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For a month or more I've been in a risotto kind of mood. It is one of my cold weather favorites and great for entertaining. Risotto is a traditional northern Italian rice dish which I first discovered in Ticino, the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. I had only recently moved to Switzerland and Marie-Claude, one of my new friends, took it upon herself to show me the country. So off we went to Locarno for the film festival and risotto.

It was my first taste of this creamy rice dish. My mother was never a particularly adventurous cook. About the time Julia Child published her famous tome and single handedly launched America's love affair with haute cuisine and celebrity chefs, Mom was busy raising two little girls and a brand new baby boy. She never got caught up in the hoopla and excitement of mastering the art of French cooking or Italian cooking or the art of any cooking for that matter.

Mom took her inspiration from Erma Bombeck and her cookbook library included such notable titles as the "I Hate to Cook Book". Dinner at our house was not about exotic or complicated dishes, it was about bringing the family together for lively conversation, debate and laughter. Mom took every advantage of convenience foods and mixes. She was frequently assisted by the likes of Mrs. Swanson and Stouffer, Duncan Hines and Betty Crocker, Clarence Birdseye and even a green giant. Her favorite ingredients included cans of condensed soup, frozen vegetables and Minute Rice. If there had been such a thing as Risotto Minuto, Mom might have made it. But there wasn't and she didn't.

My friend, Marie-Claude was a cooking teacher, foodie and loved to travel. She was delighted to meet a budding foodie who was interested in exploring Switzerland and the rest of Europe. She suggested a long weekend in Ticino for the beautiful countryside, the film festival and because she loved risotto.

We arrived in the charming lakeside town of Locarno on Thursday afternoon, checked into our hotel and then wandered around. We took in the local color, found the outdoor cinema and bought tickets to "Stranger Than Paradise". Marie-Claude scoped out the restaurants and booked a table.

That evening with my friend's enthusiastic encouragement, I (of course) ordered the risotto. I was anticipating something extraordinary, spectacular and exotic. What I got was rice. It was okay but pretty bland, sort of like eating Cream of Wheat. Only the rice was maybe a little too al dente, even crunchy. I made polite noises and Marie-Claude conceded it was not the best ever.

Singularly unimpressed, I made little effort to master the art of risotto. Until a few years later when on a trip to Milan I finally discovered what all the fuss was about. Properly prepared, risotto is heavenly. And while a simple risotto is wonderful, it is even better with a few additions. On chilly nights throughout the fall and winter, a butternut squash or wild mushroom risotto is the perfect comfort food. Risotto with asparagus is a mainstay of my Easter table and lobster or spinach is a perfect addition to this creamy rice dish any day of the year.

Risotto has somehow developed a mystique of being temperamental, even difficult. Nothing could be further than the truth. Yes, it requires a little attention, a little stirring but a simple risotto takes all of twenty, maybe twenty-five minutes. Put risotto on the menu at your next casual dinner party, give everyone a turn to stir the pot and enjoy! Bon appétit!

Bon appétit!

Susan

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Wild Mushroom Risotto

A wonderful, cozy dish for a cold winter night, wild mushroom risotto goes well with lamb, beef or pork. It's also great as a main course on a bed of sautéed escarole, Swiss chard or radicchio. Enjoy!

Serves 3-4 as a main course, 6-8 as a side dish

1 ounce dried porcini, cèpes, morels or chanterelle mushrooms
1 pound fresh mushrooms, trimmed, cleaned and chopped
1 small red onion, chopped
Extra-virgin olive oil
Balsamic vinegar
Kosher salt & freshly ground black pepper
1 cup Arborio rice
1/2 cup dry white wine
2-2 1/2 cups hot chicken or vegetable stock
Pinch nutmeg
2 teaspoons fresh thyme leaves or 1/2 teaspoon dried
2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat leaf parsley
1 tablespoon butter
1/4 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese plus more for passing



Do ahead:

1. Put the dried mushrooms in a sieve and rinse well under cold, running water. Put the mushrooms in a 1 cup container, add cold water, cover and soak for several hours or overnight.
2. Preheat oven to 375 degrees.
3. Put the fresh mushrooms and onion in a large oven-proof skillet, drizzle with a little olive oil and balsamic vinegar and season with salt and pepper. Toss to coat and roast at 375 degrees until lightly browned, about 30 minutes. Reserve.

When you are ready to make your risotto:

4. Strain the dried mushrooms, reserving the soaking liquid. Rinse, drain and finely chop the mushrooms. Reserve.
5. Heat a little olive oil in a heavy saucepan. Stir in the rice and sauté until lightly toasted, 3-5 minutes.
6. Add the wine, salt and pepper to taste and simmer, stirring often, until the wine is absorbed.
7. Leaving any sediment behind, carefully pour the dried mushroom liquid through a fine mesh sieve into the rice. Add the dried mushrooms and thyme, stir to combine.
8. Add the hot chicken stock 1/2 - 1 cup at a time and cook, stirring, until the rice has absorbed the liquid. Allow the rice to absorb each addition of stock before adding more.
9. After about 15 minutes, add the nutmeg, roasted mushrooms and onions. Continue to add broth until the rice is tender but still firm. Total cooking time is about 20-25 minutes. Stir in the cheese and butter. Check for seasoning; add salt and pepper to taste and sprinkle with parsley. Serve immediately.



You can find recipes for Butternut Squash and Asparagus Risotto in the recipe archives on my website www.susannye.com.