from the skillet and set aside. Sauté the chopped mushrooms until tender, about 1 minute, adding more oil and/or butter to the pan as needed. Remove and set aside. Sauté the chopped artichoke hearts, mostly to remove the excess water, about 1 minute. Remove and set aside. Carefully add about ¼ cup water to the skillet and then the spinach. A large skillet should hold the entire pound. If your skillet is too small you can cook the spinach in two batches. Cook with the lid on the pan for 1 minute, then turn with tongs and cook an additional minute. Place in a colander in the sink to drain and cool.

Squeeze the cooled spinach, removing excess moisture (it can also be pressed between layers of paper towel or with a potato ricer) and then chop coarsely. Combine onion, garlic, mushrooms, artichokes, spinach, ricotta, Parmesan (or Romano), Ricotta, nutmeg, and parsley in a bowl. Adjust for salt and pepper, then add one egg and mix well. Cover with plastic and set aside until needed.

Mix the melted butter and olive oil in a small bowl. On a piece of waxed paper or parchment paper, place a sheet of the phyllo dough and oil very lightly with a pastry brush, only in a few places. Add a second sheet, bunching it up a little to allow some air between each sheet. Again, oil lightly. Continue until about a dozen of the phyllo sheets are used. With the outer ring of the springform pan in the closed position, press down upon the pastry to form a depression. Cover with plastic and set aside.

Similar to forming the top crust, layer phyllo dough sheets to form the bottom crust. You will need a bottom shell that is large enough to cover the bottom and sides of the pan. My 9-inch (23cm) springform pan requires a bottom shell that is at least 15 inches (38cm) in diameter. Each sheet won't be wide enough; so arrange them at different angles to cover the entire area needed.

Carefully press the bottom pastry shell into the springform pan, arranging the excess around the sides evenly. Spoon the filling into the shell. Make 4 depressions, large enough to each contain an egg. Break an egg into each depression. Trim the top crust inside the depression made with the springform pan. Fit into the top of the pie.

Combine the remaining egg with a teaspoon or two of water to make an egg wash. Brush the egg wash around the inside edges of the pie, rolling and pressing the bottom excess around the edges to seal against the top crust. Lightly brush the top with egg wash.

Bake at 350°F (180°C) 60 to 70 minutes, to an internal temperature of 160°F (71°C) to cook the egg.

Allow to cool about 5 minutes, then transfer to a serving plate. Serve warm or at room temperature.

STEP-BY-STEP

1



Assemble your *mise en place*.

2



Phyllo (fillo on this box) dough is usually sold frozen. Thaw in the refrigerator.

3



Sometimes Ricotta cheese is too wet when it comes out of the container. I spread it on several layers of paper towels and then press more towels on top. I set it aside to drain until I am ready to use it. The paper towels will wick excess moisture out of the cheese.

4



I purchased artichoke hearts in a jar at the warehouse store. The jar contained oil, water, and vinegar. To remove some of the tart vinegar flavor, I drained the jar, rinsed the artichokes well, then filled the jar with cold water and stored it in the refrigerator overnight. This gave the artichoke hearts a milder flavor.

5



Chop the red onions fairly small.

6



The artichoke hearts can be coarsely chopped. The mushrooms can be chopped about the same size as the onions. Chop the parsley leaves finely.

7



Heat olive oil in a large skillet and sauté the onions until tender, about 5 minutes. Add the minced garlic and sauté about a minute longer.

8



Remove the onions and garlic from the pan. Add the chopped mushrooms and sauté until tender, about a minute. Mushrooms absorb a lot of oil; so you can add a little more oil and/or butter if you prefer. Remove from the skillet and set aside.

9



I sauté the chopped artichoke hearts mostly to remove excess moisture, about a minute. Remove from the pan and set aside.

10



My large skillet will contain 1 pound of spinach. Put a few tablespoons of water in the bottom of the pan, add the spinach, cover, and steam for about 1 minute over medium heat. Use tongs to turn the spinach over, cover again, and steam for an additional minute.

11



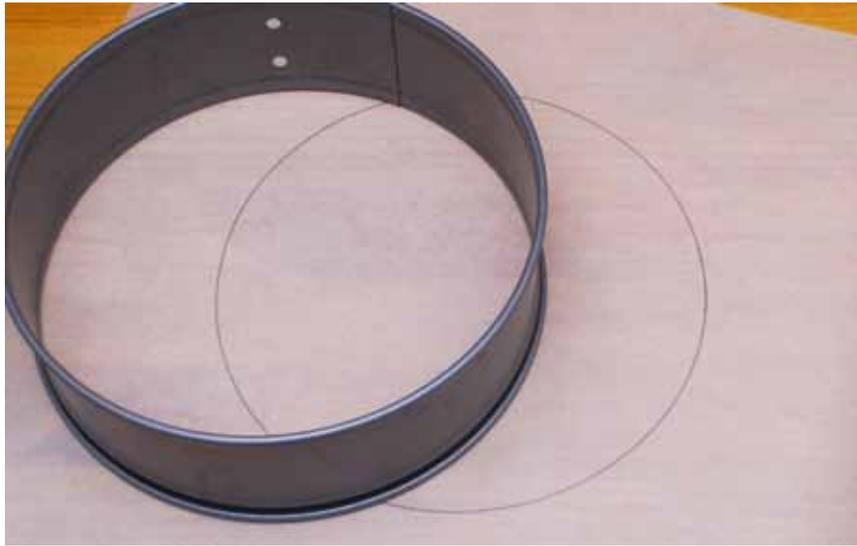
Move the cooked spinach to a colander in the sink and allow to drain and cool. When cool enough to handle, use your hands to squeeze out excess moisture. If you have a potato ricer, you can use it to press moisture out of the spinach. Then chop the spinach coarsely.

12

Another way to remove excess moisture is to spread the spinach on paper towels, like you did the Ricotta cheese, and press more towels on top.

13

Finally, combine all the filling ingredients (Ricotta, onion, garlic, mushrooms, spinach, artichoke hearts, Parmesan (or Romano) cheese, chopped parsley, nutmeg, salt and pepper). You can adjust for salt at this stage by tasting a sample. When satisfied with the salt, add one egg and mix well.

14

I find it's easy to gauge the size of the top crust by tracing a line onto parchment paper.

15

I turn the paper over (ink underneath) and layer sheets of phyllo dough, dotting lightly with the melted butter/oil mixture. I "scrunch" the sheets a little to put a little air between the layers. Cover and set aside.

16

The bottom crust has to cover the bottom and sides of the pan, so I make mine about 15 inches wide.

17



Arrange the bottom shell inside the springform pan, easing the excess around the sides. Fill with the stuffing mixture and make four depressions large enough to hold an egg in each. Break an egg into each depression. If desired, you could space as many as six eggs around the inside of this pie.

18



When I make the top crust I use the pan to press a depression into the crust. This gives me a line to cut the crust to the size I need. Allowing for the thickness of the bottom crust, I cut inside the line, using a pair of kitchen scissors, then fit the top crust into the pie.

19



Break the remaining egg into a small bowl and add a couple teaspoons of water. Mix to make an egg wash. Brush the egg wash around the inside top edges of the crust and roll the bottom edges down, tucking into place against the top crust. It won't be smooth and beautiful, but that's okay. Brush the entire top surface lightly with egg wash and bake the pie in a 350°F (180°C) oven for 60 to 70 minutes.

20



I use a digital thermometer to check the internal temperature. At 158°F (70°C) the egg yolk will be cooked and the white of the egg will be cooked to a moist consistency. So I aim for a finished temperature of about 160°F (71°C) after the pie has come out of the oven and allowed to rest for 5 to 10 minutes. As you can see above, the pie is golden brown and the egg is perfectly cooked.

Conclusion

This was one of those recipes that I hit perfectly the first time I made it. The flavor was a perfect balance of ingredients. None of them overpowered the others. This is a light and delicate pie, especially if you go light on the salt (I always do). It is beautiful as well as delicious. I shared this with a neighbor who looked at it and said, "I really like pretty food and this is really pretty!" It is.

You could serve this as a side dish with almost any protein source: fish, chicken, beef or lamb. As this pie is traditionally served on Easter in Italy, it is typically followed by roast lamb. I think it is elaborate enough for just about any special occasion and it is suitable for a main course at lunch.