

PASTA PERFECTION

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I am pleased to bring you the first edition of a continuing article on pasta, sauces and accompaniments. As the former owner of an Italian Restaurant with a history of working as a Chef in traditional Italian eateries back East, Italian food is my preferred cuisine, and pasta is my personal favorite food. In each article I will cover general information about pasta, such as fresh versus dried, making your own fresh pasta, which shape of pasta you should select, how much pasta to cook, matching sauces to pasta and how to cook both dried and fresh pasta.

Dried Pasta Selection and Cooking

The first step to making great pasta is to select an imported pasta made with semolina flour. Typically, imported pasta (regardless of the brand) is superior in texture and often more flavorful when cooked. Most grocery stores offer at least one imported pasta such as De Cecco. When you open the box and only use part of the contents, always place the open box in an airtight bag. If you allow the dried pasta to have continuous exposure to air, it will cause further dehydration.

When cooking dried pasta, remember it was originally a moist dough that has been dehydrated. Most of the liquid is removed so the pasta can be stored without refrigeration. The cooking of dried pasta reverses the process and rehydrates that dough. When cooked, the dried pasta acts like a sponge and absorbs liquid. If you want your pasta to be *perfect* you must do three things: first, season the cooking water. I use a mild chicken stock with salt, garlic, and onion flavor. The rehydrated dough will absorb and retain the flavor of the cooking liquid. Do not place oil in the cooking water. It inhibits the pasta's absorption, and is a waste of oil. Second, bring the cooking liquid to a rolling boil and then add the pasta, separating and stirring

vigorously for the first few minutes. This will prevent the pasta from sticking together. Pasta - whether dried or fresh - should be cooked *al dente*. This is firm to the bite, but fully cooked. Pull a bit of the pasta and taste periodically. You will know when the pasta is almost done. Third, when *al dente* remove the pasta quickly to the sink and drain in a colander. If you are going to serve it right away, rinse the pasta with boiling hot water to remove the surface starch and shake off the excess water quickly. Transfer the rinsed hot pasta to the serving dish and slightly toss with a little olive oil. If you are cooking the pasta ahead, rinse it quickly in cold water to remove the surface starch, then plunge the pasta into ice and water and let it sit a minute submerged until the temperature of the pasta is cold. Remove the cooled pasta from the ice water and strain again through the colander. This immediately stops the cooking process. If you do not do this, the pasta will continue to cook even though it has been removed from the cooking water. Now shake off excess water and place the pasta in a container where it can lie reasonably flat. Add a small amount of olive oil and stir to keep the cooked pasta from sticking together. Cover and refrigerate until ready to serve.

LINGUINI AND SCAMPI WITH PUTTANESCA SAUCE

Serves 4

16 each - U 15 size shrimp with shell on
1½ lbs imported linguini
3 quarts flavored chicken stock
to cook the pasta
½ cup extra virgin olive oil
3 cans (14.5 oz. each) Hunts diced tomatoes
with roasted garlic flavor
5 cloves whole garlic, crushed
1 cup Spanish (yellow) onion, finely diced
8 medium mushroom caps, sliced thick
½ cup of red wine (Merlot or Chianti)
2 tbsp chopped fresh parsley
⅓ cup of imported cured black olives
(pit & cut in quarters)
3 anchovy fillets, diced (or one level
8teaspoon of anchovy paste)
1 tbsp capers
1 tbsp dried red pepper flakes
1 tbsp dried or fresh oregano
1 tbsp of dried or fresh sweet basil
Freshly grated Parmesan cheese to garnish
8 whole olives to garnish

To Prepare the Puttanesca Sauce

Place diced tomatoes in blender or food processor and pulse slightly. The tomatoes should still be somewhat chunky. Set aside in a glass or stainless bowl. Mix in the basil and oregano. Season to taste with a little salt.

Heat half of the olive oil in a heavy bottom pot with high sides. When oil is hot, add the crushed garlic and the finely diced onions. Watch closely, as the garlic will brown immediately. Sauté the onion and garlic mixture until golden brown.

Add the red wine and simmer for a few minutes to burn off the alcohol. Add the sliced mushrooms, diced anchovy, and the pitted and cut black olives (hold back 8 olives for garnish). Bring back to a boil then simmer for 3 minutes.

Add the crushed tomatoes with oregano and sweet basil. Stir the mixture to fully blend and bring the sauce back to a rapid simmer. Let simmer for ten minutes and the sauce is ready.

Peel the shrimp leaving the tail on but removing the back vein. Rinse quickly in cold water. You can cook the shrimp either by sautéing in olive oil, or by placing them raw in the hot simmering sauce. I prefer the latter as the shrimp will add flavor to the sauce. The shrimp will need to simmer in the sauce for at least ten minutes. Test to make sure the shrimp are cooked.

To Prepare the Linguini (to be served immediately)

1. Bring the 3 quarts of flavored stock to a rapid boil.
2. Add the pasta and stir continually to keep pasta separated – keep the stock boiling.
3. Stir pasta periodically and taste until al dente.
4. Remove from heat and drain in a colander.
5. Rinse with very hot water to remove the surface starch.
6. Shake off excess water & lightly toss with olive oil.
7. Transfer to serving bowl or individual plates.

To Serve Individual Plates

1. Place the pasta on a plate creating a little cavity in the center of the plate.
2. Ladle 5 oz. of Puttanesca sauce into the cavity in the center of the pasta.
3. Garnish with 4 shrimp and 2 olives (pitted).
4. Sprinkle on crushed red pepper and chopped parsley.
5. Serve with freshly grated Parmesan cheese.

PASTA CON QUESO

Here's a quick and easy chile season pasta dish. Cook spinach fettuccini or cilantro fettuccini following methods described and serve it with you favorite Chile con Queso recipe. Garnish with fresh cilantro.



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