



## *All About* PASTA

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# PASTA

## A Brief History of Pasta

Where you place the origins of pasta depends a great deal on how you define it. There is evidence that the ancient Etruscans prepared a wheat and egg paste, but it was baked not boiled. Does that count? There are artifacts from a period 3,000 years ago that look remarkably like pasta dies and extruders. But naturally the material they worked on is not preserved.

Certainly the ancient Greeks had some form of flattened dough that resembles lasagna. The knowledge to mix wheat and egg with water was known long before. But the result was roasted on hot stones. Whether this should be called 'baking' is a matter of semantics. The Romans quickly followed suit in the 1st century AD with a layered dish comprised of 'lagana' and meat or fish.

By the 5th century AD, cooking noodles was commonplace, as is known by references from the Talmud. This record of pasta-like preparation in Arab lands provides a basis for the claim that the practice spread to Italy from Arabia. With the incursion of Arabs into Sicily, they would undoubtedly have brought a food that could travel well. A flour-based product in the shape of strings was produced in Palermo at the time that might fit the bill.

While for a time it was thought that Marco Polo returned from China in 1295 with pasta, there are Italian recipe books from twenty years earlier containing references to pasta dishes. However, it is certain that he did encounter pasta on his travels. Since China is an ancient civilization, with a complex culture dating back 5,000 years, it's likely that pasta existed in China very early.

Nevertheless, pasta did become more popular during the 14th century and spread to the 'New World' as Italian and Spanish explorers sailed the seas to new lands. In the 'Old World' it continued to spread, with tubes of pasta in use at 15th century Italian monasteries. By the 17th century, it was a common food throughout the region.

In the New World, pasta grew in popularity through the 18th century. By its end, it graced the table of Thomas Jefferson and commoner alike. When the American Ambassador returned from France in 1789 he brought with him a macaroni maker that he used to delight friends.

Macaroni and cheese was enjoyed by many during the period of the Civil war in the mid-19th century (1859-1864), owing to its ease of storage and cooking, along with the satisfying taste.

But it was with the large Italian immigration around the turn of the century that pasta really took off in America. Spaghetti, lasagna and a great many other forms became widespread as a result. With the ubiquitous consumption of pre-made dried macaroni and cheese during WWII, the dish became a staple of the American diet for decades after.

But whatever its true origins, and subsequent history, one thing is sure. Pasta is here to stay.

## An Ancient Food, Still Modern

One of the most remarkable things about pasta isn't just how long it's been around. It's that, plus the fact that it has changed so little over the hundreds, or perhaps thousands of years that it has been made and consumed. While the ancient Greeks and Romans undoubtedly made and prepared pasta differently than is done now, dishes made during the Renaissance would be easily recognizable today.

Any food which can satisfy and remain relatively unchanged for 500 years surely has some remarkable properties. Made from simple ingredients - wheat and eggs - and processed in a simple way - just basic mixing - are just two reasons, but fundamental ones. Healthy, appetizing and easy to prepare by simple boiling or baking are other attributes that are equally important.

The many shapes and sizes of pasta aren't just a modern marketing gimmick, either. They serve a good purpose. Providing lots of surface area on this starchy food allows sauces to cling well. Coming in a variety of useful shapes means the ability to stuff, layer or otherwise offer versatility in recipe invention.

Pasta, almost alone among foods, goes well with a huge variety of other ingredients. Everything from bacon and steak to asparagus and peas can be part of a great pasta recipe. The range of compatible sauces, from simple marinara to a fine clam, is unequaled in other foods. And, how many foods can serve superlatively in such a wide assortment of recipes both cold and hot?

Pasta is a very healthy food, too. Despite its reputation, pasta is a low-calorie, heart-beneficial dish. With only 200 calories per cup (two servings) and a gram of fat, it is perfect even for those on a strict diet.

As a complex carbohydrate, it is digested slowly, leading to an even and gradual production of blood sugar. As a food high in fiber, there is evidence that it is helpful in forestalling intestinal and other cancers. Often fortified with folates and naturally packed with essential minerals, it is heart-healthy, as well.

It's easy to prepare, easy to cook and makes for a great presentation on the table. There's a good reason so many Italian restaurants continue to do good business. But it's equally welcomed at home where it can inexpensively feed a family of five or a party of fifty.

But one thing about pasta has changed dramatically over the centuries. There are today more helpful tools and machines to create and prepare pasta than ever before. The variety and utility of rollers, cutters, bowls and other tools is greater than ever. Materials science and ergonomic designs have made these things stronger, healthier and less expensive. Pasta making machines are cheaper, more reliable and come with a larger assortment of useful attachments than they did even as recently as twenty years ago.

So when you think of pasta, you don't need to think of a 'food you really shouldn't eat' or one that is just mundane. It's healthy, can be prepared in a dazzling array of tasty dishes, and is just plain great.

## The Basics of A Great Food

There's a good reason pasta is high on nearly everyone's list of favorites. Pasta is versatile, healthy, tasty and easy to work with. It provides the base for hundreds of delicious recipes, whether drowned in sauce or chopped up plain in a salad, or even as an ingredient in a stir-fry.

You can even easily make your own pasta from a simple recipe, aided by a pasta maker. Simple mixtures with a bit of kneading, followed by stretching, slicing and coloring (or not) provide for a dozen different types.

All pasta is made from a simple flour and egg mixture, blended together and sliced in different ways. Thin and long or short and tubed, it offers structural variety and a taste that is delightful even plain with just a sprinkle of olive oil.

Since it's made from flour and egg, pasta makes for the perfect ingredient for many healthy recipes. Whether combined with a slab of fish that's chock full of omega-3 fatty acids, or just served plain with a fine glass of red wine, this simple food can be great for your heart.

Because of the gluten and starch that threads throughout pasta, along with its geometry and combination of stiffness and flexibility, this versatile food makes for a great base. Sauces cling to the starch, the geometry allows for creative stuffing and the flexibility makes possible a wide variety of attractive serving options.

Pasta has an ancient and honorable history. While stories of being introduced to the West by Marco Polo are mythical, it nevertheless has graced kitchens for centuries. Ancient Chinese certainly had a hundred uses for this flexible food. The Etruscans, progenitors to the modern Italians, were no stranger to the delights of pasta.

Pasta can serve as a great comfort food, without being high in fat. It can be used in the most sophisticated dishes that justify high prices at elegant 4-star restaurants. Pasta is found in a hundred forms from all around the world.

Everything from simple alphabet soup or chop suey to a more complex Tortelli di Zucca can be found along one's travels. The latter is common in Mantova at the base of the Apennines and a trip to Italy would not be complete without trying some. But even a simple macaroni and cheese at home can be plenty satisfying on a cold evening.

For such a simple to make food, pasta has an amazing variety of uses in cooking. At the same time, it tastes great and satisfies. How many foods can say that?

## Is Pasta a Healthy Food?

Pasta, like many foods high in carbohydrates, often gets a bad reputation. But a little basic nutrition knowledge can dispel that right away.

Carbohydrates, though they are sometimes made out to be villains, are actually similar to natural sugars. When broken down they provide a major source of glucose, which is the body's 'energy factory'. Glucose is in turn broken down in a process called the tricarboxylic acid cycle.

Despite the complicated name, the idea is really very simple: break down sugar and release energy. That energy is used to repair cell damage, build muscles and for all the other chemical and physical actions the body takes to maintain itself. Without energy, nothing is possible.

Without sugar, the body feeds on stored fat in a less efficient process to provide that needed energy. If you're trying to lose weight and body fat, that's not bad. But it can only go so far. Eventually, you need to replenish your stores of energy. Carbohydrates are the way to do that.

A number called GI (Glycemic Index) measures how quickly the body's blood sugar level rises after the ingestion of a food. Gradual rises are better. Pasta has a GI of 41, which is similar to pears and lower than many breads.

Pasta is healthy in other ways, as well.

Most pasta today is made from durum wheat. The semolina flour obtained from it is a good source of nutrition. It has plenty of B vitamins and folic acid, iron and niacin also known as vitamin B3. It's low in sodium and, despite some myths generated years ago, does not contain high cholesterol.

Pasta is made with eggs. It was once thought that eggs were nutritionally bad, that they were high in cholesterol. Subsequent research showed later just how healthy eggs really are, in moderation.

As many people know, pasta forms a major component of the diet of many Mediterranean cultures, such as Italy. There is ample evidence to suggest that the diet of such cultures is very healthy, as judged from the relatively low incidence of cancer and heart disease. There are many factors, of course. But pasta is a big contributor to that result.

Pasta itself is not fattening. A cup (two servings) of cooked pasta contains about 200 calories and one gram of fat. Provided sauces, meats and other ingredients in a pasta dish are controlled, there is nothing inherently high-calorie about a pasta-based meal. In particular, a low-carbohydrate diet doesn't necessarily lead to weight loss. What counts are the total calories, and pasta is on the low end of the scale.

Like other whole grain foods, there is also considerable evidence that these products high in insoluble fiber can help reduce the risk of certain types of cancers. While research is ongoing in the field, many studies show a reduction in colon, breast and other cancers, in part as a result of a high-fiber diet.

So go easy on the fattening meats and sauces and enjoy pasta regularly. It's a healthy food.

## Pasta and the Heart Healthy Diet

Like everything in nutrition, the heart health impact of pasta is an area of active research. Though there are dissenters, which is good since that's where new ideas come from, most experts agree that pasta is a heart-healthy food.

Made from durum wheat, pasta is a whole grain food. Whole grains are 'whole' because their bran and germ are still intact. Many types of common wheat processing remove that by milling. But since whole grains retain theirs, they are very good sources of fiber. And fiber is an important part of a heart-healthy diet.

Pasta is also typically enriched with folates, a synthetic form of B vitamins that are another component in a heart-healthy diet. Iron, needed to form red blood cells, niacin (vitamin B3), thiamine (vitamin B1), riboflavin (vitamin B2) and other compounds are also part of a whole grain. Those nutrients, along with vitamin E, phosphorus, magnesium and other minerals found in pasta, help regulate blood pressure. That's a major aspect of heart health, since the heart and blood vessels are, obviously, part of a connected system.

Apart from its inherently healthy attributes, pasta helps promote heart health in another way: by forming the base of many heart-healthy recipes. Because of its good taste, physical shape and sturdiness, and the ability to be easily cooked, pasta makes for the centerpiece of many fine preparations.

Provided certain meats and sauce ingredients are used in proper ways and proportions, pasta dishes can readily make for a very heart-healthy meal. Pasta itself is low in calories, cholesterol and fat. A cup (two servings) of cooked spaghetti contains about 200 calories and only a gram of fat.

Pasta primavera, for example, is a great dish for those interested in a recipe that helps maintain heart health while being very tasty. Mix 250g of pasta with about a cup each of snow peas, corn, baby carrots and asparagus. Parboil the asparagus and peas for a few minutes. Parboil the carrots and corn until tender.

Boil the pasta to al dente (firm, not too soft nor undercooked), then drain. Add the other ingredients, then blend with 2/3 cup of low-fat cottage cheese and 2/3 cup of low-fat yogurt. Heat then add a little lemon juice and sprinkle with black pepper.

Tasty, and it's made from ingredients likely to be found on the Mayo Clinic site or other professional nutrition science sites. The result contains less than half a gram of saturated fat and 3 mg of cholesterol, while providing 6g of fiber per serving.

Provided you make judicious use of sauces, meats and other ingredients that often make their way into pasta recipes, you can enjoy pasta frequently and maintain a heart-healthy diet. Those in the Mediterranean do and have among the lowest incidences of heart disease of any culture.

## The Various Types of Long Pasta

There are more types of pasta than there are cell phone ringtones. Ok, maybe not quite that many. But there are a lot, anyway. Fortunately for the newcomer to the world of pasta, they break down along two broad categories: long and short. Or, more accurately, pasta shapes come mostly in two types: thin, long and solid, or short, tubed and curled.

Spaghetti is the most well-known, of course, though why that should be is shrouded in the mists of history.

Spaghetti, as nearly everyone knows, is the very prototype of long pasta. About a millimeter or two in diameter, typically about 10 inches long, and perfect for, well, spaghetti. Actually quite a healthy food, it does tempt nearly everyone to overindulge in a fine tomato sauce.

Fusilli ('twisted spaghetti') is a nice, dare we say it, twist on plain spaghetti. This curled, yet still long, form of pasta makes for a wonderful variation. It still goes perfectly with a tomato sauce, but cream sauces don't complain when mixed with it and neither will you.

Angel Hair or capellini (Italian for 'fine hairs') is very similar to spaghetti, but thinner and more delicate as the name suggests. Very fine for lighter sauces, it can also be used as an additive for soups or broken up and sprinkled on a salad.

Still thinner, are vermicelli ('little worms'). Don't let the name put you off. This delectable form of pasta is the perfect ingredient for a lower calorie 'spaghetti'. It tends to get smothered if the tomato sauce is too heavy, but it works quite well plain or with a nice cream sauce.

Fettuccine ('small ribbons') are aptly named, since they are shaped like longish, but fairly narrow ribbons. The perfect pasta under a fine cream sauce, they can also be used in cheese dishes and alongside a fine bit of meat. Alfredo is only one of the many ways to make use of this fine pasta.

Linguine ('little tongues') are about midway between a spaghetti and fettuccine. Perfect with just about any sauce, they are also delicious plain on a salad with just a bit of oil. Many stir-fry dishes use linguine. After all, not all pasta dishes are Italian.

And, then, ahhh, there's Lasagna. For those who want a larger, wider, heavier strip of pasta they can do no better. Used for, like the name says, lasagna it can also make a great base for other types of casserole. But don't short change it. It does well with chopped vegetables and a wide variety of other combinations.

Any form of long pasta does well when it's kept whole. After all, if it isn't at least a few inches long, how can you wrap it around the fork?



## The Various Types of Short Pasta

There are more types of pasta than there are bathing suit designs. Ok, maybe not quite that many. But there are a lot, anyway. Fortunately for those new to the world of pasta, they break down along two broad categories: long and short (with a few crossovers). Or, more accurately, pasta shapes come chiefly in two types: thin, long and solid, or short, tubed and curled.

The short pastas tend to exhibit a much greater variety and they find themselves in dozens of delightful dishes. Short pasta forms the base for everything from ordinary macaroni and cheese to the most delicious ravioli, to those much more exotic recipes as well.

Of course, that plain macaroni ('dumpling') should not be scoffed at. It has gotten many person with little time on his or her hands through a lonely night. Baked or used in soups, or even just boiled and smothered in cheese, it's wonderful.

Cannelloni also known as manicotti ('small muffs') are a big jump up. Used to house meat and cheese, or stuffed with vegetables, they're more than just construction material. This pasta is recipe friendly. Cover with a fine tomato sauce and you've got a meal.

But there are several other pasta shapes that make for great stuffers. Medium shells like conchiglie may be a bit small and do better in soup. But jumbo shells are perfect for mixtures of shrimp or taco meat and seasoning, or a variety of other dishes.

Penne ('quills') or mostaccioli ('small mustaches') get lumped together because they're both small tubes. But they can make for great individual choices when used in a salad, in a baked casserole or just boiled and sprinkled with a little oil and seasoning.

Then there are types that the kids often have a lot of fun with. These can range from alphabet soup additions to little wagon wheels called ruote ('wheels'). Add them to soup or top with a nice cheese sauce and you'll have some budding gourmets on your hands.

Teach the children the next step and try some ditalini ('little thimbles'). They make for a great base in stir-fry dishes, creative salads and for little surprises when stuffed. Then let the young ones have fun with farfalle ('butterflies'). Great with chunky sauces.

Step up to ziti ('bridegrooms'), these cooperative little bits of pasta are great for meat dishes. They'll also make for a fine base in stir-fry dishes or all by themselves topped with a little dry cheese.

Don't forget about the venerable rigatoni ('large grooved'). With lots of surface area, where the starch causes the sauce to cling, they'll make your fine cream or tomato a stand out. Much smaller, but with even more surface area are the radiatore ('radiators'). Ruffled and ridged, they can make a casserole that just drips with sauce.

Whatever dish you plan there's a pasta shape that will make for a great taste and a sensory delight.

## How to Make Your Own Homemade Pasta

After you've experimented a while with pastas from various sources, you'll want to venture out on your own. Making your own homemade pasta offers the same delight as grinding your own coffee, growing your own vegetables and other do-it-yourself food and drink projects. You get the same advantages as those others, as well: a truly fresh, delicious product.

Making your own pasta is simplicity itself, though there's a bit of effort involved. You'll need:

1 lb of fine white flour. You can use Grade 00 Italian, or American-style breadmaking flour. The latter has a bit more gluten, making for a firmer pasta.

4 eggs. For a more 'egg noodle' color and flavor, drain off some of the whites and add more yolks.

That's it, apart from a little bit of salt and possibly some water.

Pour the flour into a large bowl and make a round valley in the center to hold the eggs. Beat the eggs just slightly in another bowl and pour into the 'valley of flour'. Add a pinch of salt and stir gently until the flour is wetted with the egg.

If the mixture is still dry pour some water into your palm, then release and fling the remaining drops into the bowl. Don't overdo it. The idea is just to keep the flour from being powdery, not to use water as an ingredient.

Now for the part that takes a bit of effort: kneading. To avoid fatigue, use the heel of your hand more than the fingers. Knead the dough for 10-15 minutes. That allows the gluten in the flour to combine, making for a firm, but elastic pasta dough. Let the dough rest, covered with a moist towel, for about 20 minutes.

Now for the shaping steps.

Sprinkle a bit of flour on a large work surface. A marble countertop is perfect, but wood or formica will do. It needs to be at least one foot by one foot and very flat for best results.

Roll the pasta dough out with a wooden roller that had a few sprinkles of flour sprinkled over its surface. Or, you can use a round empty wine bottle. Take care not to press hard enough to break the bottle, of course.

Start from the middle and work your way out until you have a large, thin slab (about the thickness of a dime). Flip and flour lightly to keep it from sticking, but go easy in order to avoid drying out the pasta too much.

Now you can cut and shape to preference.

You can use a pasta machine to slice it into fettuccine or lasagna or any of a dozen other shapes. Or you can slice it into smaller shapes for ravioli or tortellini.

Remember that when boiling fresh pasta you should shorten the cooking length. Store-bought pasta contains durum wheat, which takes longer to cook. Fresh, homemade pasta has less gluten, making for a quicker meal. Three to five minutes should do it.

For variety, pasta can be colored or flavored. Green is among the most common choices. Just add to the mix a few ounces of raw spinach that has been heated a few minutes. For red, use finely diced carrots instead with a tablespoon of tomato paste.

## Homemade Pasta Making Machines

There is a fascinating variety of pasta making machines on the market, but they all perform the same basic task. But then, all cars perform the same basic task. Yet some get you there in style, while others merely take you from place to place.

Once you have a mound of pasta dough, to turn it into real pasta it needs to be flattened, shaped and cut. Considering the enormous variety of pasta shapes and styles, that task is a good deal more demanding than it sounds.

One day you'll need a lasagna for, well, lasagna. Another day it will be spaghetti for a spaghetti dish. But on those special occasions you'll want ditalini or farfalle, ziti or mostaccioli. A good pasta maker will do them all.

Since you want to be able to use your machine for any dish you might consider now or in the future, look for one that is flexible enough to do the job. Most will do a few basic shapes, extruding vermicelli or slicing fettuccine. But look for one that can accept extra attachments to churn out those little thimbles or butterflies, bridegrooms or small mustaches as well.

To achieve that, it will need the standard rollers and cutters for making flattened and sliced strips. But it will also need to accommodate special dies and circular slicers to curl, shape, extrude tubes and more.

Having one made of stainless steel is a must, so it will last and look good. But it's equally important that it's easy to disassemble and re-assemble for easy cleaning and good health. Bacteria in the air readily attach themselves to food left on metal surfaces. Look at the cutting mechanism on your electric can opener sometime... Check to ensure you can take apart and put together yours without endangering your hands.

Prices range from about \$20 to over \$100 and in the case of pasta makers you usually get what you pay for. The more expensive units offer electric motors, more ways to roll and slice and ease-of-use features. But even a manual one with a single 6-inch wide roller will be a big step up if you've been flattening and cutting the dough by hand.

In general, the more types of pasta it will shape and cut the better. Many will cut only spaghetti or tagliatelle. But others will make squares for ravioli, while still being able to make capellini, linguini, trenette, fettuccine and others.

Top of the line models, which are often not much more money, incorporate bowls, stirring rods, kneaders and other features to allow making the dough as well. That puts the whole operation together in one unit. Not bad!

It isn't mandatory to get one that is made in Italy, but many of the best units are manufactured there. They have generations of experience that are incorporated into the designs.

## Pasta Preparation Tools

Those with an interest in making pasta dishes - and that's everyone, yes? - are fortunate to be living in this day and age. Ancient wisdom and modern technology have combined to produce an array of tools that can aid in the pursuit of pasta perfection.

### Board

If you make your own pasta, and it's a simple exercise you should try at least once, you'll need a good pastry board. A large wooden slicing board will do in a pinch. But then you have to fuss with flour, which dries out the pasta, then sprinkle water. It can be a pain. Though more expensive, investigate in a thin marble slab. Marble slabs provide an outstanding working surface.

Even if you don't make your own pasta, you'll find these sturdy, easy to clean surfaces a delight to work with. You don't have to worry about harming them, but take precautions against dulling your knives. They clean up easily and don't collect bacteria readily.

### Rolling Pin

The traditional rolling pin may look like an antique from your Grandmother's day. But one of the signs that this invention was a work of genius is how practical this basic design remains. Wood is common and actually healthier than you might suspect. Wood tends to oppose the growth of bacteria in a way that most plastics do not. Trees have to fight disease, too, after all.

Some like to substitute a wine bottle, but that may more an excuse to empty it than a search for a practical tool. If you go that route, be sure the glass is strong enough to stand up to forceful use. Shattered shards in pasta is dangerous for your hands and wasteful of good pasta. We assume you've already solved the potential problem of wasting the wine...

### Scraper

Next, you'll need a scraper - a thin metal blade with a wooden or plastic handle with which you scrape up dough. Stainless steel is great, but there are titanium alloys and a wide variety of other choices today. Plastic ones are ok, but they just don't compare to the metal type.

## **Pasta Wheels and Rollers**

This clever device has a cutting wheel at one end that is used to cut pasta into different shapes. Get one that allows for variety. Sometimes you want plain, simple strips. Other times you want a fluted edge, or to be able to curl the pasta into fancy shapes.

A variation is a pasta roller, used to make squares, circles and strands. Sometimes you'll find a device that is a combination or that is formed by attachments onto a pasta making machine. Isn't variety great?!

## **Bowls**

The variety of bowls available to work with pasta could fill a book. And you'll need at least a few pages worth. Small, medium and large mixing bowls all serve different purposes. A huge bowl is inefficient for making sauce, unless you happen to be cooking for fifty. Too small a bowl will make tossing a pasta salad an absurdly difficult chore, but they're great for small sauce experiments.

Ceramic is the champ. Plastic will sometimes serve, especially if it's one of the newer space-age types. But ceramic is strong and has great heating properties. Glass has its uses, but get Pyrex or something similar. An ordinary glass bowl is too easily shattered to be useful for anything but serving.

## **Mortar and Pestle**

Don't forget that old-fashioned bowl and crusher familiar to your local pharmacist. In use for thousands of years, this simple device is still useful for a variety of applications. Great for crushing peppers, nuts and herbs to add to the recipe.

And these are just some of the basics. Oh, you'll have great fun collecting all the useful tools that populate a working kitchen.

## **Pasta Preparation Tips from the Pros**

There are so many different possible pasta recipes it might seem impossible to provide general guidelines. But all good pasta recipes have a few things in common.

The most obvious is to start with fresh pasta.

That could be homemade, certainly. Making your own pasta at home is easy and inexpensive. After a little practice, the results are often as good as anything you can get at the store, even in the 'upscale' or specialty section. But there are also many good pastas on the market and modern technology has radically improved the way food is kept fresh.

Pick a pasta that suits your needs.

That sounds obvious, and it should be. But if you need a large ribbon of lasagna, don't just do with a narrower fettuccine. If you need a jumbo shell to house a stuffing, don't settle for medium conchiglie. Manicotti is perfect for a lot of those stuffed vegetable dishes where a large penne won't do.

Apart from geometry, you have to consider what kind of pasta will be best from another perspective. All pasta is made from wheat and eggs, but not all wheat types nor eggs are the same.

Durum wheat is the most common. But your recipe may call for a more specialized pasta. You may need a pasta made strictly from organic eggs, for a richer yolk. Sometimes, that requires making your own pasta at home.

Some pastas have a better ability to retain starch that allows good clinging by sauce. That's a combination of both geometry, ingredients in the pasta and manner of cooking. You need to consider all three factors to get the best effect.

Be careful about cooking time.

In years past it was common to boil the heck out of pasta until it was just a bunch of, shall we say, limp noodles. While you want to avoid leaving the interior crunchy, it's also true that overcooked pasta is bland and less effective.

Cooking to an 'al dente' level, in which the pasta is firm, yet neither undercooked nor soft, is generally preferred. That brings out the pasta taste, at the same time leaving enough physical sturdiness to do the job of holding meats. It also leaves enough starch intact to let the sauce cling well.

How long is 'long enough' varies enormously from recipe to recipe. Thick spaghetti may take as long as six to eight minutes, while vermicelli will often be overdone at just four. Just be sure to keep enough water in the pot to allow for ample room for the pasta to move around. You want even heating and no sticking together. Adding oil to prevent the latter may not fit with your recipe and can cause starches to be less effective.

Timing is everything.

Apart from total cooking time, the moment at which the dish is finalized and served affects the final result. Alla Carbonara requires careful timing to get the eggs cooked just right by the still-hot pasta. Some cold pasta dishes can wilt if they sit in the refrigerator too long. Plan out ahead what needs to be done when before you crack an egg or turn on the oven.

Great pasta dishes, like any fine art, are not created by accident. But with a little research and forethought you can be the equal of many professional chef.

## Pasta Cooking Tips from the Pros

Nothing should be simpler than cooking pasta. After all, it's just a matter of heating some water to a boil and tossing a wheat and egg-based product into a pot for a few minutes, right? But within this seemingly simple operation lies many potential pitfalls.

To avoid them, though, requires nothing more than a little thought and planning followed by some careful execution.

Start fresh.

That much should be obvious. Fresh food tastes better, provides better nutrition and makes for a nicer presentation. But how do you tell when pasta is no longer fresh, since it doesn't show mold readily nor wilt? The date on the package is a clue. Tasting a sample of it raw is another route. The surest method is to make it yourself, which isn't difficult.

Give it room.

Providing plenty of water for the pasta to move around in a pot is a good idea. That way it receives even heating, doesn't stick together and retains plenty of the starch that helps sauces stick.

Some will 'cheat' and break spaghetti in half. But that makes rolling it up on the fork more difficult. Alternatively, rather than having half of it stick out of the water for two minutes, where it doesn't heat at the same time as the rest, just get a bigger pan.

Don't go halfway...

To save a few minutes, you could always parboil the pasta. This, not surprisingly, is a matter of controversy among chefs. Parboiling is partial cooking by boiling for a brief period. Then, when the moment you need to add the pasta arrives, it can be cooked the rest of the way in a shorter time. Professional restaurants do this in order to serve a plate of spaghetti (that would normally take six to eight minutes just to cook) in two minutes.

But surely you can spare an extra few minutes to avoid the downside of parboiling. It pre-softens the glutens, then sits while they relax. More boiling usually turns the pasta to mush. It's very tricky to get it just right. If you don't need to serve twenty people in a hurry, there's usually no need for parboiling.

...unless you must.

If you must, add a pound of pasta to a pot of boiling water and return to a boil. Then cook for two minutes exactly, drain and rinse with icy water. Add a little olive oil to a container, add the spaghetti and stir, then refrigerate until you're ready for the final boil later.

When you're ready, take the softened pasta and cook it in boiling water for one to two minutes, then drain in a colander. If it's done just right, the pasta will be tasty and ready for sauce.

## Experiment

The best tip for aspiring cooks, though, is a surprisingly simple one: experiment. Professional cooks do this all the time. Sometimes their experiments are tried on customers, sometimes they're reserved for friends or just themselves. But no one improves without practice. Every artist has to practice his or her craft to test new ideas.

## Pasta Serving Tips from the Pros

If you pay careful attention when you enjoy an evening at a fine restaurant, you'll discover there is more to the meal than simply a well-made dish. Presentation counts for a lot.

Yes, you can see the fine table cloth and the waiters are properly attentive while not pestering you. But focus for a moment on the pasta dishes themselves. They too are equally well thought out to provide a superior dining experience.

For example, take something as simple as a plate of spaghetti. Sure, you can just plop a bunch of long, thin, boiled pasta onto a flat piece of ceramic. It's possible to just dollop out some red goop, then chow down. But it isn't pretentious to give a little more care to presenting even such a simple dish.

A more bowl-like plate makes for a nice table setting, while at the same time offering a bit more functional eating. It's much easier to wind a fork around those long strands when you're not wrestling to keep them on the plate. In the other direction, having them in a plate rather than a bowl makes the dish look like a recipe, not just a quick lunch for the kids.

Notice what goes on top of the dish. Is it just lathered with sauce? Not usually. Even the simple, traditional parsley sprig gives some elegance to the meal. The sauce is often sprinkled with basil, delicately festooned with Parmesan or decorated with a freshly ground black or white pepper. True, these are flavor enhancers. But don't they also add to a look that makes the difference between boring and boffo?

Observe, too, what goes around the dish not just in it or on top of it. Even the lowly breadstick adds a touch of design while giving another taste sensation that enhances the pasta.

Pairing with the proper wine is a must. Though some in the past may have gone overboard on strictness about having just THIS wine go with only THAT dish, giving some thought to the matter is beneficial. There's a reason a traditional red goes well with a heavy ragu, but a Gewürztraminer would not. Conversely, you could serve a heavy Spanish port with that delicate clam-sauce covered linguine. But why fight against nature?

Lastly, don't forget about ambiance. Scented candles can interfere with the wonderful odor of that well-prepared dish. But there's a reason that candlelight often helps set the proper mood. Lowering the light stimulation allows for increased concentration on the odor of the pasta dish.



Eating a fine meal is a visual and odor experience as well as one of taste. Paying attention to all the elements will maximize the enjoyment for both diners and the chef who gets praised for them.

## Sauces Make the Dish

Plain pasta is healthy and delicious. But the overwhelming majority of dishes are going to involve combining it with some kind of sauce. Fortunately, there are many delicious recipes to choose from, covering every kind of pasta shape and flavor.

### Heavy

A traditional ragu may be too much trouble. So go for something a little bit different and try a Sugo di Carne. You'll need:

1/2 lb ground beef  
2 1/2 cups pureed tomatoes  
1/2 cup dry white wine, such as Chardonnay or Chenin Blanc

and

3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
2 tablespoons heavy cream  
3 tablespoons butter

and

1 carrot  
1/2 stick celery  
1 garlic clove

Heat up a sauce pan and while you're waiting, dice the celery and carrot, and chop up the garlic clove. Put tomatoes, wine and cream in a saucepan and simmer for an hour. Put the olive oil and butter in the saucepan and heat on medium, then add carrot, celery and garlic, then add the ground beef. A pinch of nutmeg and you're ready to go.

### Light

Planning a dish that's lighter and whiter? Try this delicious crabmeat pasta sauce. You'll need:

1 lb crabmeat  
2 cups water  
3 tablespoons olive oil  
5 cloves of garlic

2 tablespoons parsley flakes  
1 hot red pepper

Add the crabmeat, oil and garlic to a 3-quart pot and brown the meat to a golden color. Then add the other ingredients (all but the pepper) and simmer for about half an hour. Then crush the red pepper and add to the final mixture.

### **Lighter Still**

A light white clam sauce is perfect for those low-cal meals served with a dry Riesling. You'll need:

1 1/2 cups chopped clams  
1 cup undiluted evaporated skim milk  
1 tablespoon olive oil  
2 cloves of garlic  
1/8 teaspoon ground white pepper  
2 teaspoons cornstarch  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil

In a skillet, heat the oil and add the cloves of garlic, finely chopped. Grill for a few minutes, then add 1/2 cup of evaporated milk and some of the clam juice from the can of clams. Cook over medium heat for about five minutes, stirring occasionally.

Mix the other 1/2 cup of evaporated milk into a bowl with the cornstarch, then pour over the sauce in the skillet and stir until thickened. Add the clams and heat for a few more minutes, then toss in some basil. Top with white pepper.

Whether you're planning a full-bodied dinner or just a light lunch, these sauces will delight and amaze your diners. Add an appropriate wine and the perfect bread or vegetable and you have the makings of a fine meal.

### **Fettuccine, In The Manner of Alfredo**

Fettuccine all'Alfredo is among the simplest, yet tastiest pasta dishes. The ingredients are easily obtained and the procedure can successfully be carried out by even the most cooking-challenged of chefs.

First invented by the Roman chef after whom the dish is named, it consists of just pasta, parmigiano and butter.

You'll need:

1 lb fettuccine  
1/2 lb parmigiano reggiano cheese  
1/2 lb butter  
and a little bit of salt.

Boil the fettuccine in salted water until al dente, this is firm, not undercooked, but not too soft. The key is to use enough water to allow the pasta to have space to move around. That allows even heating and a uniform coating of starch that's boiled out of the pasta. Drain, but don't rinse.

Warm the butter in a large bowl to a little more than room temperature, making it soft and easy to spread. This can be done any number of ways, but one easy method is to add a small amount of water to a ceramic bowl, then microwave. Take care not to overdo it, though. Microwaves can be damaged if the bowl becomes dry and there's no remaining water to heat. Then add room temperature butter to the heated bowl.

Grate the cheese into fine, small chunks. If the cheese is slightly dry, sprinkle a few drops of the water used to boil the pasta into the bowl with the cheese.

Drop the still hot pasta over the butter, add the cheese and toss vigorously. Stir until the pasta is well coated with the soft, gooey mixture. Cover and let sit for a couple of minutes.

For a delightful variation, add a teaspoon of garlic powder to the mix and stir in well. For the true iconoclast, substituting a bit of romano cheese for the parmigiano is an option. To spice it up just a bit, sprinkle a dash of cayenne pepper into the bowl and work it in.

For a thicker sauce, simmer butter, garlic powder and two cups of heavy whipping cream in a saucepan for about 20 minutes, stirring constantly. Other variations include using a bit of cream cheese to thicken the mixture still further. Blue cheese (about four ounces, crumbled) has even been used instead.

For a lighter sauce, substitute milk for the cream.

For a seasoning variation, a bit of basil can be added to the mixture.

But remember, for every deviation from the 'vanilla' recipe you're moving farther away from the true, traditional all'Alfredo style made famous by the chef to celebrities in Rome during the 1950s. But, hey, rules were meant to be broken!

## Spaghetti alla Carbonara

Though far from the most exotic pasta recipe, Spaghetti alla Carbonara (more or less literally translated as 'spaghetti as that of the charcoal maker') is a great mid-way step between that and just plain marinara. Essentially spaghetti with eggs and bacon, it is simple to make and delightful to eat.

First, lay out your ingredients. You'll need:

1 lb spaghetti  
2 eggs  
4 oz pancetta, diced  
2 oz pecorino romano cheese  
4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil  
and a bit of salt with some freshly grated black pepper.

Bring at least 4-liters of water to a vigorous boil. Use enough water to allow the spaghetti to float independently to prevent sticking and provide room to heat evenly. Add a dash or two of salt.

While you're waiting for the water to heat, pour olive oil in a frying pan and add the pancetta (bacon), diced into small pieces. Fry to the point of being well cooked, but not crunchy. About three minutes should do it. It should still be soft and pliable.

While you're waiting for the bacon to cook, in a medium bowl, beat the two eggs.

Cook the spaghetti to al dente, this is firm, not soft. A few minutes should do nicely. Drain the pasta, but don't rinse. You want the starch to stay on the spaghetti where it provides a good binding agent. Drop it immediately onto the eggs and mix well. If you time it right, the heat from the pasta will cook the egg. Mix well.

Key to a good Spaghetti alla Carbonara is to pour the pasta still hot over the eggs. Otherwise, you have raw egg in your dish, which is unsavory and potentially dangerous. If the pasta cools from draining too long, you won't achieve the proper effect. One way to help that is to drain the pasta in a plastic strainer, not a metal collander which absorbs more heat from the pasta.

For a lighter meal, drain the bacon. For extra flavor, add the bacon with frying fat, then top with grated cheese and season with black pepper to taste. You can substitute guanciale, which is unsmoked bacon, for a nice taste variation.

If pecorino romano is a bit full, there are many good alternatives, such as half romano, half parmigiano. But keep in mind, the other ingredients will soften the flavor so don't go based on the taste of the raw cheese alone.

As an alternative, you can toss the cheese into the uncooked egg and stir before adding the pasta. For a delightful twist, try a 1/4 cup of white wine in the sauce.

Toss and serve.

## Pasta and Meat

One of the great things about pasta is not just its inherent great taste, but its versatility. Because of the variety of shapes it can take on, and its sturdy structure, it can be stuffed with meat or smothered in meat sauce. Bacon, beef, lamb, chicken... they all go great with pasta, in the noodle or over the top in a tasty goo.

It could be something as simple as a fine spaghetti sauce of tomato paste, ground beef and mushrooms with a little basil and garlic powder. But it serves equally well in a delicious Mexican lasagna. Here's how....

You'll need as ingredients

- 1 1/2 lbs lean ground beef
- 15 oz black beans
- 1 1/2 cups corn
- 1 1/2 cups Mexican cheese
- 1/2 cup chopped tomato
- 9 corn tortillas

and

- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 tablespoons cilantro
- 10 oz enchilada sauce

While the oven is heating to 350°F/176°C you can prepare your ingredients. Chop the tomato, grate the Mexican cheese, let the corn thaw and dice up the cilantro. Heat a skillet to medium heat. While you're waiting for that...

Spray a baking dish about 12in x 7in x 2in with non-stick olive oil. Arrange tortillas in the dish to cover the entire bottom surface with a small amount lapping up the sides. Spread 1/4 cup of enchilada sauce over the tortillas.

Now that the skillet is heated, brown the ground beef over medium heat for about 10 minutes and pour off the grease. Stir in the enchilada sauce, then fold in the black beans, corn and cumin. Bring the mixture to a quiet boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for a few minutes. Stir occasionally to prevent sticking to the pan.

Once done, pour about a third of the mixture into the baking dish, then top with cheese. Pour another layer, top, and repeat until you're out of mixture. Then cover the top layer with enchilada sauce.

Cover the top with a glass lid or aluminum foil and bake at 350°F/176°C for half an hour. Slide the dish out of the oven and remove the lid or foil, then top with a sprinkle of cheese. Bake it for another five minutes, or just let the dish sit in the oven while the cheese melts.

Remove from the oven and sprinkle a little cilantro over the top. For a slightly spicier concoction, dash a little cayenne pepper lightly around.

The result serves about 6 and each serving provides a nutritious meal of about 465 calories with 35g of protein. Though the recipe has a relatively high fat percentage (about 1/3 of the calories), with nearly 840mg of sodium, it is high in folic acid (102mcg). It also contains 6mg of niacin (vitamin B3), 5.7mg each of iron and zinc and 1.7mcg of B12. Calories can be reduced by using leaner beef or serving smaller portions.

## Pasta and Seafood

Many cities in Italy are near the sea and the Italians are well-known for their centuries-old tradition of fishing. They're also well known, obviously, for the use of pasta in cooking. Many excellent recipes have evolved from those twin circumstances. When the seafood is fresh, these two make for excellent partners.

There are many possibilities, including pasta with salmon or crab or lobster. But a favorite of many is to use the seafood as a main ingredient in the sauce and to make the pasta the main dish. Here's one delicious recipe...

### Angel Hair with Shrimp Sauce

You'll need as ingredients

- 8 ounces of Capellini
- 1 lb of medium-sized shrimp
- 1 lb of fresh asparagus
- 5 cloves of garlic
- 1 cup of mushrooms

and

- 1 bunch of scallions
- 3 teaspoons of chutney
- 2 tablespoons of sesame seeds
- 1 tablespoon of brown sugar

and

- 1/2 cup of soy sauce
- 1/2 cup of vinegar
- 2 tablespoons of sesame oil
- 2 teaspoons of canola oil

Trim and cut the asparagus into 1-inch pieces and slice the mushrooms. Finely chop the scallions and the garlic. Remove any tails from the shrimp, but don't chop.

Boil the pasta in plenty of water. The key is to provide enough space around the pasta to allow even heating and an even coating of starch. Add the asparagus to the boiling water about two minutes before the pasta is al dente (firm, not overdone).

While you're waiting...

Place the garlic, mushrooms and canola oil into a sauce pan and saute for a few minutes, then add the soy sauce, vinegar, sesame oil, sesame seeds, chutney, brown sugar and scallions. Simmer for about four minutes and add the shrimp, then cook for another six minutes.

Drain the pasta and asparagus, but don't rinse. Then pour the sauce over the still hot pasta and serve. Ready in half an hour and a true taste treat.

The results are a delicious, relatively low calorie, but highly nutritious meal. The recipe serves five and each serving has about 600 calories, with over 35g of protein and 13g fat. With only 165mg of sodium and cholesterol, this is a heart healthy recipe.

To spice it up a bit add a little cayenne pepper to the top, or just sprinkle on some freshly ground black pepper.

## Pasta and Your Favorite Wines

One of the great things about pasta is its versatility. Not only is it nutritious and tasty, but it goes with any wine you happen to favor. Still, you'll want to select a wine that goes with the whole dish.

You should start simple and work your way up as you experiment with a wider variety of dishes and wines.

That means for those simple tomato-based pasta recipes, you can't go wrong with a nice Chianti or other traditional red. For strongly flavored sauces, the Sangiovese will never clash. If you're planning a seafood dish, you have a wide variety of whites to choose from: Chardonnay, Sauvignon or Chenin Blanc, for example.

As an intermediate, you might be whipping up a fine tuna spaghetti with tomatoes and capers. Since you've got both seafood and tomatoes, what to do? Di Tufo to the rescue. This ancient golden grape grown in volcanic soil has a rich bouquet that will bring out the best of both.

For a slightly more complex recipe, such as a Spaghetti alla Carbonara or a Fettuccine all'Alfredo a fine Viognier is a perfect choice. The rare white is a great complement to those egg or butter based dishes. Or, test a fine Pinot Grigio and see which you prefer. It is, after all, all about personal taste.

When you're laboring over that fine halibut recipe you just can't wait to try, spend a few minutes to think about the wine. While you do, consider how pleasant is a Pinot Noir. Earthy but not overpowering, the hints of clove will add the perfect spicy touch to that delicate fish dish.

At the opposite end of the scale, when you have a plain pasta with just a bit of olive oil or tossed into a salad, you can go either way. A simple dry Gewürztraminer white will avoid overpowering the dish. Or you can pick out a slightly more robust Riesling to add flavor to a relatively bland dish.

If you're mixing up an appetizer, such as anchovies with pistachio nuts, a fine Verdicchio provides a pairing fit for a plutocrat. With its fruity overtones of apricot and tangy spice, it will complement the spicy tang of the fish and the sweet fruit will offset the salty nut.

For a robust roasted lamb dish, stuffed inside some jumbo conchiglie, you could do no better than a Tofanelli Charbono. The smoky hints of this fine varietal will pair nicely with the full flavor of the meat. For a bit more zing, go the full route and pick out a nice Petit Syrah.

Going whole hog, so to speak, and working on that lasagna Bolognese? Bring out that slightly chilled Shiraz and let it warm up a little bit. Spicy and full-bodied, it will stand up and hold its own next to a heavy dish.

But whatever you're preparing, and whichever wine you consider, remember that in the end what counts is whether you enjoy the results. Experiment!

## Pasta From Around The World

Pasta is made from simple ingredients - wheat and eggs. And by such a simple process (just a little mixing). Those two facts almost guaranteed that pasta would find its way around many cultures. But learning where and how and which type reveals a few unexpected twists.

The source of wheat for pasta is something of a surprise. America has huge wheat farms, and the climate in Italy helps give that country the best durum output in the world. Semolina flour made from durum wheat is the source of one major category of pasta. Yet it was from the rich fields of the Ukraine that America's supply came in the early years of the 20th century. In recent years, Australia has risen to be one of the major producers.

The versatility of pasta is equally unexpected. Italian pasta dishes are well-known throughout the world. Pizza is ubiquitous and spaghetti with marinara graces tables from Palermo to Poughkeepsie. But there are pasta dishes equally delicious that hail from parts far and wide.

Though the name may be Italian, a Thai pasta salad made with vermicelli is as native as it gets. Tomatoes, snow peas and miniature corn cobs form the major ingredients in this delightful Asian dish.



Though it's not hard to find pizza in Iceland these days, the native pasta dishes make for a delightfully different experience. This seafaring nation, not surprisingly, makes a lobster and shrimp pasta dish called Sjúvarrétta that is to die for.

Mexican lasagna may have little in common from an ingredient perspective with its Italian counterpart. But the results are equally magnificent. Made with black beans and Mexican cheese, it will be appreciated no matter where you live.

Pasta dishes have been gracing Greek tables for thousands of years. The truly adventurous might want to try some htapothi makaronatha, otherwise known as octopus pasta sauce.

Then, of course, one shouldn't overlook native Italian dishes. Tortelli di Zucca is enjoyed throughout Mantova, at the base of the hills of the Apennines. But traveling to the flatlands along the Po River one can find many local variations. Made with squash, then mixed with pears, mustard and amaretti, with a little Grana cheese, this fruity dish is delicious.

But even plain macaroni and cheese is still immensely popular. Introduced as a pre-made, dried meal in 1937 by Kraft, it was heavily consumed in WWII. Yet it still satisfies many comfort-food seeker in America.

No matter where you go around the world, you'll find this simple food in the most amazing styles and combinations. One sign of a great food is the versatility with which it can be used. From that perspective, pasta may just top the list.

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