

PASTA SECRETS

There are good reasons why pasta is such a popular food: it's cheap, it's quick and easy to prepare, it's delicious, it's nutritious and, it's amazingly versatile. You can dress up pasta for a dinner party with a creamy smoked salmon sauce, or serve it simply, with Parmesan or bacon and eggs. You can serve it cold in salads, warm in soups or piping hot from the oven, stuffed with spinach and ricotta. You can serve it for dessert and you can even serve it as a hangover cure; according to the Italians, spaghetti with garlic and chili oil, eaten before going to sleep, will ward off the aftereffects of too much vino. You can eat pasta everyday of the week, as indeed many Italians do, and never tire of it. Pasta goes well with anything, including breads, vegetables and salads, which is why I have included salad recipes in this class.

Of course, there is the traditional accompaniment to most pasta dishes, Parmesan cheese. Although small amounts of grated Parmesan, or little shavings, do look attractive, resist the temptation to serve it with everything. Avoid it with seafood sauces, in particular, as the flavors do not always mix well. If you can't resist decorating your pasta, garnish with either chopped parsley (Italian) or fresh basil.

DRIED OR FRESH!

Many people think that fresh pasta must be better than dried. This is not always the case, some sauces are better teamed with fresh pasta and some are best with dried. Fresh pasta works well with rich sauces made from cream, butter and cheese, because its soft texture absorbs the sauce. Alfredo is one of the nicest sauces to serve on fresh home made pasta, as is a simple topping of butter and grated Parmesan. Dried pasta is the one to choose if you're serving a heartier, tomato-based sauce. If your sauce has olives, anchovies, chili, meat, or seafood, you'll almost certainly need dried.

Pasta is a combination of flour, water and sometimes eggs and oil. Pasta made with Whole Wheat flour is darker. If dried pasta is made with durum wheat flour, it is considered to be of superior quality. Other dried pastas that are available include those made from different flours and cereals such as buckwheat, corn, rice, and soybeans. Pastas are sometimes flavored with a puree of herbs, tomato, spinach or other vegetables. Dried pasta last six to eight months, stored in an airtight container in a cool dark place. However, dried Whole Wheat pasta will only last for few months before turning rancid. Fresh pasta can be wrapped in plastic and frozen for five days. If double wrapped, it will last up to four months. Don't thaw before cooking.

WHICH PASTA SHAPE?

There are good reasons for matching one pasta shape with a particular sauce. Apart from the traditional regional preference for a local shape, its ability to hold and support the sauce is all-important. Tubular shapes such as penne capture thick sauces, while flat or long pastas are traditionally served with thin, smooth sauces. There are no hard and fast rules and part of the fun of pasta is trying out all those fabulous colors, flavors and shapes.

HOW MUCH PASTA?

Another highly charged subject as far as pasta aficionados are concerned, is how much pasta each person should be served and even more controversially, how much sauce should be served on that pasta. As a general guide, use 2 oz of fresh pasta per person for a starter, and 4 oz for a main dish. You should allow a little bit more if you are using dried, about 3 oz for a starter and 5 oz per person for a main course.

How much sauce is obviously a matter of personal taste, but the biggest mistake non-Italian cooks make is to use too much sauce; the pasta should be lightly coated, not drenched. When the pasta and sauce are tossed, there shouldn't be extra sauce swimming around at the bottom of the plate.

COOKING YOUR PASTA

Unsalted water will come to the boil faster than salted water, so add the salt once the water is boiling. Use a large pan of water, enough so that the pasta has plenty of room to move around, and only add the pasta when the water has reached a rapid boil. Some people like to add a tablespoon of olive oil to help prevent the water boiling over or the pasta sticking together. After the pasta has been added, cover the pan to help bring the water back to the boil as quickly as possible then remove the lid as soon as the water returns to the boil.

Perfectly cooked pasta should be *al dente*, tender but still firm "to the tooth". It is important to drain the pasta and then turn it immediately into a heated dish, into the pan with the sauce, or back into its cooking pan. It should never be over drained, as it needs to be slippery for the sauce to coat it well. Never leave it sitting in the colander or it will become a sticky mass. A little oil or water tossed through the drained pasta will stop it from sticking together. Alternatively, lightly spray the pasta with either some olive oil or some of the left over cooking water and toss it gently (it is always a good idea to keep a little of the cooking water for this, in case you over drained).

Timing can make all the difference between a good pasta meal and a great one. Always read the recipe through first and then coordinate your cooking times. Try to have the sauce ready to dress the pasta as soon as it is cooked, especially if the pasta is fresh (it

will continue to cook if it is left to sit around). Pasta that is to be used in cold pasta salads should be rinsed under cold water to remove excess starch and tossed with a small amount of oil. Then cover and refrigerate until ready to use.

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