

# How to make great pasta dishes

There's no magic required, just loving attention.

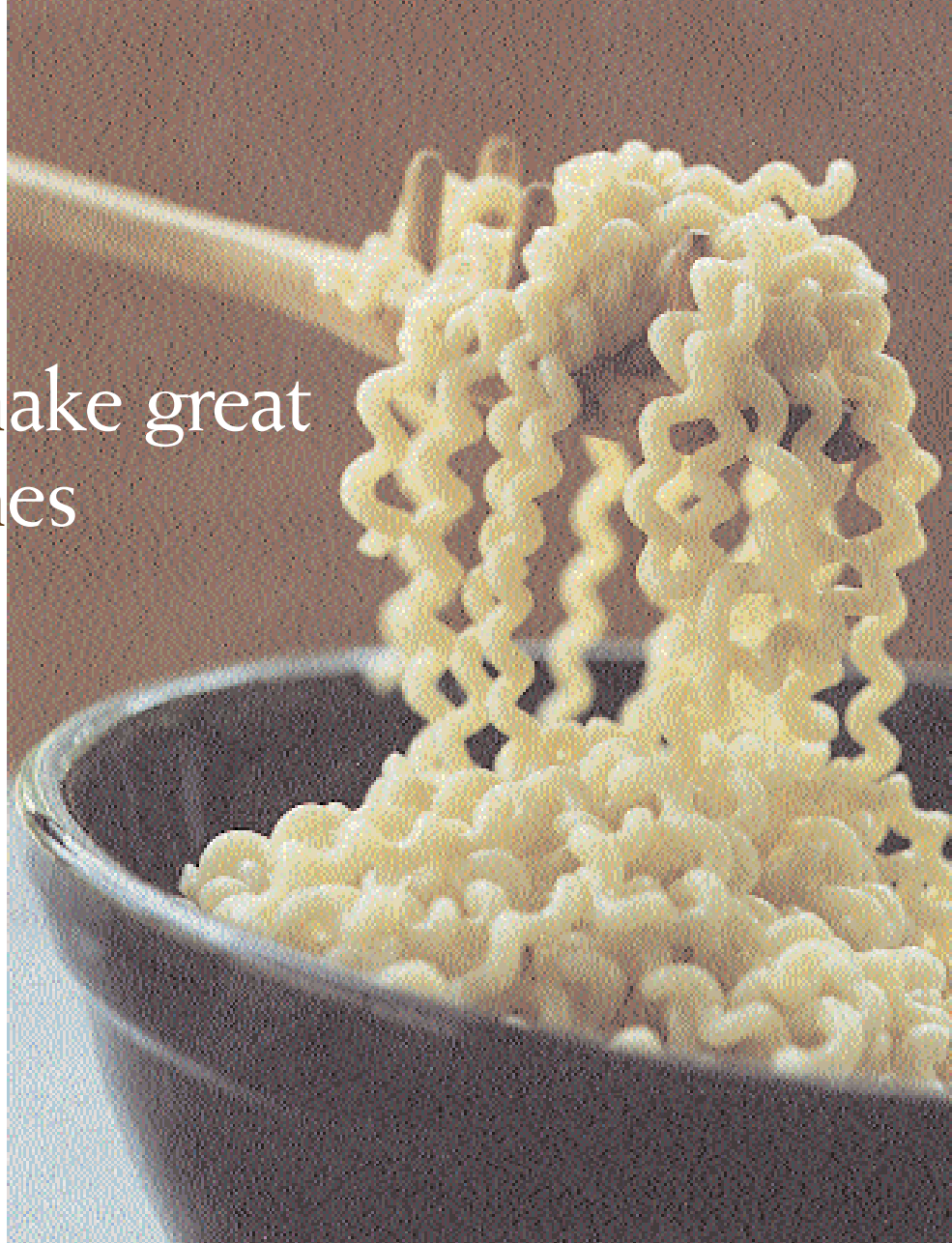
By Sharon Sanders

In Tomie de Paola's illustrated retelling of a classic Calabrian children's folk tale, *Strega Nona*, the Grandma Witch effortlessly cooks up mounds of succulent pasta in her magic pot. Alas, her assistant, Big Anthony, does not pay attention and creates a comic disaster when he tries to cook pasta in the same pot. Big Anthony learns that while a magic pot isn't necessary to cook pasta perfectly, paying attention is.

Pasta tastes so good in Italy because it's cooked with care and attention to detail. Savoring a dish of perfect pasta, like experiencing your first love, is a moment in time that's all too fleeting. That's why we've chosen the cooking of pasta dishes—Italian ones, specifically—as the subject for this month's lesson in our year-long Cooking Class 2000 series. Not to exclude the pasta traditions from elsewhere around the world, but for a beginning cook, chances are that Italian dishes are very familiar already and thus ideal teaching tools. Indeed, you've probably already enjoyed many of the kinds of recipes you'll learn this month, but we've put an especially healthy and tasty spin on our own variations.

The pasta names are probably well known to you, too—spaghetti, lasagna, fusilli, ziti, fettuccine, penne. But learning to take each of these neighborly noodles and combine them with flavors and techniques full of both Italian and Italian-American influences will give you a tremendous inventory of tastes and traditions for more meals than you can count. And we won't have to remind you to pay attention. When cooking Italian, the danger is dipping your spoon into the simmering sauces for a sample so often there isn't enough left when you sit down to eat.

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## Full Credit

You'll learn to make these seven great recipes in this installment of Cooking Class 2000.

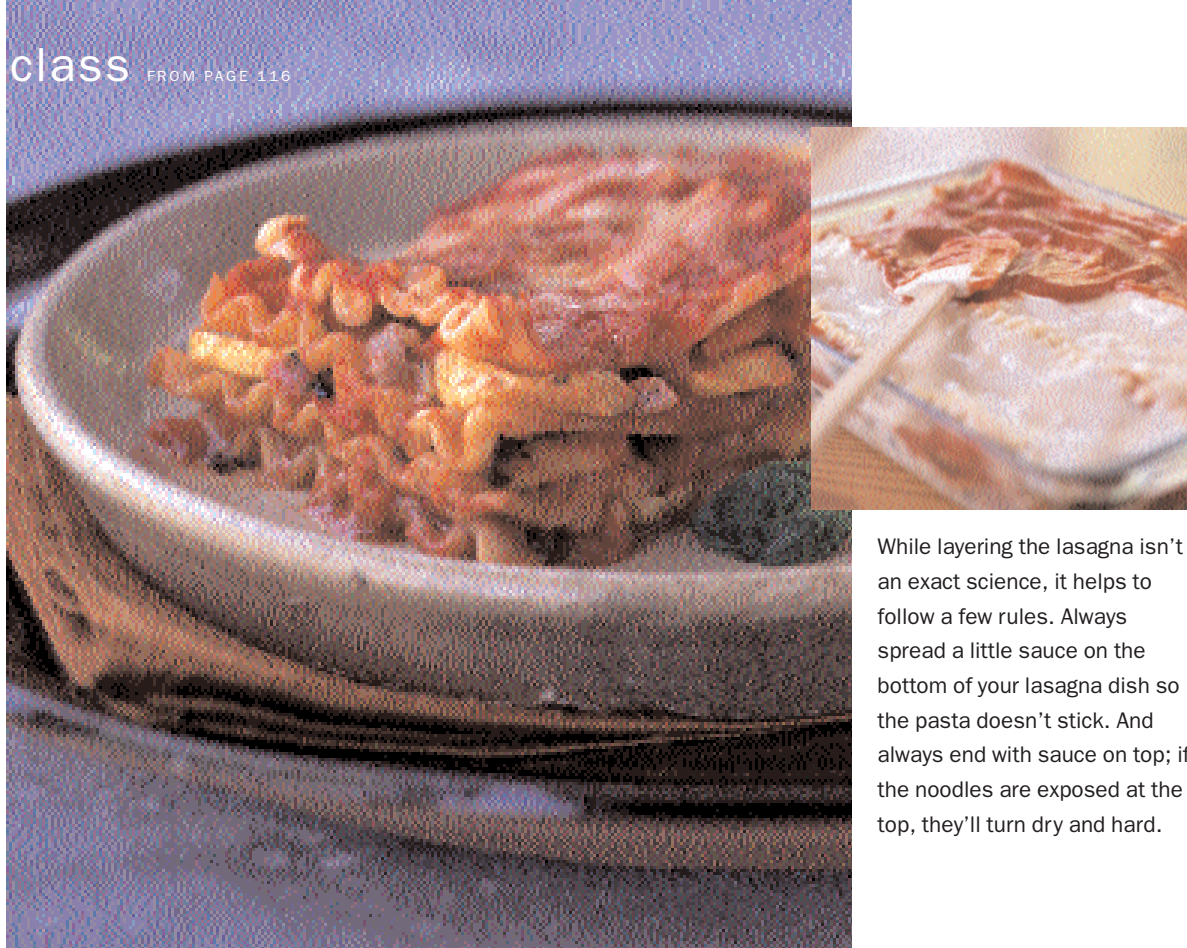
Spaghetti Aglio e Olio	Ziti With Tuscan Porcini
Grilled Summer Vegetable	Mushroom Sauce
Lasagna	Penne With Green Beans,
Spicy Seafood Fusilli	Sun-Dried Tomatoes, and
Farfalle Carbonara	Toasted Breadcrumbs
Fettuccine With Ragù Sauce	

## Techniques You'll Learn

- How to cook pasta
- How to sauce pasta
- How to make ragù sauce

## tips

**You can** assemble this lasagna and refrigerate it up to eight hours ahead. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes, then bake as directed.



While layering the lasagna isn't an exact science, it helps to follow a few rules. Always spread a little sauce on the bottom of your lasagna dish so the pasta doesn't stick. And always end with sauce on top; if the noodles are exposed at the top, they'll turn dry and hard.

### ▲ Grilled Summer Vegetable Lasagna

This recipe has a number of components, but all can be made ahead, particularly the tomato purée and the white sauce. You can substitute 3 (8-ounce) cans of tomato purée for the homemade tomato purée. You can also use a grill pan to prepare the vegetables indoors.

#### GRILLED VEGETABLES:

- 3 large red or yellow bell peppers, seeded and each cut lengthwise into quarters
- Cooking spray
- 3 medium yellow squash, each cut lengthwise into 1/4-inch slices
- 1 large red onion, cut into 1/4-inch slices

#### TOMATO PURÉE:

- 4 pounds tomatoes, cut lengthwise into quarters
- 1/3 cup vodka
- 1 1/2 teaspoons salt

#### WHITE SAUCE:

- 2 1/2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- 1/4 teaspoon salt
- 1/4 teaspoon ground nutmeg
- 2 cups fat-free milk

#### REMAINING INGREDIENTS:

- 4 quarts water
- 12 uncooked lasagna noodles
- 1 cup chopped fresh basil
- 3/4 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 cup (4 ounces) finely shredded Gruyère cheese
- 1/2 cup (2 ounces) grated fresh Parmesan cheese

1. Prepare grill.
2. To prepare grilled vegetables, place bell peppers, skin sides down, on a grill rack coated with cooking spray; cook 15 minutes or until blackened. Place in a zip-top plastic bag; seal. Let stand 15 minutes. Peel and cut into strips.
3. Place squash and onion on grill; cook 5 minutes on each side or until tender.
4. To prepare tomato purée, place tomatoes in a large Dutch oven. Cover and cook over medium heat 30 minutes or until tender, stirring occasionally. Place tomatoes in a blender or food processor; process until smooth. Return to pan. Stir in vodka; bring to a boil. Reduce heat, and simmer 10 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in 1 1/2 teaspoons salt. (You will have 5 cups purée.)
5. To prepare white sauce, combine flour, 1/4 teaspoon salt, and nutmeg in a medium

saucepan; gradually add the milk, stirring with a whisk. Cook over medium-high heat until thick (about 7 minutes), stirring constantly. Set aside.

6. Bring water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add noodles; return to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 10 minutes or until noodles are done, stirring occasionally. Drain.

7. Preheat oven to 375°.

8. Spread 1/3 cup white sauce in bottom of a 13 x 9-inch baking dish coated with cooking spray. Arrange 3 noodles over white sauce; top with one-third of grilled vegetables, 1/3 cup basil, 1/3 cup white sauce, and 1/2 cup tomato purée. Sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon black pepper, 1/4 cup Gruyère, and 2 tablespoons Parmesan. Repeat layers twice, ending with noodles. Spread remaining white sauce, 1 1/2 cups tomato purée, remaining Gruyère, and remaining Parmesan over noodles. Bake at 375° for 45 minutes or until bubbly and top is browned. Remove from oven; let stand 15 minutes. Yield: 8 servings (serving size: 1 piece).

**NOTE:** You will have 2 cups of leftover tomato purée. Cover and refrigerate for 1 week, or freeze up to 3 months.

CALORIES 347 (22% from fat); FAT 8.4g (sat 4.3g, mono 2.3g, poly 1g); PROTEIN 17.4g; CARB 51.8g; FIBER 4.7g; CHOL 22mg; IRON 3.3mg; SODIUM 567mg; CALC 358mg



**Any short**  
pasta such as  
ziti, rigatoni,  
or mostaccioli  
will stand in  
for the penne  
just fine.

## Penne With Green Beans, Sun-Dried Tomatoes, and Toasted Breadcrumbs

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|---|---|
| 1/2 cup boiling water   | 4 cups (2-inch) cut green beans (about 12 ounces)                 |
| 1/2 cup (1 ounce) sun-dried tomatoes, packed without oil (about 12)                     | 2 garlic cloves, minced   |
| 4 quarts water  | 2 tablespoons Italian-seasoned breadcrumbs                        |
| 3 cups uncooked penne (about 12 ounces uncooked tube-shaped pasta) or other short pasta | 1/2 teaspoon salt   |
| 2 tablespoons olive oil, divided  | 1/4 cup (1 ounce) grated fresh pecorino Romano or Parmesan cheese |
|   | 2 tablespoons capers  |
|   | 1 teaspoon red wine vinegar                                       |
|   | 1/4 teaspoon black pepper   |

1. Combine boiling water and sun-dried tomatoes in a bowl; let stand 30 minutes or until soft. Drain tomatoes over a bowl, reserving 1/4 cup liquid; slice tomatoes lengthwise.
2. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add penne; return to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 10 minutes or until al dente, stirring occasionally. Drain.
3. Heat 1 tablespoon oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add green beans; cover and cook 3 minutes, stirring occasionally. Reduce heat to medium; add reserved tomato liquid, tomatoes, and garlic; cover and cook 2 minutes, stirring occasionally. Stir in breadcrumbs and salt; sauté 2 minutes. Stir in penne, 1 tablespoon oil, cheese, capers, vinegar, and pepper. Toss well. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: 2 cups).

CALORIES 360 (25% from fat); FAT 10g (sat 2.4g, mono 5.7g, poly 1.1g); PROTEIN 12.9g; CARB 56.1g; FIBER 4.1g; CHOL 7mg; IRON 3.9mg; SODIUM 745mg; CALC 132mg

In classic carbonara, the heat of the pasta actually cooks the eggs. But for safety's sake, we've cooked them on top of the stove. Once the egg mixture is added to the pasta and cooked over low heat, it's important to stir constantly. This ensures that the eggs get creamy instead of scrambled. ▼



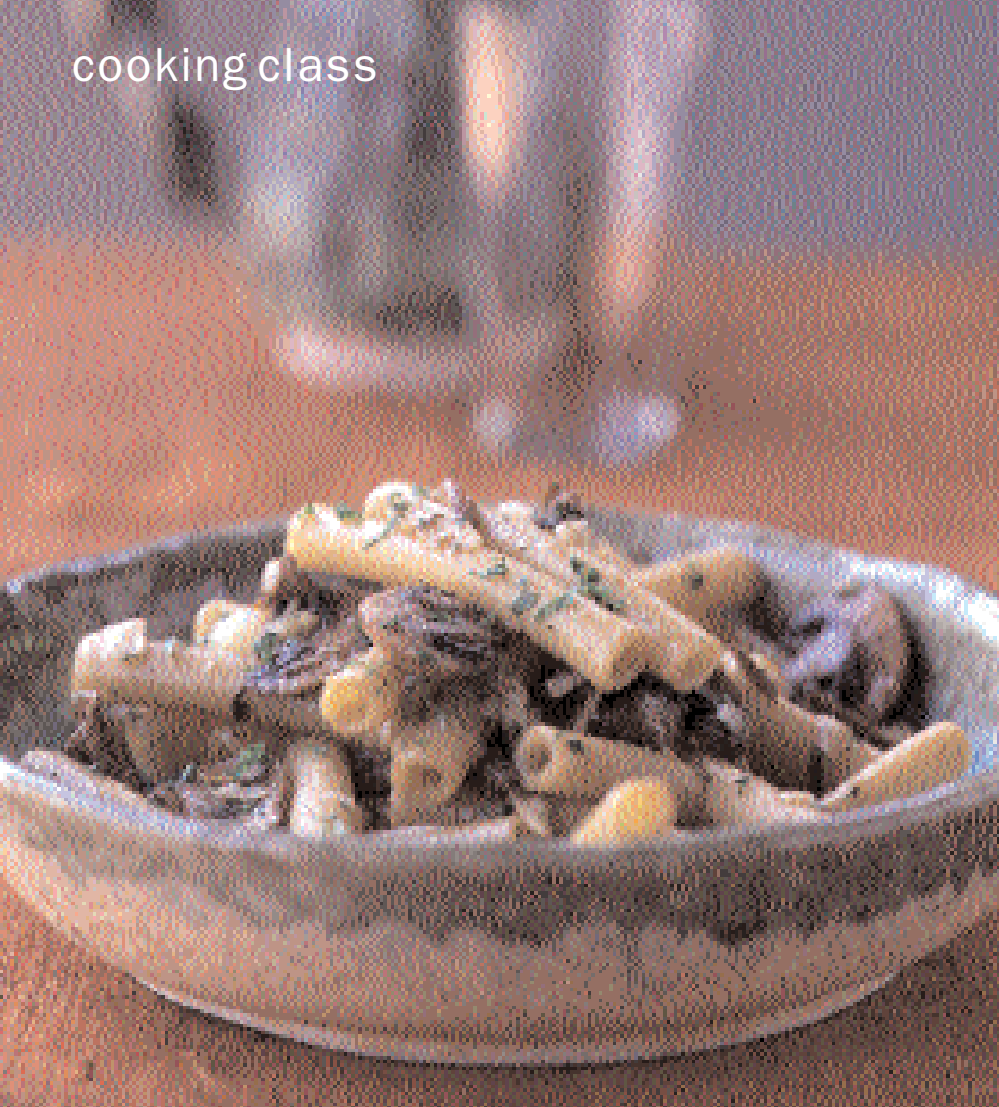
## ◀ Farfalle Carbonara

Be ready to eat, as this dish needs to go straight from the stove to the table—after sitting for just a few minutes, it loses its creaminess. If it's a little thick when done, add some low-fat milk to thin it out. Use a good Romano cheese (such as Locatelli) for the most flavor. You can use spaghetti or fettuccine in place of the farfalle if you prefer. The garlic procedure here may strike you as unorthodox, but we think it works very well.

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| 2 tablespoons water  |
| 2 garlic cloves, minced  |
| 4 quarts water   |
| 3 cups uncooked farfalle (about 8 ounces bow tie pasta) or other short pasta |
| 2 large eggs, lightly beaten   |
| 1/2 cup (2 ounces) grated fresh pecorino Romano cheese or Parmesan cheese    |
| 4 bacon slices, cooked and crumbled  |

1. Heat a large nonstick skillet over medium heat. Add 2 tablespoons water and garlic; remove from heat.
2. Bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add farfalle; return to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 10 minutes or until al dente, stirring occasionally. Remove 1/2 cup pasta cooking water, and whisk into the eggs, stirring vigorously. Drain farfalle; add to garlic mixture in skillet. Stir well. Add egg mixture to farfalle. Cook mixture over medium-low heat until thick (about 4 minutes), stirring constantly. Remove from heat; stir in cheese and bacon. Serve immediately. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: 1 cup).

CALORIES 348 (28% from fat); FAT 10.8g (sat 4.3g, mono 3.8g, poly 1.2g); PROTEIN 17g; CARB 43.6g; FIBER 1.4g; CHOL 123mg; IRON 2.8mg; SODIUM 333mg; CALC 167mg



## ▲ Ziti With Tuscan Porcini Mushroom Sauce

Intensely flavored dried porcini, along with fresh button mushrooms, give this dish a real Tuscan touch. Any dried mushroom will work well in this recipe, but authentic Italian porcini are worth the extra cost.

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|---|--|
| ¾ cup fat-free, less-sodium chicken broth             | 2 garlic cloves, minced  |
| ¼ cup chopped dried porcini mushrooms (about ¼ ounce) | 4 quarts water   |
| 1 tablespoon olive oil                                | 3 cups uncooked ziti (about 8 ounces short tube-shaped pasta) or other short pasta |
| 3 cups sliced button mushrooms (8 ounces)             | ¼ cup (1 ounce) grated fresh Parmesan cheese                                       |
| 1 teaspoon minced fresh or ¼ teaspoon dried rosemary  | 1 tablespoon finely chopped parsley  |
| ⅛ teaspoon salt                                       | ¼ teaspoon black pepper  |

1. Combine broth and porcini mushrooms in a small microwave-safe bowl. Cover with wax paper; microwave at HIGH 2 minutes; let stand 10 minutes.
2. Heat oil in a large nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add button mushrooms, rosemary, salt, and garlic; sauté 3 minutes. Add broth mixture and porcini mushrooms to pan; remove from heat.
3. Bring water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add ziti; return to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 10 minutes or until al dente, stirring occasionally. Drain. Stir ziti into mushroom mixture; cook 3 minutes or until thoroughly heated. Stir in cheese, parsley, and pepper. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: 1½ cups).

CALORIES 295 (20% from fat); FAT 6.4g (sat 1.8g, mono 3.1g, poly 0.8g); PROTEIN 11.8g; CARB 47.6g; FIBER 2.5g; CHOL 5mg; IRON 3.2mg; SODIUM 284mg; CALC 105mg

## Choosing Your Pasta

We think there's actually very little practical cooking difference among the brands of pasta available at the supermarket. Once they're incorporated into a recipe, they all taste about the same, so we don't recommend paying more for a fancy name, domestic or imported. In fact, some independent studies have shown that many people find American-made just as good as Italian.

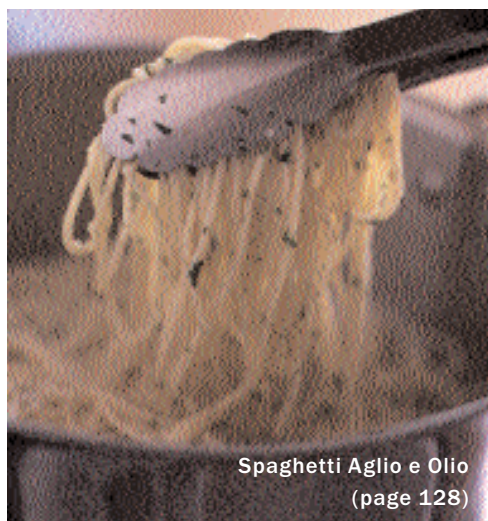
What about dried versus fresh? It's pretty much up to you. In our recipes, we use mostly dried, which is basically a mixture of semolina flour—ground from durum wheat—and water. In commercial factories, the mix is made into a paste that is turned into different shapes by passing through dies, or large metal discs filled with holes. The pasta is then dried and packaged.

Fresh pasta, which can be substituted in any of the recipes, is perishable, so it's generally pricier than dried. It also takes almost no time to cook—two to three minutes on average. In Italy, fresh pasta is traditionally made from soft wheat flour and eggs (so it has more cholesterol than dried). But some American fresh pasta producers use semolina flour to make a refrigerated fresh pasta that's sturdier than the Italian kind.





Pasta can be tricky to serve because it has a tendency to slip and slide. The best serving utensil, especially for longer pasta, is a metal or wooden pasta fork or tongs. For short pasta, a large spoon works fine.



Spaghetti Aglio e Olio  
(page 128)

## Fettuccine With Ragù Sauce

Ragù, or meat sauce, is as varied as the regions in Italy. This version is loosely based on a traditional ragù Bolognese. With thawed ragù from the freezer and refrigerated fresh fettuccine, this homemade dish comes together in less than 15 minutes. You can also use fresh spinach fettuccine or dried fettuccine.

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| 4 quarts water                                 | 2 cups hot Ragù                          |
| 1 (9-ounce) package fresh fettuccine, uncooked | Sauce                                    |
| 2 teaspoons butter or stick margarine          | 2 teaspoons grated fresh Parmesan cheese |

**1.** Bring water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add fettuccine, stirring to separate noodles; bring back to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 3 minutes or until done, stirring occasionally. Drain and return pasta to pan; stir in butter. Add 2 cups Ragù Sauce; cook 1 minute or until thoroughly heated. Sprinkle with cheese. Yield: 4 servings (serving size:  $1\frac{1}{4}$  cups pasta and  $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon cheese).

(Totals include Ragù Sauce) CALORIES 343 (30% from fat); FAT 11.4g (sat 4.7g, mono 4.6g, poly 1.1g); PROTEIN 17.2g; CARB 42.9g; FIBER 1.7g; CHOL 82mg; IRON 3.6mg; SODIUM 384mg; CALC 59mg

### RAGÙ SAUCE:

- 1 teaspoon olive oil
- $1\frac{1}{2}$  cups finely chopped onion
- 1 cup finely chopped celery
- 1 cup finely chopped carrot
- $3\frac{1}{2}$  cups finely chopped portobello mushrooms
- 1 pound ground round
- $\frac{3}{4}$  cup dry white wine (such as Orvieto or Pinot Grigio)
- 1 cup whole milk
- 2 bay leaves
- 1 (16-ounce) can fat-free, less sodium chicken broth
- 1 (10 $\frac{3}{4}$ -ounce) can tomato purée
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{2}$  teaspoon black pepper

**1.** Heat olive oil in a large nonstick saucepan over medium-high heat. Add onion, celery, and carrot; cover and cook 7 minutes. Reduce heat to medium. Add mushrooms; cover and cook 5 minutes. Remove mushroom mixture with a slotted spoon; set aside.

**2.** Add beef to pan; cook over medium-high heat until browned, stirring to crumble. Add wine; bring to a boil, and cook 5 minutes. Add the mushroom mixture, milk, bay leaves, broth, and purée. Heat the mixture to 180° or until tiny bubbles form around edge of pan, stirring frequently (do not boil). Reduce heat to medium-low, and simmer 2 hours. Add salt and pepper; discard bay leaves. Yield: 6 cups (serving size:  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup).

**NOTE:** Cool remaining Ragù Sauce to room temperature. Cover and refrigerate for 1 week, or freeze up to 3 months.

CALORIES 137 (50% from fat); FAT 7.7g (sat 3.1g, mono 3.3g, poly 0.4g); PROTEIN 9.5g; CARB 7.7g; FIBER 1.7g; CHOL 29mg; IRON 1.4mg; SODIUM 328mg; CALC 44mg

## Putting Pasta in the Pot

Cooking the pasta itself is fairly simple, and most packages give directions. But make sure to follow these procedures:

- Use a large pot as full of water as possible. For 8 ounces of dried pasta, you'll want to fill a 4-quart pot.
- Cover pot and bring water to a full rolling boil over high heat before adding pasta.
- Add pasta and stir with a pasta fork.
- Start timing cooking when water returns to a boil. If you use fresh pasta, remember that it cooks more quickly than dried.
- Always cook uncovered over high heat.
- Start testing for doneness a few min-

utes before indicated cooking time. Pasta that offers resistance to the bite but has no trace of brittleness is al dente. This is how you want it. If an undercooked piece of pasta is cut in half, a white dot or line is clearly visible in the center. Al dente pasta has only a speck of white remaining, meaning the pasta has absorbed just enough water to hydrate it.

- Set a large colander in the sink so water drains quickly. Do not rinse.
- Return pasta to the warm cooking pot or add to the skillet with sauce, and toss immediately with large tongs or a pasta fork.

**A NOTE ON SALTING.** We agree with most cooks that adding salt to the cooking water helps bring out the flavor of the pasta. While we didn't find that salted water changed the pasta's consistency (as some folks assert), it certainly makes the pasta taste better on its own. But when tossing the pasta with flavorful sauces, as we've done in these recipes, salting the water is far less critical. So to avoid adding unnecessary sodium, we chose not to salt the water in these recipes, and our nutritional analyses reflect that. If you're not watching your sodium intake, you can salt as you prefer.

## Spicy Seafood Fusilli

Fusilli is one of the few pastas that come both long and short. Either will work in this dish, but we prefer the long.

**You can use**  
canned clams  
in place of  
fresh if you  
prefer. Just  
make sure to  
drain them  
first.

4 quarts water	1/8 teaspoon salt
8 ounces uncooked long fusilli or 3 cups uncooked short fusilli (twisted spaghetti)	1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, undrained
2 tablespoons olive oil	16 littleneck clams, scrubbed
1/3 cup minced shallots	3/4 pound large shrimp, peeled and deveined
1/2 teaspoon fennel seeds, crushed	2 teaspoons grated lemon rind
Dash of powdered saffron (optional)	1 teaspoon minced seeded jalapeño pepper

1. Bring water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add fusilli; return to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 10 minutes or until fusilli is al dente, stirring occasionally. Drain.
2. Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over medium-low heat. Add the shallots, fennel seeds, and saffron (if desired). Cover and cook for 4 minutes or until shallots are tender, stirring occasionally. Stir in salt and tomatoes. Increase heat to medium; cover and cook for 5 minutes. Add the clams. Increase heat to high; cover and cook for 6 minutes or until clams open. Add shrimp, rind, and jalapeño. Stir gently. Cover and cook for 3 minutes or until the shrimp are done. Discard any unopened clamshells. Stir in fusilli. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: 2 cups).

CALORIES 396 (21% from fat); FAT 9.4g (sat 1.3g, mono 5.3g, poly 1.6g); PROTEIN 26.2g; CARB 50.8g; FIBER 2.2g; CHOL 109mg; IRON 9.6mg; SODIUM 358mg; CALC 96mg

## Spaghetti Aglio e Olio

In Italian, *aglio e olio* (AH-lyoh ay OH-lyoh) means “garlic and oil.” Typically, the garlic is fried in olive oil on the stovetop, but we’ve cooked it with olive oil in the microwave, which is easier and omits the risk of burning the garlic. You can add some crushed red pepper flakes for a spicier version.

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil	8 ounces uncooked spaghetti
1/4 teaspoon dried oregano	1/2 cup fat-free, less-sodium chicken broth
4 large garlic cloves, minced	2 tablespoons minced fresh parsley
4 quarts water	

1. Combine the olive oil, oregano, and minced garlic in a small microwave-safe bowl. Cover with wax paper, and microwave at HIGH for 1 minute.
2. Bring water to a boil in a large stockpot. Add spaghetti; return to a boil. Cook, uncovered, 10 minutes or until al dente, stirring occasionally. Drain. Return to pot. Stir in the garlic mixture and broth. Cook over medium heat 4 minutes or until broth is absorbed, stirring constantly. Stir in parsley. Yield: 4 servings (serving size: 1 cup).

CALORIES 278 (25% from fat); FAT 7.7g (sat 1.0g, mono 5.1g, poly 1.0g); PROTEIN 7.9g; CARB 43.7g; FIBER 1.5g; CHOL 0mg; IRON 2.4mg; SODIUM 66mg; CALC 20mg

*Cookbook author Sharon Sanders is working on a book of Italian recipes and reminiscences to be published in spring 2001.*



Pasta needs lots of water to roll around in—this dilutes the starch the pasta releases. Too little water makes the pasta starchy or gummy. Four quarts for 8 ounces of pasta is ample. Bring the water to a boil, add the pasta, and stir to separate the strands.

## How to Sauce Pasta

In general, long strands are most compatible with smoother sauces that coat them all over. Short shapes work well with chunky sauces that can be caught in the nooks and crannies.

It’s important to balance the amount of sauce and the way it’s combined with the pasta. Think of sauce as a seasoning or dressing that is tossed with the pasta, much like a salad and dressing, until each piece of pasta is moistened. Plain pasta is bland. The idea is to impart well-flavored seasoning to each bite of the finished dish.

## Course Syllabus

Now that you know how to make all sorts of pasta dishes, come back for some good old-fashioned roasting. We’ll show you how to fire up the oven and roast everything from chicken to leg of lamb in our October class. And don’t miss out on the rest of our year-2000 series. Mark these months.

**October:** How to Roast a Chicken and Rave

**November:** How to Make Plenty of Bread

**December:** How to Make the Ultimate Light Cookie