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Budini di Pecorino & Oven-Roasted Rapini

Serves 6

The satiny budini from Bottega chef Michael Chiarello and chef de cuisine Nick Ritchie can be made well ahead, so it's great for entertaining. Just before serving, reheat the budini and finish the rapini and bruschetta.

Budini

Unsalted butter

3 cups crustless cubed (1-inch) Pugliese bread (about 3 ounces)

1 cup whole milk

1 cup heavy cream

1 cup grated pecorino cheese, preferably Fulvi brand

3 large egg yolks

Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

Rapini

2 bunches rapini (broccoli rabe), about 1½ pounds

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil

2 garlic cloves, minced

½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

2 teaspoons Calabrian chile paste (optional, see Note)

Sea salt, preferably gray, and freshly ground black pepper

Few drops lemon juice

Bruschetta

6 slices country-style bread, ¾-inch thick

Extra-virgin olive oil for brushing

Kosher salt and pepper to taste

For the budini: Butter six, 4- to 5-ounce ramekins and set aside, along with a roasting pan that will hold them. Preheat the

oven to 280°. Put the bread cubes in a bowl. Combine the milk and cream in a medium saucepan; bring just to a boil over medium heat. Remove from heat and whisk in the grated cheese. Pour the mixture through a coarse-mesh sieve into the bowl of bread cubes. Set aside until the cream mixture comes to room temperature, about 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, bring a kettle of water to a boil. Transfer the bread mixture to a blender, and process until very smooth. With the blender running, add the egg yolks, one at a time, blending well after each addition. Season with a pinch of freshly ground pepper.

Divide the mixture evenly between the prepared ramekins, and arrange the ramekins in the roasting pan. Place in the oven, then pour in enough very hot water to come halfway up the sides of the ramekins. Bake until the budini are set and just beginning to puff, about 30 to 35 minutes. To avoid spillage, use a turkey baster or a ladle to remove some of the hot water from the pan before taking the pan out of the oven. Carefully move ramekins to a wire rack and cool about 15 minutes. Serve or refrigerate to serve later. (If refrigerated, reheat at 300° for 10-20 minutes in a pan with boiling water coming halfway up the sides of the ramekins.)

For the rapini: Preheat the oven to 375°. Trim off the bottom 3 to 4 inches of the

rapini. Heat a large skillet over medium heat; add the oil. When the oil begins to shimmer, add garlic and sauté a few seconds, until golden. Stir in the pepper flakes and chile paste (if using), then add rapini, using tongs to run it until evenly coated. Season to taste with salt and pepper.

Transfer to a rimmed baking sheet, and roast for 10 minutes, or until just cooked through and a little browned along the edges. If it becomes dry, add a splash of water. Remove from the oven and set aside. Serve at room temperature, or reheat before serving. Squeeze on a few drops of lemon juice just before serving.

For the bruschetta: On a grill or under your broiler, toast the bread slices on both sides. Brush with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper.

To serve: Carefully run a knife around the edge of each ramekin to loosen the still-warm budini. Place a plate over the top and turn over swiftly. Gently shake the ramekin if the budino doesn't easily slide out. Serve with the bruschetta and rapini on the side.

Note: Calabrian chile paste can be found at The Pasta Shop in Oakland and Berkeley, and Molinari in San Francisco.

Per serving: 482 calories, 17 g protein, 29 g carbohydrate, 34 g fat (16 g saturated), 179 mg cholesterol, 607 mg sodium, 1 g fiber.

Wine pairing: Chef-owner Michael Chiarello recommends serving a crisp, Italian white like Vermentino. Or try a moderate Pinot like the 2007 Peregrine Pinot Noir (\$34) from New Zealand's Central Otago region.

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The secrets

Pecorino cheese: The sharp, salty tang of this cheese is mellowed, but not

Bread cubes: The bread serves as a natural thickener that gives the baked custard a smooth, fool-

Egg yolks: The three yolks add an additional layer of richness.