



mastering pasta

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Most people are terrified or, at best, hesitant at the very thought of making their own pasta. Yet a session of fresh pasta making is a day of fun. Children will always help, particularly with the rolling, folding and cutting. Pushed, they may even help clean up the cloud of flour which inevitably results.

THE FIRST MAJOR consideration when making pasta is the flour. The best pasta will be made from high protein, hard durum wheat flour although a good result can also be obtained from ordinary supermarket plain flour. Another option is the flour sold as 'Continental Flour' or 'Tipo 00 flour'. This is a very fine semolina flour and is the flour of choice for the pasta made by some of the large specialist Italian outlets. It has a slight graininess to it and produces a pasta with a superior texture. There is also now a

specialist 00 flour produced by Anchor Foods and is available in most supermarkets. It has a protein level of about 10% and works really well.

Eggs are the next consideration and while the proportions quoted are generally one egg to every 100 grams of flour this will of course vary according to both the size of the eggs and the absorbency of the flour. I use very large eggs (size 60 or 67). It's easier to work with a softer dough, especially when you are first learning how to make pasta as you can

always work extra flour in during the working and rolling stage. Even so, a firmer dough gives a better pasta. Once you get the hang of it you won't even bother to measure the flour; you'll just mix up the eggs and add the flour until it feels right.

And while a pasta rolling machine might make your job easier, pasta can also be made quickly and successfully with just a rolling pin and a knife.

It's important to appreciate that different pastas are better suited to different sauces. Lighter sauces are better with finer pastas and more robust sauces are better suited to chunkier pastas. So a light cream based sauce is better with fettuccine or angel hair; while a red wine based meat sauce needs the wide, strappy pappardelle.

And is it really worth the effort to make your own fresh pasta? The answer is yes, every time.



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The Basic Dough

SERVES 4 WITH SAUCE

4 large eggs
2 tsp salt
400 g flour

Sift the flour and salt into a large bowl or onto a clean bench top. Make a well in the centre and break the eggs into the well. Lightly whisk the eggs with a fork or fingertips and gradually work in the flour, finishing with your hands. If the mixture is a little dry, add a few drops of water. Turn onto a floured surface

and knead until the mixture is smooth and springy – about 10 minutes.

Alternatively, and the purists will be horrified, place the flour and salt in the bowl of a food processor and add the eggs. Process until it is combined. It might look a little dry but fear not. Tip the mixture onto a sheet of plastic film and wrap it up tightly. Within an hour, it will have come together nicely. Knead as before.

Rolling

By Hand

Cut the piece of dough in half and cover the section not in use.

Working on a floured surface and using a long, thin flour-dusted rolling pin (I've used a wine bottle at Rottneest!), roll out the pasta using a combination of rolling, stretching and pushing to produce a long oval or rectangle.

The pasta should be thin, particularly if you want to fill the pasta for ravioli. Roll the sheet



up into a roll, as for a Swiss roll, and then with a sharp knife, cut the pasta into the width of strips desired. Unravel the rolls and, if not cooking immediately, hang them over the back of a chair or leave on a flour-dusted tea towel, bench or tray.

Machine

Again work with only half the dough at a time, keeping the other half covered. Press

out the piece of pasta with your fingers into a rectangle and then pass it through the rollers with the machine on the largest setting. Keep rolling and folding until the sheet is smooth. Continue rolling, making the settings smaller and smaller until the desired thickness is reached.

I use the thinnest setting for filled pasta and the second thinnest for fettuccine.

Repeat with the second piece of dough. You may then use the cutting rollers to cut the sheets. Most rollers are for fettuccine and linguine. For lasagne sheets, ravioli or cannelloni, the uncut sheet is used. Hang the cut pasta over the back of a chair or over a clean broom handle to dry if you like.

Note: make sure you keep the machine well-dusted with flour while rolling and never ever wash the machine in water.



To Cook Fresh Pasta

Allow at least one litre of boiling water for every portion of pasta and one teaspoon of salt to every litre of water – pasta likes to swim in plenty of boiling salted water. While a little olive oil helps prevent lasagne sheets from sticking together, it is not necessary for other pasta. Have the water ready at a rolling boil and over a high heat and drop in the pasta. Stir once to prevent sticking and bring back to the boil. Fresh pasta should only take two to three minutes to reach the al dente stage. The best way to test is by tasting it. The pasta should be tender without being soft and there should still be a slight firmness or resistance when bitten. Drain but do not rinse as the starchy surface helps the sauce to stick to the pasta.

Herbed Pasta

When the sheets are at the desired thickness, place whole sprigs of flat leaf parsley on a section of the pasta. Top with another piece and press them lightly together; just enough to hold them in place. Run this through the pasta machine. Cut into squares and use to garnish a light clear soup.

Some dishes show off fresh pasta better than others. When I make fresh pasta, these are some of my favourite ways to showcase it.



BRAISED OXTAIL WITH PAPPARDELLE

Choose the large meaty sections for this dish. Use the smaller bits for stock

SERVES 4

- 2 kg oxtail sections, well trimmed of fat
- seasoned flour
- 30 g butter
- 1 tbs olive oil
- 2 tbs brandy
- 2 onions, sliced
- 4 carrots, peeled and sliced
- 1 cup red wine
- stock
- 1 bouquet garni (bay leaf, few parsley stalks, sprig thyme, a few peppercorns)
- salt and freshly ground pepper
- 2 parsnips, peeled and chunked
- 1 tbs parsley, chopped

Toss the tail sections in the flour, then brown carefully and thoroughly in the heated butter and oil in a pan. When browned, remove the meat to a casserole dish and add the brandy. Then brown the carrots and the onions in the same pan, adding butter and oil if necessary. Add these to the meat. Boil the wine in the browning pan until it's reduced by half. Add to the casserole dish and then add enough stock to almost cover the meat. Add the bouquet garni and season well.

Cook in a 150°C oven for about four hours, or until the meat is meltingly tender. Remove bouquet garni, cool and refrigerate overnight.

Remove the solidified fat and add the parsnips to the casserole. Cook for about an hour to cook the parsnips through and to reheat the braise. Strip the meat from the bones, returning it to the sauce.

Fold through cooked pappardelle and serve sprinkled with the chopped parsley.



LEMON AND BASIL LINGUINE

This is a classic in the Italian kitchen, especially along the Amalfi coast where the lemons are plentiful and aromatic. Great as a vegetarian dish, but wonderful with the addition of shredded ham. As with any very simple dish all of the ingredients must be of the best quality.

SERVES 4

- finely grated rind and juice of 2 lemons
- 2 tsp crushed garlic
- 2/3 cup best extra virgin olive oil
- plenty of salt and freshly ground pepper – the salt balances out the acid
- 1 cup Parmigiano Reggiano, grated
- 1 cup basil leaves, torn or roughly shredded
- freshly made linguine
- extra grated parmesan to serve

Make the sauce by combining all of the ingredients down to and including the basil in a bowl. Bring a large pot of heavily salted water to the boil and cook the linguine – this should only take about two minutes. Drain it and toss through the dressing. Serve with the extra parmesan. ✨

Some favourite pasta combinations

smoked tuna or salmon, red onion, baby capers, finely diced lemon flesh, olive oil and freshly ground black pepper

crushed garlic, extra virgin olive oil, rocket leaves or finely chopped parsley and best quality parmesan

slices of black olives, chilli, herbs, capers, extra virgin olive oil, salt and freshly ground black pepper

with butter, cream, best parmesan and freshly ground black pepper