Prep Time: 20 minutes
Cook Time: 45 minutes
Intensity Level: Low to Medium (Requires basic knife skills and occasional stirring)

There is nothing quite as comforting as a pot of tomato sauce simmering on the stove. While a classic marinara is lovely, this “Loaded Veggie” version is a game-changer. It is designed to be hearty, chunky, and incredibly nutrient-dense. By finely dicing a medley of vegetables like carrots, zucchini, and mushrooms, we create a sauce that is rich in flavor and texture, without relying solely on meat or excess oil.

This sauce is the ultimate utility player in your kitchen. It is thick enough to stand up to rigatoni, smooth enough to toss with spaghetti, and robust enough to serve as the base for a lasagna or a bowl of shakshuka. It also freezes beautifully, making it a perfect meal-prep staple for busy weeks.

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Ingredients

The Base:

- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- 1 large yellow onion, finely diced

- 1 large carrot, peeled and finely diced (or grated for a smoother texture)
- 1 red bell pepper, stemmed, seeded, and finely diced
- 8 oz (225g) cremini or button mushrooms, finely chopped
- 1 medium zucchini, finely diced

The Aromatics:

- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried basil
- ½ teaspoon fennel seeds (optional, but recommended for a “sausage-like” depth)
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes (adjust to taste)

The Tomatoes & Finish:

- 2 tablespoons tomato paste

- 2 cans (28 oz / 800g each) crushed tomatoes (San Marzano preferred)
- 1 cup vegetable broth (or water)
- 1 teaspoon salt (plus more to taste)
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
- ½ cup fresh basil leaves, roughly chopped
- Freshly grated Parmesan cheese (for serving)

Instructions

Phase 1: The Sauté (Intensity: Low | Time: 10 Minutes)
Heat the olive oil in a large Dutch oven or heavy-bottomed pot over medium heat. Once the oil is shimmering, add the diced onion and carrot. Sauté for 5 minutes until the onion becomes translucent and the carrots begin to soften. Add the bell pepper, mushrooms, and zucchini. Cook for another 5 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the mushrooms have released their liquid and the vegetables are softened. *Tip: Do not rush this step; allowing the vegetables to sweat builds the foundational sweetness of the sauce.*

Phase 2: Blooming the Aromatics (Intensity: Medium | Time: 2 Minutes)

Reduce the heat to medium-low. Add the minced garlic, oregano, basil, fennel seeds, and red pepper flakes to the pot. Stir constantly for 1 to 2 minutes. You want to smell the garlic and spices blooming in the oil, but be careful not to let the garlic brown, as it will turn bitter.

Phase 3: Building the Sauce (Intensity: Low | Time: 5 Minutes)
Push the vegetables to the side of the pot and add the tomato paste to the center. Fry the paste for about 1 minute, stirring it into the oil to caramelize it slightly. Then, stir the paste into the vegetables. Pour in the crushed tomatoes and vegetable broth. Add the salt and pepper. Bring the mixture to a gentle simmer.

Phase 4: The Slow Simmer (Intensity: Low | Time: 25–30 Minutes)
Once the sauce is bubbling, reduce the heat to low. Cover the pot partially with a lid (leaving a gap for steam to escape). Let the sauce simmer for 25 to 30 minutes. Stir every 10 minutes to ensure nothing sticks to the bottom. As it cooks, the vegetables will become tender and the sauce will thicken significantly.

Phase 5: The Finish (Intensity: Low | Time: 2 Minutes)
Taste the sauce. If it tastes slightly acidic, add the balsamic vinegar to brighten the flavor and balance the sweetness. Stir in the fresh chopped basil. Turn off the heat and let the sauce rest for 5 minutes before serving. This allows the flavors to marry.

Serving Suggestions

- Pasta: Toss directly with your favorite pasta (rigatoni or penne work best to hold the chunky sauce).
- Polenta: Serve over creamy polenta for a gluten-free comfort meal.
- Eggs: Poach eggs directly in the simmering sauce for a quick Shakshuka.

- Protein: Spoon over grilled chicken breasts or pan-seared white fish.

Nutrition Information

Disclaimer: The following nutritional estimates are based on the recipe as written, without added pasta or cheese. Actual values may vary based on specific brands and ingredient sizes.

Serving Size: 1 cup (approx. 1/6th of recipe)
Calories: ~135 kcal
Total Fat: 5.5g

- Saturated Fat: 0.8g
  Sodium: ~480mg
  Total Carbohydrates: 19g

- Dietary Fiber: 5g

- Total Sugars: 11g (Natural sugars from tomatoes and carrots)
  Protein: 3.5g
  Vitamin A: 40% DV
  Vitamin C: 45% DV
  Iron: 10% DV