

Italian Baked Pancakes with Cheese and Tomato

SERVES 4-6
VEGETARIAN

FOR THE PANCAKE BATTER (MAKES 8)

125g (5oz) flour
Pinch of salt
2 eggs
125ml (4fl oz) milk
125ml (4fl oz) water
15g (1/2oz) butter, melted
Sunflower oil, for oiling the frying pan

FOR THE TOMATO SAUCE

3 tbsp olive oil
1 onion, peeled and finely sliced
4 cloves of garlic, peeled and crushed or grated
Salt, freshly ground black pepper and sugar
2 x 400g tins of chopped tomatoes or 900g (2lb) fresh tomatoes, peeled and chopped
3 tbsp torn fresh basil leaves

FOR THE FILLING

300g (11oz) fresh mozzarella, grated
100g (4oz) ricotta
25g (1oz) Parmesan cheese, finely grated, plus a bit extra for sprinkling

This recipe was inspired by a conversation I had with the great Italian chef Aldo Zilli. He told me a wonderful story about his mother using light pancakes as an alternative to pasta in certain dishes, and I've discovered they work wonderfully with rich tomato sauces. This recipe uses the pancakes in place of lasagne sheets, which adds a fluffiness to the dish. I love the way it comes out of the oven, sizzling and bubbling to the table. It's a perfect family dinner.



1 First make the pancakes. Place the flour and salt in a bowl. Make a well in the centre and drop in the eggs. Start to whisk, gradually add in the milk and water, whisking all the time, until the batter is smooth and free of lumps. Add in the melted butter and set aside. The batter can sit like this in the fridge for 24 hours.

2 Next make the tomato sauce. Place the olive oil in a wide saucepan, add the onion and garlic, season with salt and pepper, then cover and cook on a low heat until the onions are completely soft. Add the tomatoes and half the basil, leave uncovered and cook for about 20 minutes until the tomatoes are soft and the sauce has thickened. Add the remaining herbs and season to taste with salt, pepper and a pinch of sugar.

3 While the tomato sauce is cooking, you can make the pancakes. Place a medium-sized frying pan on a high heat and allow to become very hot. Pour the batter into a jug for easy pouring. Wipe the frying pan with an oiled piece of kitchen paper. Pour in just enough batter to cover the base of the pan – it will start to cook as soon as it hits the pan so swirl it around the base immediately.

4 Cook on a high heat for 30 seconds–1 minute until the pancake is golden brown around the edge. Using a fish slice or palette knife, carefully but quickly flip the pancake over (you might need to take the pan off the heat while you do this) and cook the other side for another 30 seconds–1 minute until golden brown. Remove to a plate and cook the remaining pancakes in the same way. You will need a total of eight pancakes.

- 6** Mix the cheeses together in a bowl, to make a spreadable paste.
- 7** To assemble the dish, place a pancake on the bottom of a 25cm (10in) square or round ovenproof dish, spread with a thin layer of the cheese mixture, top with another pancake and continue assembling, alternative seven layers of pancake and filling. Finish with a top layer of pancake. Pour the tomato sauce over the top, sprinkle with the remaining 25g (1oz) grated Parmesan.
- 8** Place in the oven (though it can also be stored in the fridge overnight or frozen at this stage). Bake for 30–40 minutes until the sauce is bubbling around the edges and the centre feels hot when a skewer is inserted. Take out of the oven, cut into wedges and serve with a lovely green salad.

