

signature
pasta



Italian Cooking & Living

signature pasta

**America's 26 top chefs
share their best pasta recipes**

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The Italian Table

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Efisio and Francesco Farris' malloreddus in wild boar ragù (recipe on page 96) is a Sardinian classic.

introduction Is there a food more symbolic of Italy than pasta? All around the world, people have fallen in love with this classic Italian fare. From shining steel stoves in Japan's top restaurants to country inns in Ireland and home kitchens in Mexico, everyone is cooking pasta and loving it. Long, egg-rich ribbons, short, stout strands, twirled tubes, plump triangles, rustic lozenges—ever since the first bite of pasta was taken by some lucky soul thousands of years

Initially made only from flour and water in its most humble form, pasta has been subsistence food for millennia. But it is so delicious, and so deliciously versatile, that centuries of innovation and ingenuity have given rise to thousands of variations on the basic theme: some pastas are opulent, others rustic, some are boldly flavored, others restrained. There are egg pastas, spinach pastas, squid ink pastas, truffle pastas, herb pastas, pastas made from buckwheat, farro, cornmeal, even rye. There are more pastas than can possibly be eaten in a single lifetime by a devout pasta eater, enough pastas to dazzle the mind and keep any pasta-loving cook busy trying new combinations.

This book was born as a way of celebrating pasta in all its glorious diversity. As the food most symbolic of Italy, pasta has been embraced by chefs across North America, who have put their own stamp—their signature—on Italy's favorite first course. In this volume, we have collected one hundred and twenty-five exciting, vibrant recipes conceived by twenty-six of North America's most creative, renowned chefs.

The pastas that these chefs cook daily in their restaurants are but one link in a long chain of culinary creativity. Just how did the chain get started? When was pasta born, and who made it first? We'll consider these questions and more in this chapter, taking you on a journey of discovery that spans thousands of years and all corners of the globe.

the origins of pasta

Almost nowhere is the art and the magic of cooking more apparent, more incredible, than in the birth of pasta. Cooking is a ritual of transformation made possible by divine, purifying fire

and by the imagination of the cook, who is in essence an expert manipulator of nature. The transformation from the raw to the cooked is the first magical instance in the cooking process. This metamorphosis becomes an authentic creation when an ingredient is manipulated in such a way that its very essence—its appearance, flavor, and texture—is transformed. And pasta—born of grain and deftly turned into gossamer thin or toothsome sheets of dough which are cut, shaped, twirled, and pinched into an unbelievable number of shapes, then cooked and sauced with an even wider assortment of condiments—pasta is undoubtedly the queen of transformation.

Pasta was likely one of the first foods that humans cooked, one of the first foods to be subjected to the magical, transforming heat of fire. At first the grains were merely crushed between two stones and mixed with water as a sort of porridge, but then someone thought of spreading the porridge on hot stones to cook, giving rise to the first flatbreads and baked pastas of all time. Cooking pasta in this way, on hot stones, is still done in Italy today: in Liguria and Tuscany, for example, testaroli are griddle-baked or roasted over hot stones.

The ancient Greeks certainly enjoyed pasta, as did the Etruscans who inhabited Central Italy three thousand years ago and the ancient Romans who ruled the Mediterranean basin and beyond. The Etruscans even painted funeral frescoes depicting tools used for preparing and cutting pasta, including a wheel for slicing dough that looks strikingly similar to one used today. The Romans ate strips of pasta called laganum, the ancestor of today's lasagna, and they either boiled it, toasted it over hot stones, or fried it—all this a good two thousand years before Marco Polo journeyed to China. Ever fond of delicious





Beat the eggs with the Parmigiano in a small bowl. When you are ready to serve, melt the butter in a skillet large enough to accommodate 1 pound of short pasta. Toss in the drained pasta, and quickly fold in the egg-Parmigiano mixture, stirring for 1 minute over high heat to coat the pasta and thicken the egg. Serve hot, topped with the parsley. Makes about 1 cup

cream sauces

Despite the star billing that cream-based pasta sauces have received on restaurant menus both in Italy and in North America lately, only a handful of traditional Italian pasta sauces call for significant amounts of heavy cream. While a touch of cream is often poured into the skillet where a sauce happily bubbles away, lending it a luscious mouthfeel and delicate flavor, cream sauces are the exception to the rule in the Italian kitchen. There are times, however, when nothing else will do, times when the decadence of a creamy plate of pasta is just what you need to restore your spirit and please your palate.

So for those moments, we offer you a subtle, saffron-laced cream sauce from Emilia. The peas can be omitted if you prefer, but they add a lovely green color that contrasts beautifully with the gold of the saffron.

saffron-laced cream sauce

- 1 onion, minced
- 4 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 8 ounces frozen or shelled fresh peas
- 4 ounces Prosciutto Cotto, diced
- 1 1/2 cups heavy cream
- 1/2 teaspoon saffron

- salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 1 cup freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano

In a skillet large enough to hold 1 pound of pasta, sauté the onion in the butter until golden and soft, about 10 minutes over medium-low heat. Add the peas and cook 2 more minutes. Fold in the Prosciutto, and cook 1 minute. Pour in the cream; bring to a boil. Add the saffron and stir to dissolve. Season with salt and pepper; fold in the Parmigiano, and cook 1 more minute.

When you are ready to serve, toss 1 pound of cooked pasta (tagliatelle and garganelli are best) with the sauce in the skillet for 30 seconds to mingle the flavors. Serve hot, dusted with additional Parmigiano. Makes about 2 cups

fish and seafood sauces

If you've ever been to a fish market in Italy, you know that Italians love their fish and seafood. There are so many creatures swimming in the Mediterranean—many of which don't even exist here—that a cook could literally prepare a different fish or seafood sauce every night. Tiny octopus are stewed to supple perfection in heady tomato sauces flavored with basil and oregano; cubes of monkfish are simmered with saffron and cream until meltingly tender; succulent baby clams are bathed in wine until they open to reveal their pearly interiors; gorgeous, pastel-hued scampi are tossed into sizzling pans with chili, parsley, and garlic; scorpionfish and other creatures of the sea are turned into savory sauces accented by celery, wine, and tomatoes; lobster, shrimp, mussels, and scallops mingle in aromatic sauces that please the eye as much the palate.

Some sauces are velvety, others chunky. Some call for a com-

bination of fish and seafood for more intense flavor (these were often born in fishmongers' kitchens as a way of using up whatever fish could not be sold at market on any given day and have become hallowed classics over the years); others use only one variety of fish or shellfish. The most beloved sauce in this category is probably clam sauce, which can be cooked with or without tomato sauce. (See page 68 for a recipe.)

Among all the variations on fish sauces, one stands out as a good, basic sauce that tastes simply of fish: made across Liguria, it uses an assortment of fish for intensity and depth. Remember that the uglier the fish, the better the flavor, so don't steer clear of homely specimens like monkfish and scorpionfish.

simple genoese fish sauce

- 2 pounds assorted fish, heads on (scorpionfish, red mullet, monkfish, and turbot are ideal)
- 1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 onion, thinly sliced
- 1 rosemary sprig
- 1 tablespoon minced Italian parsley
- salt

Rinse the fish and place it in a wide pan. Add just enough water to cover; bring to a gentle boil over medium heat, and cook for 2 minutes. Remove the fish from the pan with a slotted spoon, reserving the cooking water; and remove the skin and bones; coarsely chop the fish.

Heat the olive oil in a saucepan and add the minced fish. Cook for 5 minutes, or until golden all over; then add the onion, rosemary, parsley, and the reserved cooking water; and bring to a gentle boil. Season with salt, and simmer for 30 minutes. Pass

through a food mill fitted with a medium disk, discard the solids, and pour the sauce into a clean saucepan. Bring to a gentle boil and simmer for 15 minutes, or until thick and reduced. Adjust the salt if needed.

When you are ready to serve, cook 1 1/2 pounds of pasta (preferably trenette or mafaldine) until al dente, then drain and toss with the sauce, adding some of the pasta cooking water if needed to dilute the consistency. Makes about 3 cups

Variation: You can add 1 pound of diced plum tomatoes along with the onion, rosemary, and parsley for a red sauce. Other versions call for leaving the fish in chunks rather than passing it through a food mill.

meat sauces

Romagna, Abruzzo, Sardinia, Campania, Apulia: All these regions make one form of ragù or another. Ragù—a term that comes from the French word ragoût—describes a meat-based sauce most often paired with pasta. Italian ragùs fall into two distinct groups: those made with finely ground or knife-minced meat, and those made by slowly braising an entire cut of meat in sauce until fork-tender.

Ragù is featured on most feast tables across Italy, tossed with stuffed or dried pasta as a symbol of abundance and celebration. There are pork ragùs in and around Naples, lamb ragùs in Romagna, beef ragùs in Lombardy, three-meat ragùs in Emilia. Of course, the most famous ragù of all is the one made in Bologna: ragù alla bolognese, as perfect with lasagna as it is lovely with tagliatelle or garganelli. Here is our favorite recipe for it.

ragù alla bolognese

- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter