

ENDLESS PASTABILITIES

by Carol Penn-Romine

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDY ROMINE



One April Fool's Day in the 1950s, the BBC ran a story on the pasta harvest in Switzerland—a bumper crop, it reported, due to a mild winter and the disappearance of the dreaded spaghetti weevil. (Thanks to YouTube, you can still find this gem of a prank if you go to the site and search for “spaghetti harvest.”)

Ah, if only you could drift down to the farmers market and buy some freshly harvested pasta. Or step out your back door and pick some from the pasta tree your home's previous owner so lovingly planted and tended over the years, until you stood next to a real estate agent in the yard one day and said, “I must have this house. It has a mature pasta tree!”

Making fresh pasta is only slightly more involved than picking it would be. And fresh pasta has its bonuses: It's far better than the boxed stuff, it's fun to make in a group and it allows almost endless creativity. Whether you have a snazzy pasta-making attachment for your monolithic stand mixer, a hand-crank pasta maker or a rolling pin and a knife, you can turn out fresh pasta with very few ingredients and very little time and effort. And when you've gone to the trouble of making a lovely pasta sauce, why would you pour it over dry, store-bought noodles that taste no better than the box in which they came? Who knows how long that box has been sitting in storage, on the shelf or in the pantry? Fresh pasta has both flavor and texture on its side.



Getting Down to Business

All-purpose flour works best for making basic pasta dough and for those doughs that call for a combination of regular flour and another flour, like whole wheat, semolina or chestnut. Bread flour contains more protein than all-purpose, so kneading dough made with bread flour builds more gluten, which gives bread great structure but makes pasta too tough. By the way, if you've picked up a bag of 00 flour in an Italian market and want to know what to do with it, just use it like you would all-purpose flour (Italian 0 flour is the equivalent of bread flour).

Set the eggs out 30 minutes before you mix the dough. The ingredients incorporate much more easily when the eggs aren't too cold.

Sift flour(s) and salt into a mound on a cutting board. Make a well in the mound with your fingers and into the well put the egg and the oil. Using a fork, begin stirring the wet ingredients, gradually drawing in the surrounding flour and mixing, until it becomes thick enough to abandon the fork and continue by hand. Knead it just until the dough comes together, adding water by the teaspoonful. Too much water will make the dough gummy, which will clog the pasta maker and cause you to use bad language. Wrap the dough in a sheet of plastic wrap and park it in the fridge for 30 minutes or so, to allow the dry ingredients to absorb the wet. While your dough gets ready for its debut, you can enjoy a glass of wine and a few antipasti, or put the finishing touches on the sauce.

Be sure the water is boiling when you begin rolling and cutting the dough. This way it won't dry out or glue itself into a mass while the water heats.

When it comes to rolling out and cutting the pasta, follow the instructions that came with your pasta maker. If you want a different size and shape than your maker can cut it, fold the sheets of pasta into sections about four inches long and cut the width of noodle you need with a knife. Or use those sheets to make ravioli or lasagna.

Matching the Right Pasta with the Right Accompaniment

If you're in the mood for pasta with pesto or maybe just a little olive oil and a grating of fresh Parmigiano-Reggiano, then you'll want to use angel hair, spaghetti or vermicelli, which are too delicate for heavy sauces.

Wider, flatter noodles like fettuccine and linguine work well with creamy sauces.

Even wider noodles like tagliatelle and pappardelle and textured noodles can accommodate chunky sauces just fine.

All those types of noodles that look like little shells, bowties and radiators (that one is actually called radiatori!) are made to catch the sauce in their nooks and crannies.

After you've rolled out and cut the pasta, you're practically ready to tuck the napkin into your collar. Fresh pasta takes almost no time to cook, so be sure your sauce is made and everyone is about to gather. Within a couple of minutes of that fresh pasta hitting the boiling water, it will be ready to eat.

Add salt to the pasta water to boost the flavor in preparation for the sauce, but don't add oil to the water. Oil makes the pasta slippery and prevents the sauce from adhering. The same thing will happen if you rinse it after cooking. The starch on the pasta gives it traction.

Regarding the old throw-it-against-the-wall-to-see-if-it's-done trick: Your mouth knows when the pasta is cooked sufficiently better than the wall does. So whether you're making fresh pasta or boiling a box of the dried stuff, fish a piece out of the pot and sample it yourself to see if it's cooked to your liking.

As with most activities, making pasta becomes faster and easier, and the results better, through practice. The basic ingredients—a little flour, salt, oil and egg—cost so little that if you botch the first few attempts, it's no big deal. Once you've learned to make a nice batch of pasta, you'll find yourself turning up your nose at the dried, boxed stuff. And by then you'll have become such a pro at making your own pasta that you'll be able to do it without a second thought. 🍝



Pasta by the Handful

These recipes are for modest portions. Each will yield enough pasta for two entrées. It's easy to do the math from here, doubling or tripling the amounts for a family or dinner party. If you have four people for dinner, get two people to make a handful of dough each. Then those who didn't make the dough can roll it out and cut it.

BASIC PASTA DOUGH

This is a good everyday pasta dough. If you want to make it a whole-wheat dough, use $\frac{1}{2}$ cup each of all-purpose and whole-wheat flours. Cooking time for this dough is about 2 minutes; for whole wheat about $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 3 minutes.

1 cup all-purpose flour

A pinch of salt

1 egg

1 teaspoon oil

Water as needed (about $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons; for whole wheat about 3 teaspoons)

SEMOLINA PASTA DOUGH

Semolina is made of durum wheat, which is a hard, protein-rich wheat. In spite of its increased heft, it requires no more time to cook than basic pasta dough, about 2 minutes. Semolina yields a more durable dough without being chewy. It's good for making stuffed pasta, like ravioli and tortellini.

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup all-purpose flour

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup semolina

A pinch of salt

1 egg

1 teaspoon oil

Water as needed (about 3 to 4 teaspoons)

PISTACHIO PASTA DOUGH

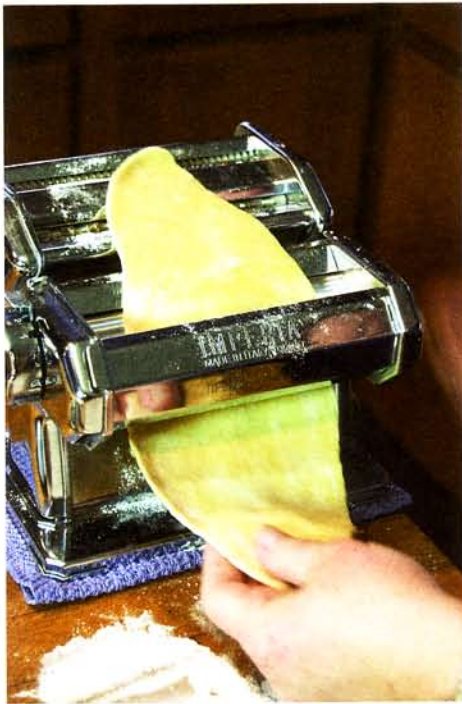
$\frac{1}{2}$ cup all-purpose flour

$\frac{1}{2}$ cup pistachio flour (available from Santa Barbara Pistachio)

A pinch of salt

1 egg

Water as needed (about 3 to 4 teaspoons)





CHESTNUT PASTA DOUGH

You can find chestnut flour at any Italian market. It makes a rich entrée component but can still surprise with its dessert possibilities. Pasta made from chestnut flour is good simply tossed with browned butter and topped with a grating of fresh Parmigiano-Reggiano and a few fried fresh sage leaves. Or for a lightly sweet dessert, poach fresh pear slices in a little sweet white wine, melt in a little unsalted butter and pour it over a plate of chestnut pasta. Garnish with some crumbled blue cheese and a light dusting of black pepper. (As you can see, it's possible to whip up a pasta dish with few precise measurements!) Chestnut pasta will cook in about 2 to 2½ minutes.

½ cup all-purpose flour

½ cup chestnut flour

A pinch of salt

1 egg + 1 egg yolk

(No oil or water is needed—if you do happen to need a bit more liquid, add water a tiny bit at a time.)

LAMINATING PASTA DOUGH

One way to make a lovely pasta with a great wow! factor is to laminate it—that is, to press fresh herbs or edible flowers in between two sheets of pasta so that they are inside the pasta. To do this, lay a fresh sheet of pasta on a flat surface and arrange on it fresh herbs or edible flowers that you've washed and carefully patted dry. If the flowers are too thick, pick off the petals and arrange them on the dough. Lay another sheet of fresh pasta over the first and press firmly all over with your hands, to be sure your lovely "sandwich" doesn't fall apart when you pick it up. Then roll it through the pasta maker to fuse the two sheets of dough with your lovely design of flowers and herbs inside. Then you can cut it into ravioli squares or rounds or make broad, colorful noodles. This is pasta you want to show off, so keep the add-ons light, just some olive oil and Parmigiano-Reggiano or a little pesto.

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