Prep Time	10 minutes
Cook Time	45–55 minutes
Total Time	55–65 minutes
Yield	6 servings (about 6 cups)
Difficulty	Easy
Cuisine	Italian-American

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Ingredients

For the sauce:

- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

- 1 lb (450 g) ground beef (80/20) or Italian sausage, casings removed (optional — omit for vegetarian)
- 1 large yellow onion, finely diced (about 1 cup)
- 4 garlic cloves, minced
- 2 cans (28 oz / 800 g each) crushed San Marzano tomatoes
- 1 can (6 oz / 170 g) tomato paste
- ½ cup dry red wine (or beef broth)
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar (optional, to balance acidity)
- 1½ teaspoons kosher salt, or to taste
- ½ teaspoon black pepper
- 1 teaspoon dried oregano
- 1 teaspoon dried basil (or ¼ cup fresh basil, added at the end)
- ½ teaspoon fennel seeds, lightly crushed (optional, for sausage-style flavor)

- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional)
- 1 bay leaf
- ¼ cup fresh parsley, chopped
- 2 tablespoons fresh basil, torn (for finishing)
- ¼ cup grated Parmesan or Pecorino Romano, for serving

Optional add-ins:

- 8 oz sliced mushrooms
- 1 diced bell pepper
- 1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar (for depth)

Equipment Needed

- Large heavy-bottomed pot or Dutch oven (5–6 quart)

- Wooden spoon or silicone spatula
- Chef’s knife and cutting board
- Can opener
- Measuring cups and spoons
- Ladle (for serving)

Instructions

Step 1: Brown the Meat (If Using) — *Time: 8–10 minutes* | *Intensity: Medium–High*

Heat the olive oil in a large heavy-bottomed pot over medium-high heat. Add the ground beef or sausage and cook for 6–8 minutes, breaking it into small crumbles with a wooden spoon, until browned and no longer pink. If using sausage, break it into bite-sized chunks. Don’t drain all the fat — a little keeps the sauce rich and flavorful. Transfer the meat to a plate with a slotted spoon, leaving about 1 tablespoon of fat in the pot. *(For vegetarian, skip this step and add 1 extra tablespoon of olive oil.)*

Step 2: Sauté the Aromatics — *Time: 5–6 minutes | Intensity: Medium*

In the same pot over medium heat, add the diced onion and cook for 4–5 minutes, stirring

occasionally, until soft and translucent. Add the minced garlic and cook for 30–45 seconds more, just until fragrant — burnt garlic turns the whole sauce bitter. If using mushrooms or bell pepper, add them now and sauté for 3–4 minutes until softened.

Step 3: Bloom the Tomato Paste — *Time: 2 minutes* | *Intensity: Medium*

Push the vegetables to the side of the pot and add the tomato paste to the center. Cook for 1–2 minutes, stirring constantly, until the paste darkens slightly and caramelizes. This step concentrates its sweetness and removes the raw, tinny flavor. Stir it into the onions and garlic.

Step 4: Deglaze with Wine — *Time: 3 minutes* | *Intensity: Medium*

Pour in the red wine and scrape up all the browned bits from the bottom of the pot with a wooden spoon — that's concentrated flavor. Simmer for 2–3 minutes until the wine reduces by about half and the sharp alcohol smell cooks off. *(For alcohol-free, use beef broth with 1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar.)*

Step 5: Add the Tomatoes and Seasonings — *Time: 3 minutes* | *Intensity: Low*

Add the crushed tomatoes, sugar (if using), salt, pepper, oregano, dried basil, fennel seeds (if using), red pepper flakes (if using), and the bay leaf. Return the browned meat to the pot. Stir everything together until well combined. Taste and adjust — the sauce should be savory, slightly sweet, and herbaceous.

Step 6: Simmer the Sauce — *Time: 30–40 minutes* | *Intensity: Low*

Bring the sauce to a gentle simmer, then reduce the heat to low. Cook uncovered for 30–40

minutes, stirring every 10 minutes to prevent sticking and scorching. The sauce will thicken, deepen in color, and develop rich, complex flavor. If it thickens too much, add a splash of water or broth. Low and slow is the secret — a rushed sauce tastes flat and acidic.

Step 7: Finish and Adjust — *Time: 3 minutes | Intensity: Low*

Remove the bay leaf. Stir in the fresh parsley, torn basil, and balsamic vinegar (if using). Taste and adjust salt, sugar, and pepper. If the sauce tastes too acidic, add another pinch of sugar; if it tastes flat, add a pinch of salt or a splash of wine. Grate in the Parmesan and stir until melted.

Step 8: Serve — *Time: 2 minutes | Intensity: Low*

Ladle over hot spaghetti, penne, or your favorite pasta. Top with extra Parmesan, fresh basil, and a drizzle of olive oil. Serve with garlic bread and a crisp green salad.

Time & Intensity Summary

Phase	Duration	Intensity
Brown meat (optional)	8–10 minutes	Medium–High
Sauté aromatics	5–6 minutes	Medium
Bloom tomato paste	2 minutes	Medium
Deglaze with wine	3 minutes	Medium
Add tomatoes & seasonings	3 minutes	Low
Simmer sauce	30–40 minutes	Low
Finish & adjust	3 minutes	Low
Serve	2 minutes	Low
Total	~55–65 minutes	Easy

Nutrition Information (Per Serving — 1 cup, with ground beef)

Nutrient	Amount
Calories	285 kcal
Total Fat	17 g
Saturated Fat	6 g
Cholesterol	55 mg
Sodium	720 mg
Total Carbohydrates	14 g
Dietary Fiber	4 g
Total Sugars	9 g
Protein	18 g
Calcium	8% DV
Iron	15% DV
Vitamin C	25% DV