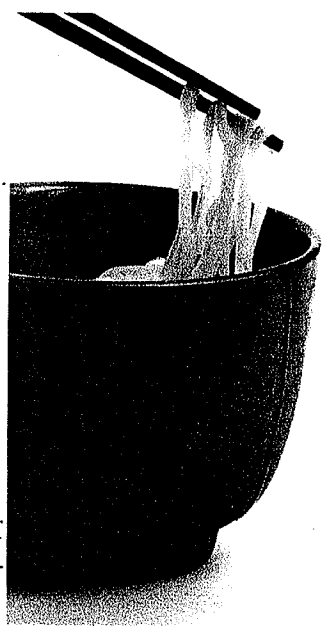


Breathing New Life into Pasta

Some resuscitation for the tried-and-true in the form of new ingredients, fresh inspiration and some must-try recipes.



by Heidi Fink

at the last minute into a thick sauce or pesto, will help thin out the sauce and distribute it evenly among the noodles. And finally, do not rinse your pasta! Rinsing will flush off the little particles of starch that still cling to the noodles. With the help of this starch, your pasta sauce will actually blend with and adhere to the pasta, rather than slipping off into a pool at the bottom of your plate.

Now, about the sauce. First, let go of the idea that a homemade sauce is difficult to make. Long-simmered ragùs are delicious, of course, but most of my favourite sauces are made in the same amount of time it takes to boil water and cook the pasta—less than 30 minutes. Some take less than five minutes. The idea is to use quality ingredients with big flavour impact, and to cook them with the proper technique.

When making a sauce, always season it more strongly than you think you should. Pasta is mild; it can carry a lot of flavour and mellow out the boldest of tastes. Pasta is a natural with anchovies, garlic, olives, sun-dried tomatoes, sausage, not to mention curry paste, peanut sauce and chiles. These ingredients have a bonus: they radically perk up the taste of your sauce without adding any prep time of their own.

And forget about tomato being the main event. Tomato sauces are delicious, but the idea that pasta needs a tomato sauce is often what limits our pasta meal to the same few variations. Tomato can be a bit player, or even left out altogether. Base your sauces around flavourful vegetables and meats, complimented by bursts of taste from herbs, olives, chiles and the like, and you will never miss the tomato. Even when using tomato, it is important to use it judiciously. Pasta sauces are easily overwhelmed by too much acid.

Always cook other vegetables first, either by sautéing or braising with garlic and olive oil, before adding the tomato. The acid in tomato prevents other vegetables from cooking properly, so it's important to give them a head start on their way to becoming fully tenderized and infused with garlic. While this might seem like an extra step, it will actually shave several minutes off the cooking time for your sauce, because the vegetables will take much less time to cook in this way.

I generally don't use onion in my weeknight pasta sauces, not because I don't love onion (which I definitely do), but because onions take too long to cook properly. Especially for a quick sauce, I dispense with the onion and instead bump up the garlic, which cooks in only 1 minute. And don't skimp—I use ample amounts of chopped garlic, usually a whole head for a pound of dry pasta.

One caveat: garlic burns very easily, so be careful. When using garlic by itself, I mix it with the oil in a cold pan and heat them slowly together. That way, the garlic cooks gently to nutty perfection, rather than turning the sauce acrid with burnt flavours. I also like to add some fresh herbs or anchovy right at the beginning, to infuse the oil with their bright or earthy aromas and create layers of flavour in the sauce.

Once you have made a flavourful base, the rest of the sauce is built on imagination. There are limitless combinations of vegetables and meats to choose from. A single perfect vegetable, lightly browned and enhanced with fruity olive oil, fresh herbs and toasted walnuts may be all you need. Or good quality sausage meat, cooked with sweet peppers and finished with a jot of tomato paste. In the summer, re-invent pasta sauce as a salsa: chopped vine-ripened tomatoes, cheese and fresh basil, never cooked, only tossed with the piping hot pasta to heat and blend all the ingredients. Canned tuna, cauliflower, tapenade, white beans, Thai red curry—all these and more have made their way into pasta sauce at my house. The recipes below are a good starting point for those needing encouragement to make a sauce from scratch.

Once the sauce has been made, and the pasta cooked and drained, mix them together right at the stove. Not only will this prevent the mass of noodles from congealing at the table, but the hot pasta will also absorb flavour from the sauce, and the sauce will be slightly thickened by the pasta. (Mixing also eliminates the common problem of leftover pasta but no leftover sauce!) As a final touch, I usually add

a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil and, if I have some, a sprinkle of fresh herbs. Uncooked olive oil has a fresh fruity taste that will perfume a whole dish in a way that cooking olive oil never can. And, of course, a grated cheese garnish before serving never hurts.

A pasta meal cooked with this kind of attention will always satisfy, both your soul and your belly. Use my guidelines and you will never have to suffer through even one more plate of drab “same-old” pasta. This is your opportunity to claim ordinary pasta as your own “destination” meal. Enjoy! ◀

CHOOSING PASTA

Of the umpteen varieties of pasta to choose from, my preference is for a good-quality dried white pasta made with durum wheat. Most dried pastas, in fact, are made with durum wheat, so no need to analyze the ingredient list. But texture and taste can vary a lot between brands, so buy a few different boxes to see which kind you like best. Specialty delis are often the best places to find a large selection of pastas, but supermarkets have quite a variety as well.

A few brands to try:

Rusticiella d'Abruzzo
De Cecco
La Molisana
Barilla
Prairie Harvest (organic)

Basic 5-Minute Tomato-Garlic Sauce

An outstanding 5-minute tomato sauce that is worlds better than any sauce out of a jar. Makes enough for one pound of dry pasta, serving 4.

1 28-oz can diced Muir Glen* tomatoes
4-6 cloves garlic, minced
3 Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, divided
3 Tbsp minced fresh basil
3 Tbsp minced fresh parsley (Italian, if possible)
1/2 tsp salt
1/4 tsp sugar
Fresh ground black pepper

*Muir Glen is a brand of organic canned tomatoes. Available everywhere, they are uniformly excellent in taste and quality.

You can use the can of tomatoes as is, but I prefer smaller pieces of tomato, so I throw the contents of the can, juice and all, into a blender or food processor and pulse a few times to make a very coarse purée. You may omit this step, if you prefer. Set the tomatoes aside.

Place 2 Tbsp of the olive oil, the garlic, 1 1/2 Tbsp of the basil and 1 1/2 Tbsp of the parsley together in a saucepan. Now turn on the heat to medium-low and heat gently, stirring frequently, until the oil warms and the garlic and herbs start to sizzle and become fragrant. DO NOT LET THE GARLIC BROWN. The moment the garlic and herbs smell the way you like, immediately add the tomatoes, with their juice, to the pan. Stir to mix, add the salt and pepper and stir again.

Increase heat to medium-high and bring the tomatoes to a simmer. Decrease heat to medium-low and simmer, uncovered, until tomatoes have broken down a bit and sauce has thickened slightly, about 10 minutes. The sauce will seem a bit runny. Stir in the sugar and the remaining basil and parsley. Taste to adjust for salt. Remove from heat and stir in remaining olive oil.

Pasta with Broccoli, Anchovies, Garlic and Feta

If you have never tried anchovies, now is your chance! This sauce is my favourite last-minute pasta sauce. Quickly made and bursting with flavour, everyone loves it. The anchovies dissolve into the background, but enhance the whole dish with their earthy, briny flavour. Serves 2 or 3.

1/2 pound dry pasta shapes, such as penne, fusilli or rotini
1 large bunch broccoli
3 Tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, divided
6 cloves garlic, minced
5 anchovy fillets, minced (about 1 Tbsp)
1/4 tsp crushed red chiles (optional)
1/2 tsp dried oregano
1/4 tsp salt, or more, to taste
2 ripe tomatoes, chopped
1/4 cup minced fresh parsley
1 cup crumbled feta cheese (I use goat feta)

Divide the broccoli florets into bite-sized pieces. If you like,

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Variations: Substitute sl Add 1/2 cup Add 1/2 cup

Quick A:

Looking for spaghetti evening. Ser

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1 tsp toasted
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1-3 tsp brown
1/2 cup chop

Bring 2 quar choice. Cook depending o

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Sun-Drie

Unusual and sweet, herba pasta. The pe

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use some of the stem, peeled and sliced thin. Set aside.

Bring 2 quarts of water to a rolling boil in a large pot. Add 1 tsp of salt and the pasta. Stir frequently in the first few minutes to keep pasta pieces separate. Cook 7-10 minutes, until done to your liking.

Meanwhile, combine 2 Tbsp of the oil, the anchovies, the garlic, the crushed chiles and the oregano in a saucepan. Now turn the heat on to medium and heat gently, stirring almost constantly, until the anchovy has dissolved and the garlic is fragrant. Add 1/3 cup water, the salt and the broccoli. Increase heat to high, cover the pan and bring to a boil. Uncover, stir, reduce heat to low and re-cover pan. Cook 1-2 minutes, until broccoli florets are bright green. Uncover and simmer about 3 minutes more. Add tomatoes with a sprinkle more salt and continue to simmer until the pasta is done.

When pasta is finished, drain, reserving about a cup of the cooking water. Add pasta to the pan with sauce, along with the parsley, the remaining tablespoon of olive oil and a bit of pasta water. Stir to combine, then simmer together to meld flavours, about 1 minute. Add more pasta water if the dish seems too dry. Stir in the cheese and serve.

Variations:

Substitute sliced baby zucchini for part of the greens.

Add 1/2 cup chopped jarred roasted red or yellow pepper with the greens.

Add 1/2 cup sliced kalamata olives with the tomato.

Quick Asian Noodle Bowl

Looking for a completely different pasta experience one night, I turned a box of Italian spaghetti into an Asian-influenced comfort meal. This dish is very brothy, perfect for a cool evening. Serves 3.

3/4 lb noodles (soba, somen, udon, spaghetti, egg noodles, vermicelli, or rice sticks)

1 Tbsp vegetable oil

1 bunch green onions, sliced thin (use both white and green parts)

1 tsp crushed red chiles

4 large cloves garlic, minced and mixed with 2 Tbsp water

1 tsp minced or grated fresh ginger

3 or 4 fresh tomatoes, chopped

1 large or 2 small bunches spinach, cleaned, stemmed and sliced

1 lb boneless chicken breast or thigh, cut into small (1/2-inch) pieces OR 1 package firm tofu, cubed

1/4 tsp salt and more, to taste

3 cups chicken or vegetable broth, canned or homemade

1 1/2 cups water

1 or 2 Tbsp soy sauce, or to taste

1 tsp toasted sesame oil

1-3 tsp rice wine vinegar, or to taste

1-3 tsp brown sugar, or to taste

1/2 cup chopped cilantro

Bring 2 quarts of water and 1 tsp of salt to a boil in a large pot. Stir in the noodles of your choice. Cook, stirring occasionally, until done to your liking, anywhere from 6-12 minutes, depending on the type of noodle.

Meanwhile, heat a saucepan over medium-high heat. Add oil, then the green onions, chiles and ginger. Sauté for about 2 minutes, then add garlic-water mixture and sauté until the water evaporates. Now add the tomato, soy sauce, spinach and chicken (or tofu) along with the 1/4 tsp of salt. Stir around for about 30 seconds, and then add the broth and water. Bring to a boil and immediately turn off the heat. While the residual heat from the burner gently cooks the chicken and vegetables, add the sesame oil, vinegar and brown sugar. Taste to adjust for seasoning. It may need more sugar, vinegar, soy sauce or salt. Stir in the cilantro.

By now, your noodles should be done cooking. Drain noodles well. Divide them into three shallow bowls and into each bowl, ladle on 2 or 3 cups of broth, chicken/tofu and vegetables. Serve immediately.

Sun-Dried Tomato and Olive Pesto (nut- and cheese-free)

Unusual and bursting with taste, this pesto hits you from all angles: spicy, briny, garlicky, sweet, herbaceous and fresh. Makes 1 1/2 to 2 cups, enough for 1 to 1 1/2 pounds of dried pasta. The pesto may be refrigerated for up to 4 days and frozen for up to 2 months.

1 cup sun-dried tomatoes

1/2 cup + 2 Tbsp pitted kalamata olives

3-4 cloves fresh garlic, peeled

1 cup fresh basil leaves

1/2 bunch parsley

1/2 cup fresh oregano, or 1 tsp dried

1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil

2-3 tsp crushed red chiles, soaked in a little warm water

1 1/2 tsp capers

1/2 tsp salt

1/4 tsp pepper

1 Tbsp balsamic vinegar

Place sun-dried tomatoes in a small bowl, cover with boiling water and let soak for 20 minutes. Drain and chop roughly. Save the soaking liquid for a different use.

Place the olives in a food processor with the metal chopping blade. Pulse several times and listen to hear if the blade gets stuck on any olive pits. If so, stop the machine, remove the lid and fish out any pits you find. Repeat this process several times, until you are confident there are no remaining olive pits.

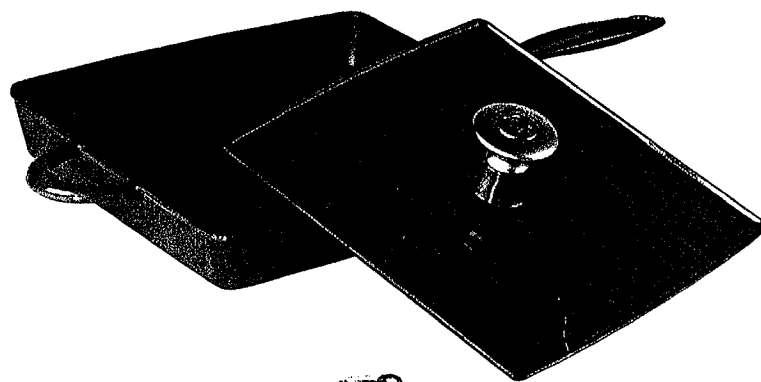
Add all the remaining ingredients, EXCEPT the sun-dried tomatoes, and puree well, stopping to scrape down the sides as necessary. Once everything is pureed, add the tomatoes and pulse to combine, leaving small chunks of tomato for texture.

To use with pasta, cook 1/4 lb of dried pasta per person. Drain the pasta, saving 2 cups of the cooking water. Place approximately 1/3 cup of pesto per person in the bottom of a large bowl, add the cooked, drained pasta and some of the cooking water and toss to thoroughly coat noodles with pesto, using more pasta water, if necessary, to thin out the pesto and help coat the noodles. Toss all the servings at once in the same large bowl. Divide into warm plates or pasta bowls, sprinkle with grated cheese (Asiago or Reggiano), if desired, and serve.

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