

Preheat an oven to 400°F. Coat a large baking dish with the remaining 1 Tbs. olive oil.

Spoon the dressed pasta into the prepared baking dish. Top with the remaining sauce and the Parmigiano-Reggiano. Bake, uncovered, until bubbly and browned on top, about 30 minutes. Serve hot. Serves 8.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Rustic Italian*, by Domenica Marchetti (Weldon Owen, 2011).

Conchiglioni with Ricotta and Spinach

Here, classic stuffed shells are topped with a flavorful, smooth sauce made by slowly simmering tomatoes with just a handful of ingredients and then passing the mixture through a food mill. Adding an egg to the ricotta mixture ensures that the filling remains cohesive and firm during baking.

To make the sauce, drain the tomatoes, reserving half of their juice. In a saucepan over medium-high heat, combine the tomatoes and reserved juice, the carrot and onion and bring to a boil. Immediately reduce the heat to medium-low, cover partially and cook, stirring occasionally, for 45 minutes. Remove from the heat, stir in the basil and let cool slightly, then pass the chunky mixture through a food mill or a medium-mesh sieve. Stir in the olive oil, season with sea salt and pepper and set aside.

Meanwhile, prepare the ricotta and spinach for the filling: Place the ricotta in a fine-mesh sieve set over a bowl and set aside to drain for about 30 minutes. Bring a saucepan three-fourths full of water to a boil over high heat. Add the spinach and the scant ¼ tsp. kosher salt and cook just until the spinach is tender, about 2 minutes. Drain well, reserving the cooking water. Squeeze out the excess moisture from the spinach, then chop it finely.

Measure the spinach water, pour into a large pot, add more water to total 5 quarts and bring to a rapid boil over high heat. Check the package instructions for the cooking time, then add the 2 Tbs. kosher salt and the pasta and stir well. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the pasta is 1 to 2 minutes shy of being al dente. Drain in a colander, refresh under cold running water and drain again.

To finish the filling, transfer the ricotta to a bowl and beat in the egg until smooth. Add the spinach, ½ cup of the Parmigiano-Reggiano, the nutmeg, the ¼ tsp. sea salt and a few grinds of pepper and mix well.

Preheat an oven to 375°F.

Smear the bottom of a 9-by-13-inch baking dish with 2 to 3 Tbs. of the sauce. Using a teaspoon, stuff the conchiglioni with the filling. They should be generously filled but not so stuffed that they are wide open. Place the stuffed conchiglioni, side by side and open side up, in the prepared dish. Drizzle the remaining sauce evenly over the top and sprinkle with the remaining ¼ cup Parmigiano-Reggiano. Cover with aluminum foil and bake until the sauce is bubbling, about 25 minutes. Let stand for 10 minutes before serving. Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *The Pasta Book*, by Julia della Croce (Weldon Owen, 2010).

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Cooking and Serving Pasta

When properly cooked, dried pasta will have a tender yet slightly chewy texture—in other words, it will be al dente, literally “to the tooth.” If you cut into a piece, a fine white line should be visible at its core.

Despite the fact that much has been written about pasta in recent years, many people still believe that any type of dried pasta can be dressed with any type of sauce. Different pasta cuts absorb and combine with sauces based on their size, shape and thickness.

For example, short tubular cuts with ridged surfaces—their names include the word *rigate*, such as penne rigate—are designed to trap sauces in their ridges and holes, and concave and hollow pastas, such as orecchiette or ziti, cradle chunky sauces in their voids. Capellini, which is thin and relatively delicate, calls for a light, smooth sauce, while thick, dense bucatini mates well with heavier, chunkier sauces.

In most cases, 1 lb. dried pasta will serve four to six people, unless the sauce is quite light and smooth. For soups to serve the same number of people or even more, you will need only a small amount of *pastina*, or soup pasta (thin strands, small shells), usually no more than about 1 cup.

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Technique Class: Pasta—It’s All About the Shape!

About Dried Pasta

A seemingly endless array of dried pasta shapes are available today, which can make choosing the right shape daunting. Most pastas belong to a family—for example, spaghetti, spaghettini and capellini are all strand pastas—and each family is ideally paired with specific types of sauces. Once you learn some basic pairing guidelines, you can stray from the recipes, choosing which pasta shapes you like that marry well with the accompanying sauce.

Dried Versus Fresh Pasta

Outside of Italy, dried pasta is widely perceived as being inferior to fresh pasta. Of course, as every Italian cook knows, such thinking is far from the truth. The difference between dried pasta and fresh pasta is not a question of quality, but of how the pasta is served.

Factory-made dried pasta, which is available in myriad shapes and sizes, has a firmer consistency and more robust flavor than fresh pasta, which means that it must be paired with different kinds of sauces. For example, fresh pasta is often partnered with smooth, cream-based sauces, while most dried pasta is better suited to tomato sauces laced with chunky ingredients.

The best dried pastas are made in Italy from semolina flour, which is milled from high-protein durum (hard) wheat and water (or occasionally egg). Their excellence is largely due to the fact that their production, in factories big and small, is regulated by national laws that ensure only hard wheat is used. They will have also been cut and shaped with bronze dies (rather than plastic), which produce a slightly coarse texture perfect for absorbing sauce.

You must be careful when buying imported artisanal pastas, however. Some small operations have not mastered the drying process fully, which causes the pasta to become too soft during cooking.

Good-quality dried pasta has an amber tint, a vaguely transparent quality, a clear, wheaty aroma and flavor and, when properly cooked, retains its elasticity. A final indicator of quality is the absence of excessive cloudiness in the cooking water.

Pairing Dried Pasta and Sauce

In general, the taste and texture of dried pasta make it well suited to robust and rustic sauces based on olive oil, pancetta, tomatoes, and combinations of vegetables, beans, olives, fish and shellfish and meats. Tomato sauces and simple butter and cheese sauces combine easily with almost any type of pasta (including fresh pasta), except for the smallest varieties, which are designed for soups.

Sauce or Dish	Ideal Pasta Cuts	Pasta Name
baked dishes	thin strand pastas, short cut pastas, large hollow pastas, pasta sheets	cannelloni, capellini, conchiglioni, lasagna, lumaconi, manicotti, penne, perciatelli, rigatoni, ziti tagliati
butter sauces	thin strand pastas, short cut pastas	conchiglie, farfalle, lumache, vermicelli
cheese and cream sauces	strand pastas, short cut pastas, short shaped pastas	bucatini, cavatappi, farfalle, fusilli, gemelli, gnocchetti, mafalde, penne, pennette, radiatori, tagliatelle, vermicelli
chunky tomato sauces	short cut pastas, short shaped pastas	conchiglie, gnocchetti, linguine, lumache, penne
smooth tomato sauces	strand pastas, short cut pastas, short shaped pastas	bucatini, capellini, conchiglie, farfalle, gnocchetti, penne, pennette, rigatoni, spaghetti
meat sauces	short cut pastas, wide ribbon pastas, short shaped pastas, strand pastas	cavatappi, fusilli corti, fusilli lunghi, gemelli, lumache, mafalde, malloreddus, orecchiette, penne, pennette
oil-based sauces	short cut pastas, thin strand pastas	capellini, farfalle, linguine, lumache, spaghetti, spaghetti, ziti tagliati
pesto sauces	strand pastas	bucatini, linguine, spaghetti, spaghetti
seafood sauces	strand pastas, medium hollow pastas	linguine, spaghetti, spaghetti, ziti
soups	pastina (small pasta about the size of rice), thin strand pastas	acini di pepe, capellini, conchigliette, ditali, ditalini, egg noodles, farfallette, lumachine, orzo, stelline, tubettini
vegetable sauces	narrow ribbon pastas, short shaped pastas, strand pastas, medium hollow pastas	bucatini, cavatelli, conchiglie, ditalini, farfalle, gemelli, linguine, mafalde, orecchiette, penne, rigatoni, spaghetti, ziti, ziti tagliati

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *The Pasta Book*, by Julia della Croce (Weldon Owen, 2010).

Spaghettini with Summer Squash and Crispy Speck

This recipe combines the sweetness of summer squash with the smokiness of speck. It is also gorgeous to look at: strands of thin spaghettini intertwined with bright green and yellow ribbons of squash and rosy flecks of ham.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat.

Meanwhile, in a large fry pan over medium heat, combine the olive oil and speck and sauté until the speck is crispy, about 7 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté until it just begins to turn golden, about 3 minutes.

Add the squash and toss well to coat the strands with the oil. Season with the ¼ tsp. salt and a generous grinding of pepper. Increase the heat to medium-high and cook until the squash is just tender, 3 to 4 minutes. Stir in the basil and remove from the heat. Cover the sauce to keep warm.

Add the pasta to the boiling water, stir and cook until al dente, about 9 minutes or according to the package instructions. Drain, reserving about ½ cup of the cooking water. Transfer the pasta to the pan with the sauce. Using tongs or a pasta fork, toss gently to combine. Add a splash or two of the pasta-cooking water to loosen the sauce, if needed. Sprinkle in the cheese and toss again. Season with salt and pepper. Divide among shallow bowls, spoon any remaining sauce on top and serve immediately. Serves 4 to 6.

Adapted from Williams-Sonoma *Rustic Italian*, by Domenica Marchetti (Weldon Owen, 2011).

Baked Ziti with Eggplant and Smoked Scamorza

You can mix up this recipe by using different cheeses and vegetables or meat, sometimes adding tomato sauce and sometimes not. If you can't find smoked scamorza, smoked mozzarella will work beautifully.

In a large fry pan over medium heat, warm ¼ cup of the olive oil. Add the eggplant and mushrooms and stir to coat with the oil. Sprinkle in ¾ tsp. of the salt and a generous grinding of pepper. Sauté until the vegetables are tender and browned in spots, about 20 minutes. Remove from the heat and cover to keep warm.

In a large saucepan over medium heat, combine 3 Tbs. of the olive oil and the garlic and warm until the garlic begins to sizzle, about 2 minutes. Press the garlic with the back of a wooden spoon to release its aroma. Do not let the garlic brown or it will become bitter. Slowly pour the tomatoes into the pan. Be careful, because the oil and juice will spatter. Stir in the remaining ¾ tsp. salt. Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to medium-low and simmer until thickened, about 30 minutes. Remove from the heat, stir in the basil and cover the sauce to keep warm.

Meanwhile, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta and cook until al dente, about 11 minutes or according to the package instructions. Drain, reserving about ½ cup of the cooking water, then return the pasta to the pot. Add the eggplant and mushrooms, about two-thirds of the sauce and the scamorza and toss gently but thoroughly. Add a splash or two of the pasta-cooking water to loosen the sauce, if needed.

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Ingredients for Spaghettini with Summer Squash and Crispy Speck

Fine sea salt, to taste, plus ¼ tsp.

2 Tbs. extra-virgin olive oil

4 oz. Italian speck, cut into small dice

3 garlic cloves, very thinly sliced

1 lb. mixed zucchini and yellow summer squash, sliced very thinly lengthwise using a mandoline or vegetable peeler, then cut into thin strips

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 Tbs. finely shredded fresh basil

1 lb. dried spaghettini

½ cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

Ingredients for Baked Ziti with Eggplant and Smoked Scamorza

½ cup extra-virgin olive oil

1 lb. eggplant, peeled and cubed

8 oz. shiitake mushrooms, stems removed, caps thinly sliced

1½ tsp. fine sea salt, plus more, to taste

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

2 garlic cloves, crushed flat but left whole

5 cups canned diced tomatoes

5 fresh basil leaves, torn into small pieces

1 lb. dried ziti, penne or other short, sturdy pasta

2 cups shredded smoked scamorza cheese

1 cup grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese