

Pasta Possibilities

by Salvatore Martocchia

Do you know there are more than 350 different kinds of dry pastas? I was flabbergasted to learn this. And that doesn't count Asian, Greek, Middle Eastern noodles or anything like that. There is evidence that pasta was eaten by the Romans in Pompeii as early as 79 AD, which we know thanks to an eruption of Mount Vesuvius that preserved the evidence. Pasta, the quintessential Italian dinner staple, now is a beloved food staple all over the planet.

There are long pastas like angel hair, fettuccine, bucatini, linguine, tagliatelle and, of course, spaghetti. Then there are tubes. They are generally short, but there are a few long ones. Of course, there are pastas for soup and pastas that are stuffed, like ravioli, cannelloni and tortellini. When I was growing up, my friends and family all called pasta macaroni, not pasta.

One of the most important things people need to keep in mind when selecting a pasta is which will go best with the sauce it is being paired with. As we know, pastas react differently; some hold the sauce more aggressively and others more gently. This really affects our bites and tastes.

I've always liked tubes like bucatini, ziti and my absolute favorite, rigatoni. For soups, my mother was partial to pastina with chicken soup and ditalini with pasta and peas or pasta fagiole. There was always orzo with lentils.

As I got older and more imported pastas found their ways to the U. S., I recognized a veritable plethora of special shapes like campanelle, gemeli, and radiatore. And the list goes on, sometimes with only the slightest variation in size or shape, depending on its geographic origin as well as the differences caused by the local water and flour used in the making.

My mother always said the sauces that were more oil-based paired best with long, skinny noodles, which need a lot of lubrication to keep them from sticking together. Meat sauces go well with long, ribbon noodles and heavy sauces always go well with shells. Smooth sauces pair ex-

cellently with twists, and hearty sauces that contain chunks of vegetables or cheese go well in pastas in which the sauce can hide inside its bends and curls.

It is fascinating to discover the names of most pastas translate loosely into a description of their appearance. For instance, linguine means little tongues. I guess it's because they're wider and flatter than spaghetti. Fettuccine means little ribbons. Tagliatelle means to cut, perhaps because it is similar to fettuccine but generally more narrow.

Pappardelle means to eat with childish joy (I'm not quite sure about this one). It is the largest of the ribbon-shaped pastas and terrific with slow-cooked meats of any kind. Mafaldini is another flat pasta with wavy edges. Named after a princess who was the founder of Savoy, Mafalda, it's sometimes called little queens and pairs well with game and fish sauces.

One of my favorites, bucatini, is a spaghetti-like pasta with a hole in the middle. I'm told the name translates into hollow straws. Most of us know that farfalle are bowties, and that conchiglie are shells, though I never heard the name because we simply called them shells. Cavatelli, which looks like little hot dog buns, is great with broccoli or broccoli rabe; campanelle, little bells or little flowers, is a cone-shaped pasta with ruffled edges and a big hollow center. Lest we forget, one of America's favorite pastas is penne, which takes its name from its pen-like shape and is almost as popular as spaghetti.

Keep in mind you want to get bronze-cut pastas whenever possible. Bronze-cut pastas are extruded through dies made of perforated bronze plates that cut and shape the pasta. Bronze dies produce a finished noodle with a much rougher and more porous texture that absorbs the sauce more efficiently and improves the feel and flavor.

Most factories producing pasta use teflon dies, which cut and shape the pastas, but do not leave the rougher, more porous texture on the finished product. This is definitely a cheaper, faster process, but produces a less desir-

able pasta. More restaurants today like to brag they make their pastas in-house. Hopefully, this means bronze cuts that produce strands with abrasions that allow the sauces to cling to the pasta and saturate each forkful.

CONSIGLI DELLA NONNA

(Advice from grandma)

It is better to use too much water to boil your pasta than not enough, which prevents the noodles from sticking together. Never cook two different types of pastas together because different shapes and sizes require different cooking times. Test your noodles for doneness by breaking one in half and, if there's still white in the middle, you know it needs to cook some more. Remember, it will continue to cook a bit more after you remove it from the heat if you don't run cold water over it after draining.

Very importantly, save some of the pasta water in case

your sauce needs more liquid. Most recipes recommend cooking to the al dente, which means to the tooth, resulting in pasta that is chewy and firm and holds its shape against whatever sauce it's put in. That's really important. Do what some of our mothers did and put some sauce on the pasta as soon as it's drained so the noodles don't start to dry out and stick. There is great controversy about whether to run cold water over the noodles after you drain them to prevent them from overcooking and getting goopy. My mother did; my wife doesn't. In our house, it's because running cold water over the pasta takes away some of the starch and cools what should be served piping hot.

By the way, I grew up in a simpler time. It was all macaroni and it was all Gioia.



What's your favorite pasta? Always a tough choice.