

## Torta Rustica—Comfort Food for All Seasons



by Sara Thompson  
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I first encountered torta rustica at the Columbia City Bakery, located in my old Seattle neighborhood. In the pre-pandemic days, this was one of the items they offered by the piece. With a crust made from thin-sliced baguette, and a filling of vegetables with or without meat all held together with a rich egg custard, it became a go-to purchase when I wanted comfort food.

One afternoon I gathered the courage to ask for the recipe. The guy behind the counter shook his head, handed me my order, and told me to Google it.

First to pop up in my search was something called pizza rustica, which features a pastry crust filled with deli meats and cheese. I persisted, met with success, and over the years I have made it my own.

This torta rustica is more akin to strata, a savory bread pudding that, according to Wikipedia, dates back to 1902 and was popularized in “The Silver Palate Good Times Cookbook” (1985) by Julee Rosso, Sheila Lukins and Sarah Chase.

Strata has made its way, to my great satisfaction, to many a brunch over the years.

But first, let’s talk eggs and bread.

The egg. I came to fully appreciate eggs when my kids were small and starting to feed themselves. What a perfect meal: One egg, quickly scrambled and placed before them, was inhaled with enthusiasm.

This year, two authors published a review in the scientific journal *Nutrients* that endorsed my maternal instincts. They wrote that egg protein is highly digestible and an excellent source of essential amino acids, with the highest attainable protein digestibility-corrected amino acid score. Egg protein has been shown to decrease malnutrition in underdeveloped countries, possibly increase height in children, and protect against kwashiorkor, a severe form of malnutrition most often

seen in children whose diets are low in protein and calories. Egg protein is also important to skeletal muscle health and protective against sarcopenia, an age-related, involuntary loss of skeletal muscle mass and strength. Egg protein also can decrease appetite, resulting in a reduction in the caloric intake from the next meal and weight reduction.

The baguette. I am of the opinion that perhaps humanity can indeed live by bread alone, in the spiritual if not nutritional sense, especially if a little butter is included. My favorite part is the crust, so the long skinny loaf with its high crust to bread ratio is especially appealing. And I am not alone. In November UNESCO, the United Nations heritage agency, added the French baguette to its “intangible cultural heritage” list. The baguettes available on the Key Peninsula may not quite live up to the French standard, but I find they work quite well for this recipe.

The torta rustica filling varies each time I make it, depending on whether or not I want to include meat (sausage or bacon are especially good), what cheese suits my fancy, what might be available from my garden and what is in my refrigerator at the time. It’s a remarkably forgiving recipe.

Here is the most recent iteration. Serve with a hearty salad and you have a satisfying dinner.

### Torta Rustica

Serves 4-6

16 baguette slices about ¼-inch thick,  
cut on the diagonal

Butter

Olive oil

6-8 ounces Swiss chard, including stems,  
chopped

1 medium yam cut into ½-inch pieces

1-2 potatoes (white, red or gold)  
cut into ½-inch pieces

1 bell pepper (red, yellow or orange),  
cut into ½-inch pieces

1 small onion, chopped

1 cup Swiss cheese, grated

2 cups half-and-half

5 eggs

1 teaspoon kosher salt

½ teaspoon pepper

Butter an 8- or 9-inch baking dish and line with baguette slices. A few gaps are fine, but you can fill them with small pieces of bread if desired. This recipe uses about half a baguette.

Precook the vegetables:

Chop the greens, place in a pan over medium heat and cook until wilted. Drain and set aside.

Sauté the onion and the bell pepper in olive oil or butter until soft.

Place the chopped potatoes and yams on a baking sheet in a single layer, sprinkle with olive oil and a pinch of kosher salt. Roast at 400 degrees for about 15-20 minutes, stirring at least once, until tender.

Combine the vegetables in a bowl, along with about half to two-thirds of the cheese and place in the baking dish. The mixture, about 5 cups altogether, will nearly fill the dish.

Beat together the eggs, half-and-half, salt and pepper. Pour over the filling, top with remaining cheese.

Bake for 50-60 minutes.

Allow to rest for 5-15 minutes, cut and serve.

We’d love to feature a dish from your KP kitchen that friends and family ask for. Email the details to [editor@keypennews.org](mailto:editor@keypennews.org) with your phone number; we’ll be in touch. (Don’t worry, we do most of the writing.)