



Clockwise from top left: 1. Green peas, 2. Broad beans, 3. Lettuce, 4. more lettuce, onion, panceta, 5. Green beans & artichokes.

Magdalena's menestra (braised green vegetables)

This is my wife's favorite dish, something her mother (Magdalena) made when she wanted something special. No recipe available, but my wife and her older sister had a pretty good idea of what was needed. This "revived" version involves a lengthy braise in a dutch oven, but can also be cooked the traditional way on a stove top.

Pretty much any green vegetables will work here, and the quantities don't make that much difference; pack in as much as the pot holds. What's important is the long slow braise that brings out and concentrates all those hidden flavors.

Ingredients

- 1 medium onion, roughly chopped
- 2 or 3 strips of panceta, cut in thick chunks (bacon will work as well)
- 4 artichokes, outside leaves removed, trimmed & cut in quarters (or 250 grams of frozen artichoke hearts)
- 250 grams broad beans, pods & all, washed and cut in 2" pieces
- 250 grams green beans, washed and cut in 2" pieces
- 200 grams green peas, shelled (fresh or frozen)
- 1/2 head of lettuce, washed & roughly chopped
- 1/4 cup concentrated chicken stock (or 1 bouillon cube)
- Olive oil, salt

Preparation

- Preheat oven to 160°C (325°F)
- With the burner on medium, heat 2 tablespoons of olive oil in a dutch oven, add the panceta and saute for 2 minutes
- Add the onion and saute for 2 minutes more, just to soften.
- Add in the remaining vegetables with 1/2 tsp salt plus the stock and mix well
- Cover and cook in the oven for 2 to 2 1/2 hours, checking liquid level and stirring every 1/2 hour or so. If it's drying out, add a little water.
- If there's still liquid after 2 hours, remove cover and cook a little longer until it's almost dry.
- That's it. Serve hot with a garnish of crispy bacon or croutons & grated cheese.

Note:

1. **Broad beans and their pods** are an essential flavor ingredient. Peas with their pods are a reasonable alternative, but not quite the same.
2. The original recipe uses fresh **artichokes**, but they are a pain to prepare and no matter how many leaves you strip off, unpleasant fibers remain. **Frozen artichoke hearts are probably a better option.**
3. Go easy with the **salt** to start, the vegetables reduce to about 1/3 of the original volume, concentrating the salt. You can always correct at the end with a bit of salt (or soy sauce).
4. It may seem odd to use **lettuce**, but it plays an important role: **moisture.**
5. Other vegetables to consider: leeks or swiss chard, but bitter stuff like kale, endive or brussels sprouts would be on my no-fly list.

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