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Torta Rustica

Makes One 9-inch torta; Serves 6 to 8

The first torta I tasted was one from La Brea Bakery in Los Angeles, and it was amazing. I decided to look it up, and I learned that this genre of savory pastry – with many layers and different colors of vegetables and meat, enclosed in pastry – is quite celebrated in some circles. You see all the layers when you cut into it, so it makes for an impressive presentation.

9 large eggs
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
5 teaspoons unsalted butter, plus more for the cake pan
One 10-ounce package frozen whole-leaf spinach, thawed
4 teaspoons olive oil
2 cups (about 6 ounces) sliced white or cremini mushrooms
2 cloves garlic, minced
1/4 cup heavy cream
One 16-ounce box frozen all-butter puff pastry, thawed overnight in the refrigerator
6 ounces domestic mozzarella cheese, grated
6 ounces sliced ham
One 12-ounce jar roasted red peppers, drained

In a medium bowl, beat 8 of the eggs with 4 teaspoons water and season with salt and pepper. Melt 1 teaspoon of the butter in a skillet over medium heat, add the eggs, and scramble them loosely, stirring with a wooden spoon until they're barely cooked through, about 2 minutes. (They will cook more in the oven). Spoon the eggs onto a plate and let them cool.

Place the thawed spinach in a colander and use your hands to press out as much moisture as possible.

Heat 2 teaspoons of the butter and 2 teaspoons of the olive oil in a sauté pan over medium-high heat and sauté the sliced mushrooms until tender, 3 to 4 minutes, seasoning them lightly with salt and pepper. Transfer the mushrooms to a plate and set aside to cool.

Heat the remaining 2 teaspoons butter and 2 teaspoons olive oil in the same sauté pan over medium-high heat and sauté the garlic for 30 seconds. Add the drained spinach and heat through. Add the heavy cream and cook, stirring to combine, for 1 minute. Remove from the heat and let cool. (You can prepare the spinach and mushrooms a day in advance and refrigerate them until ready to use).

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Torta Rustica, (continued)

Generously butter a 9-inch round cake pan.

Unfold 1 pastry sheet onto a lightly floured work surface. Roll out the dough with a rolling pin to remove the creases, and then cut a round of dough the same size as the cake pan, using the bottom of the pan as a guide. Place the pastry on a baking sheet and chill it until you're ready to use it.

Roll out the second pastry sheet and cut out a slightly larger round (big enough to line the cake pan and have about 1 inch of dough hanging over the edges of the pan). If the dough becomes too warm and pliable, place it on a baking sheet and chill it for 15 minutes to make it easier to handle. Line the cake pan with this large pastry round, gently easing the dough into the corners of the pan, leaving any excess dough to be trimmed later. Chill the dough in the cake pan in the freezer for 15 minutes.

To assemble the torta, remove the cake pan from the freezer and trim the overhanging dough to 1 inch. Spread half of the cooled eggs over the pastry in the pan. Spread half of the spinach over the egg, then half of the cheese, half of the mushrooms, half of the ham, and finally all of the peppers. Repeat in inverse order, layering the remaining ham, mushrooms, cheese, spinach, and ending with the remaining eggs. Fold the overhanging dough in over the filling. Make an egg wash by beating the remaining egg with 1 tablespoon water, and brush the edge of the pastry with egg wash. Place the refrigerated pastry round on top, and press down gently to join the edge of the round with the egg-washed edge of the pastry in the pan. Brush the top layer of pastry with egg wash. Use a knife to cut a small hole in the center of the top pastry layer, to allow steam to escape during baking; then score radiating lines away from the hole for decoration, if desired. With the decorative design, don't cut through the pastry; just scratch the surface. Chill the entire torta for 30 minutes to let the layers settle.

Position a rack in the lower third of the oven and heat the oven to 350 degrees.

Place the cake pan on a baking sheet and bake the torta for 1 to 1-1/4 hours, until golden brown on top. Let it cool for 10 minutes. Then cut it into wedges and serve.