



*Rich and satisfying*

# The Ultimate **MAKEOVER** **Lasagne**

Half the  
fat of a  
traditional  
version

Angela Nilsen finds a way to  
lighten this family classic while  
maintaining its full flavour  
Photographs DAVID MUNNS

**T**raditionally, lasagne is made for special occasions and can be very rich. 'In Italy, making lasagne is not something you take on lightly,' said Valentina Harris, cookery writer and teacher. 'It can be a four-day event.' So I had several challenges – as well as pruning the fat and calories, I would also aim to reduce the time it takes to put this dish together.

#### Seeking advice

In Italy, the layers of a lasagne can be as varied as the cooks that create them. Valentina told me: 'There may be a few layers or many, it can be shallow or deep, there will be different cheeses

inside or on top. You often find peas in there, plus all sorts of fresh or cured meats and sausages – often, whatever's in the kitchen'. Just one thing is sacrosanct: the pasta should be rolled out extremely thinly. 'It should be like a fine layer of cobwebs going through the dish.'

I didn't intend to make my own pasta, but would try to achieve the same light effect by having fewer layers of pasta. Lasagne is a popular ready-meal, which Fiona Hunter, Good Food's nutrition expert, said 'contains scary amounts of fat and salt. Homemade is better, and small changes have a big impact, like enriching the sauce with red wine and herbs instead of fat and salt, omitting cream

and fatty meats, and adding more veg.'

To further reduce the fat, Fiona also suggested using lean beef steak instead of minced beef as it contains under half the fat. Valentina agreed, but for a different reason. 'Italian cooks like to chop the meat finely as they prefer the texture to mince.'

A combination of meats appealed, so my first test was made with beef and pork steak. I chopped the meat and tasters loved the texture, but because there was so little fat in the meat, the sauce lacked richness. I tried again with mince – it was certainly quicker and richer – but the fat shot up. How could I get it down again and still maintain richness?

### A fresh approach

I decided to compromise by using minced pork for convenience and a bit of fat, and beef steak for its texture and lack of fat. The addition of red wine, basil and nutmeg, plus slow-cooking the meat, gave a thick, rich, flavoursome sauce. To bump up the veg, I incorporated a colourful layer of spinach, and added carrot to the meat sauce.

Another high-fat culprit in this recipe is béchamel sauce. I tried a fat-free mix of cornflour and milk, but when baked this sat in unappetising blobs on the top. Spotting a lasagne recipe by Gennaro Contaldo in Gennaro's Italian Year (Headline), I found a solution. Instead of using béchamel he dotted ricotta cheese between the layers. I tried to lower the fat even further by using reduced-fat cheese, but half-fat mozzarella proved tasteless and rubbery, so I decided simply to use less of the real thing.

The final test was made with ricotta spread over the spinach and, instead of hiding everything with the usual layer of bland-looking pasta and béchamel sauce, I made the meat sauce the topping hero. I'd been tucking mozzarella and Parmesan between the layers, but now I was using less they were getting lost. I found that their flavour, look and gooey texture were more pronounced when scattered on top to protect the meat.

### The verdict






What the tasters loved most about my final version was its fresh taste, even before Good Food's nutrition analyst Wendy Doyle reported that the fat and calories had been more or less halved. My lasagne is now a much lighter affair. I just hope the Italians will forgive me for not taking several days to make it.

## THE ULTIMATE MAKEOVER

### Lasagne

**SERVES 6 • PREP 35-40 mins**

**COOK 1 hr 50 mins**

**Easy**      **Good source of calcium, folic acid and vitamin C, counts as 2 of 5-a-day**

#### FOR THE MEAT SAUCE:

**1 tbsp olive oil**  
**1 onion, chopped**  
**2 medium carrots, diced**  
**3 plump garlic cloves, finely chopped**  
**250g/9oz lean rump steak, trimmed of fat, thinly sliced, then very finely chopped**  
**250g/9oz lean minced pork**  
**100ml/3½fl oz red wine**  
**2 tbsp tomato purée**  
**400g can plum tomatoes**  
**½ tsp ground nutmeg, plus a pinch**  
**handful basil leaves, torn**

#### FOR THE OTHER LAYERS:

**300g/10oz fresh spinach**  
**1 egg**  
**250g tub ricotta**  
**handful flat-leaf parsley leaves, chopped**  
**6 wide sheets (about 175g/6oz) no pre cook lasagne**  
**125g ball mozzarella, preferably buffalo, roughly chopped**  
**50g/2oz Parmesan, coarsely grated**  
**200g/8oz cherry tomatoes on the vine**

#### TO SERVE:

**basil leaves and green salad leaves**

1 Make the meat sauce: heat oil in a large sauté pan, then tip in onion and fry for 5 mins until golden. Add carrots and garlic, then fry for 2 mins more. Stir in both meats, breaking up the pork with a wooden spoon. Cook over a high heat until the meat is no longer pink and the juices are released. Pour in wine, scrape the bottom of the pan as you stir, then cook for 1-2 mins until the liquid is reduced. Tip in tomato purée, tomatoes and 2 tbsp water, then stir to break up tomatoes. Add ½tsp nutmeg and some pepper, cover, then simmer for 1 hr, stirring occasionally. Taste and add salt if you like. Mix in torn basil. Sauce can be chilled for up to 1 day.  
2 While the sauce is simmering, prepare the other layers. Tip the spinach into a large bowl



and pour over boiling water. After 30 secs, tip spinach into a colander and put under cold running water briefly to cool. Squeeze to remove excess water. Beat the egg in a bowl, then mix with ricotta, parsley, a pinch of nutmeg and pepper. Soak the lasagne sheets in a single layer in boiling water for 5 mins. (Although the packet says no pre-cook, I find soaking improves the texture.) Drain well. Heat oven to 200C/fan 180C/gas 6.

3 Start layering. Spread a few big spoonfuls of sauce to barely cover the base of an ovenproof dish (20 x 29 x 6cm deep). Cover with 2 sheets of lasagne, then spread over half the remaining sauce. Cover with 2 more lasagne sheets, then scatter spinach evenly over. Spread the ricotta mixture on top and cover with 2 more lasagne sheets. Spread with remaining sauce, then scatter over mozzarella and Parmesan to almost cover meat. Top with cherry tomatoes and some pepper, then cover loosely with foil.  
4 Bake for 35 mins, then remove foil and bake 5-10 mins more. Leave for a few mins, then scatter with basil and serve with salad.

PER SERVING 447 kcalories, protein 38g, carbohydrate 31g, fat 19g, saturated fat 9g, fibre 4g, sugar 9g, salt 0.96g



### MAKING IT HEALTHIER

**Classic lasagne contains 770 kcalories and 50g fat (26g of which is saturated fat). My version contains 447 calories and 19g fat (9g of which is saturated fat). Here's how I made it healthier:**

**Reduced fat** by using less oil, replacing minced beef with pork mince and rump steak. Replaced béchamel sauce with ricotta and used less cheese.

**Boosted veg** by adding spinach, mixing carrots into the meat sauce and topping with tomatoes.