Lasagna is the quintessential comfort food, a decadent, rich dish that warms the soul and adapts seamlessly to meat, seafood and vegetarian varieties. Many chefs can testify to the long tenure of lasagna’s popularity. It’s a dish that simply refuses to go out of style.

Worth the work

Carla Gomes added it to the menu at Antico Forno, her Southern Italian restaurant in Boston, back in 1999. The recipe for the restaurant’s roasted vegetable lasagna came from Mario Nocera, her Italian-born chef. When he left, his lasagna stayed on.

Gomes and her team make two sheet pans a day to accommodate the 30-plus servings. They purchase homemade lasagna sheets from Maria’s Gourmet Pasta in Malden, Massachusetts, and use San Marzano tomatoes for the sauce. The tomato variety is important, Gomes says. “San Marzano tomatoes, grown in Italy’s Mount Vesuvius area, are the best tomatoes for the sauce, because they have fewer seeds, a stronger, sweeter taste and are less acidic.”
LASAGNA TIPS

- Cook lasagna in a terra cotta dish, suggests Carla Gomes, owner, Antico Forno, Boston. "Clay terra cotta retains heat incredibly well, only needs to be soaked once for a 24-hour period—and not every time it’s used—and can be used over the stove, on the barbecue grill or in a wood-fired brick oven, as we do. If used correctly, terra cotta lasts many years in the kitchen and stands the test of time."

- Cover lasagna with tinfoil while cooking and remove the foil for the last 20-30 minutes so the top becomes crispy, Gomes says. "When it’s fully cooked, allow the dish to set on the counter for 30 minutes prior to cutting it. This way, it is less likely to fall apart on the plate."

- Make your own lasagna pasta, says Michael Pirolo, owner, Macchialina, Miami Beach, Florida. "The flavor of egg pasta versus semolina pasta adds a lot to the dish." He advises precooking the pasta, then blanching it in cold water before drying and layering with sauce, protein and/or vegetables.

The dish has three layers each of roasted vegetables, mozzarella cheese, pasta and tomato sauce, and is baked in a terra cotta dish in a brick oven. It sells for $14 on the lunch menu and $17 for dinner. “It’s definitely a cost-efficient dish, because the ingredients are inexpensive,” Gomes says, adding that her food costs range between 25% and 30%. “If there is an expense, it has more to do with the labor-intensiveness, and that’s what chefs need to consider before putting it on the menu.”

It’s a meal-in-a-dish that doesn’t require anything alongside it, Gomes adds. And, consider its homey connotations. “It’s a comfort food that reminds people of home and their mothers making it,” she says. “It’s versatile, easy to make, inexpensive, and its ingredients are easily obtained by ordinary people. What’s more, it’s nutritious, tastes good, is filling, and it’s always better the second day.”

Second-day dish

Chefs shouldn’t shy away from serving lasagna on that second day, providing it is cooked, cooled and reheated correctly, says Bruce Mattel, associate dean, food production, The Culinary Institute of America, Hyde Park, New York. “Often, by the second day, the flavors have married together. And once it’s cooked and completely cooled, it portions in a much cleaner, easier way.”

Mattel recommends cooking the dish and then cooling it in a blast chiller before portioning. The best way to reheat it is in a TurboChef oven or something comparable that “combines forced hot air with microwave technology, so you get the sizzling on the outside but rapid heating inside, too,” he says. “Use a thermometer to check that the interior is the right temperature before serving—a minimum of 165°F.”

Michael Pirolo only serves his lasagna on the second day at his Miami Beach, Florida, restaurant Macchialina. When it opened in June 2012, he put his short-rib lasagna with Taleggio bechamel on the dinner menu for $20, but quickly found the 6½-hour preparation process for the dish too time-intensive. He took it off the menu, but guests were so vocal about its return that back it came. This time, Pirolo hired a kitchen employee devoted almost exclusively to lasagna-making.

“We sear the meat, toss in onions and chicken stock, and braise the short rib for three hours before we shred it,” he says. Onions and chicken stock are blended to make a gravy, and the dish has three layers each of housemade lasagna, short rib and Taleggio bechamel interspersed between braised cabbage and grated Parmesan. “The Taleggio bechamel has a much stronger flavor than the usual mixture of Parmesan and ricotta,” Pirolo says.

“We have to serve this on day two, because it’s such a creamy, luscious dish that it needs a day to set before we can even cut it.” Pirolo and his team make 20 servings at a time, and top each with grated Parmesan and sliced chives.
Nonna’s lasagna

When Bryan Forgione created the menu at Buddy V’s Ristorante in Las Vegas in 2013, the executive chef knew lasagna would be right at the top. “It’s been the No. 1 seller, and we menu it for lunch and dinner,” he says.

Buddy V’s is a casual Italian-American restaurant that seats 300. The recipe for the dish comes from Buddy Valastro’s grandmother, and combines Italian sausage, beef, pork, ricotta, mozzarella, provolone and Parmesan. “We don’t try to reinvent anything—it contains uncomplicated ingredients that simply taste good and go well together,” Forgione says.

The culinary team at Buddy V’s makes sheets of lasagna pasta daily, relying on a pasta recipe that holds up well through the baking and helps maintain the integrity of the dish. On the lunch menu, Nonna’s Lasagna Al Forno is a five-layer dish that menus for $22; at dinner, it increases to eight layers and costs $26. The restaurant’s culinary team goes through up to 60 servings of lasagna each day, and makes it fresh several times a day to keep up with demand.

It can be difficult to make lasagna look pretty on a plate, which is why Forgione bakes it in large batches and transfers individual portions to a cast-iron dish. When guests order it, individual portions are reheated so that the cheese caramelizes just before serving. “Being as large as it is, you need a nice dish to hold it and keep it all together,” he says.

Nonna’s Lasagna Al Forno is special to the Valastro family, and when guests order it, they come in looking for a certain experience. “This is a homey dish, and part of its spirit is that it should be rustic,” Forgione says.

Having a background in Italian cooking is great when it comes to making lasagna, but it’s not mandatory, by any means, Mattel says. “One thing you do need to know is how to handle pasta, which can be tricky. You don’t want to overcook it, so if you’re pre-cooking dry pasta, be sure to extract it from the water once it is pliable but before it is fully cooked, otherwise, it will become mushy when the lasagna is assembled and baked.”

## Roasted Vegetable Lasagna

**Antico Forno // Boston**

**YIELD:** 6-8 SERVINGS

1 stick butter
6-8 T. flour
2 cups heavy cream
6 cups tomato sauce, divided
¼ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese
¼ cup grated Romano cheese
1 red pepper
1 yellow pepper
1 seeded zucchini
1 seeded summer squash
½ white onion
½ red onion
Olive oil, to coat vegetables
Salt and pepper, to taste
1 small bag cleaned spinach
1½ boxes lasagna sheets
1 lb. shredded mozzarella

1) To make bechamel: Melt butter in small saucepan over low heat. Add flour; cook for 5 minutes, stirring constantly. Whisk in cream slowly, until mixture thickens. Strain into large bowl; cool. Mix cooled bechamel with 5 cups tomato sauce, Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese and Romano cheese.

2) Medium-dice red pepper, yellow pepper, zucchini, summer squash, white onion and red onion; toss with olive oil and salt and pepper. Roast at 350ºF for 20 minutes until tender. Add spinach. Cool vegetables.

3) Cook lasagna sheets in large pot of boiling salted water for 8-10 minutes, or until al dente. Strain; rinse under cold water. Pat dry with kitchen towel; drizzle with olive oil.

4) In greased 9x13-inch baking dish, layer lasagna as follows: tomato mixture, lasagna sheets, vegetables, mozzarella, tomato mixture. Repeat at least four times until reach top of baking pan. Add remaining cup tomato sauce; top with mozzarella.

5) Cover with aluminum foil; bake at 350ºF for 50 minutes. Remove foil; continue baking for 20 minutes, until crust is golden. Remove from oven; rest about 20 minutes before slicing.