

The New York Times

From Italy, the Truth About Pasta; The Italians know that less is more: a call for a return to basics

By NANCY HARMON JENKINS SEPT. 17, 1997

Americans are strictly bush-leaguers when it comes to pasta, consuming about 26 pounds per capita each year. Italians, it almost goes without saying, are the world champions, averaging 60 pounds of pasta a year for every man, woman and child in the country. Which works out to five pounds a month. Or by my informal reckoning, at least one large plate of well-sauced and seasoned pasta six out of seven days a week.

And most of that pasta comes from a box.

A persistent notion in American kitchens is that pasta, to be good, must be freshly made by hand, preferably by a venerable grandmother wielding a rolling pin. Second best is pasta cranked from a machine of the kind that tends to gather dust in American kitchens, and with good reason: except in skilled hands, the pasta that exudes from it is seldom very good. Finally, there's the kind of ready-made, fresh pasta available in American shops -- an overworked, extruded paste that too often turns to goo in the cooking water.

And only after all that comes pasta secca, pasta in a box.

Not here in Italy. Except in a few regions of the north, Italians don't bother much with pasta fresca at all. Don't get me wrong. Beautifully made pasta fresca is glorious, but for everyday meals, whether in high-priced Milanese restaurants or humble Tuscan farmhouses, Italian cooks rely on the stuff in the box. And they don't apologize for it, either.

That's not just because pasta secca represents a cheap, quick, easy way to throw together a delicious dish. Italian cooks, professional and at home, are fully persuaded that commercial dried pasta is a high-quality product, every bit as tasty as -- and often even better than -- pasta fresca.

The most popular dried pasta in Italy is Barilla, which has recently become more widely available in the United States. Like all Italian dried pasta, it is made under rigid Government controls from hard durum-wheat flour, called semola di grano duro in Italian and semolina in English. (Durum-wheat flour is higher in protein and better able to stand up to the rigors of pasta making and cooking than softer bread flour, which is used for making most pasta fresca.

More discerning cooks and pasta lovers in Italy, however, are turning away from such industrially produced products and seeking out a handful of artisanal producers who make pasta the old-fashioned way. There are two important differences in the process: the pasta is extruded through bronze dies instead of through industrial Teflon, giving it a rough-textured surface to which sauce clings rather than slipping off, and the pasta is dried slowly at low temperatures so that it retains more of the nutty flavor and aroma of durum wheat.

The bias for fresh over dried is just one of the pasta misunderstandings from which we Americans suffer. In fact, whenever I return to the States after a few months in Italy, I'm struck by how often this simple dish is cooked poorly and sauced badly. That's as true in restaurants (including Italian restaurants in the United States) as in home kitchens.

My own moment of truth took place years ago in a vaunted restaurant in Aspen, Colo., when I was faced with a large oval plate on which slippery, slimy, overcooked corkscrews peeped shyly from a small lake of highly seasoned, cream-thickened sauce. Just back from a year in Italy, I recoiled. And I recognized that the "more is always better" creed operating on so many American tables was anathema to an appreciation of Italian cuisine. This despite the fact that Americans eat the relatively low 26 pounds of pasta a year, according to Business Trends Analysts, market researchers in Commack, N.Y.

What's gone wrong back home in the United States?

Just ask Fred Plotkin, who wrote the highly regarded "Authentic Pasta Book" (Simon & Schuster, 1995) and who has another book, "Recipes From Paradise" (Little, Brown), due in October. He doesn't hesitate in identifying the problems.

"Three immense ones I notice invariably," Mr. Plotkin said. "We overcook pasta, we serve it in immense portions, and we oversauce it."

Why? "We're still stuck in the legacy of immigrant Italians who tried to stave off hunger by consuming large amounts of pasta," said Mr. Plotkin, who lives part of the year in the Ligurian seaside town of Camogli. "They don't do that in the south of Italy anymore, you know. They don't need to."

Simplicity and ease of approach are the keys to good pasta in Italy.

"I really think it's time for some pasta therapy," Mr. Plotkin said. "We Americans need to get back to the basics, the 1-2-3's of pasta. Just take a box of spaghetti, some canned tomatoes and some good extra virgin olive oil, and you'll make a dish that's far superior to that chicly complex thing we aspire to."

He thinks there's a nervousness that reminds him of how Americans approach sex: "Was it good for you? Did I do it right?"

According to every Italian I know, overcooking is the single most common American failing.

Yet, we all know what pasta al dente means, or think we do. It's pasta that is tender through and through but that still retains a pleasant, slightly chewy texture. Carlo Latini, whose small family firm in the Marche region on the Adriatic Sea produces pasta by old-fashioned, low-temperature, artisanal methods from wheat grown to his own specifications, is very precise about it: when you cut into a strand of cooked spaghetti, it will appear cooked through, except for a white ghost, a tiny spot of not-quite-rawness, at the center of the strand. Mr. Latini calls this the anima, the soul of the pasta.

The only way to tell when pasta is done is to test. And test again. At the precise moment the pasta is ready, it must be drained, sauced and served. So, it's important to have a colander, sauce and a warm serving dish ready as soon as the water is put on to boil.

On the al dente front, good pasta cooks learn to trust their instincts. When pasta is al dente, don't chicken out. Dump it into the colander immediately, remembering that residual heat will cook it just a little more.

Actually, I am persuaded that a more common but related error is using too little water, a mistake that leads to stewed rather than boiled pasta -- and stewed pasta will always be gummy and overcooked. A one-pound box of pasta, or enough for six servings, must cook in at least five quarts of vigorously boiling, salted water, and more is probably better. This is not exactly earth-shattering news, yet it is advice that seems to have almost no power of persuasion. We Americans insist on cramming a pound of spaghetti into a two-and-a-half-quart pot, hoping no one will notice.

But if you don't cheat and you use ample water, you can bring it to a rolling boil, add two tablespoons of salt and then the pasta, and stir vigorously to immerse all the pasta as rapidly as possible in the water, which -- because there's enough of it -- will return quickly to a boil. When the pasta is done -- in about five to six minutes (more for thicker pasta, less for spaghettini or angel-hair pasta) -- remove it and drain it in a large colander, but not too thoroughly, since a little water clinging to the strands will help to keep the pasta moist. Turn it into a big serving bowl that has been previously warmed with a couple of ladlefuls of the boiling pasta water. Then sauce it and serve immediately.

The sauce is another source of grave misunderstanding. It can be as simple as chopped garlic and dried red chili pepper simmered in olive oil; in fact, I don't know anything better. But if it is complex, it must still be uncluttered, in a sense. For instance, a southern ragu might be made with a variety of meats

simmered for hours with tomatoes and aromatics. But then the meats would be removed and served apart as a second course, while the meat-flavored sauce dresses the pasta.

The point of the dish is not the sauce but the pasta. Like butter on bread, the sauce is there simply as a counterpoint. There should be sufficient sauce to lightly coat each strand of pasta and no more -- no puddles of sauce congealing in the bottom of the dish, no oily emulsions from the corkscrews of pasta.

In Italian, the word for sauce, "salsa," is rarely used with pasta. Instead, Italians speak of the "condimento," the condiment, that dresses the dish. The pasta sauce, as a condiment, is served in quantities of roughly a quarter-cup a serving.

A frequent restaurant technique is to cook the pasta until it is within a minute or two of being done, drain it, toss it into hot sauce and then let it finish cooking in the sauce on the stove. In Italy, this is called "pasta saltata in padella." Its purpose is to let the pasta absorb the flavors of the sauce.

Mr. Latini's wife, Carla, the marketing director of the family company and, not surprisingly, a first-rate pasta cook, says the technique brings about a full marriage between the pasta and its condimento. At the beach-side restaurant where we were all lunching on delicious Latini spaghetti ai frutti di mare, she pointed out that the pasta had finished cooking in a very light tomato sauce. Then at the last minute, delicately steamed shrimp, mussels and tiny clams still in their shells were stirred in. Simplicity and perfection.

Cheese? If you wish, but Italians use far less grated cheese than many of us think they do. A scant teaspoonful a serving is considered sufficient for most dishes, and of course it is freshly grated, either Parmigiano Reggiano, grana padana or a dry, aged pecorino (sheep's milk cheese).

Not all pasta dishes, of course, benefit from the addition of cheese. The general view is that dishes that are redolent of garlic do not need any cheese added. But the American prohibition against serving cheese with seafood -- a final misconception -- is often flouted in Italy.

Americans in Italy, indulging in that first beautiful dish of pasta, may marvel at the magic wrought by Italian cooks. It isn't really magic, though. It's an art born of simplicity and balance and the recognition that, as with most things in the kitchen, less is often ever so much better than more.

The Key to Good Pasta Is in the Drying

MOST Italian pasta sold in American markets is at least adequate. The best, however, comes from a handful of small, family-owned companies that produce pasta by traditional, artisanal methods. At least four of these export

to the United States: Rustichella d'Abruzzo; Benedetto Cavalieri, from the Apulia region; Martelli, from Tuscany, and Latini, from the Marche region.

These companies make their pasta by mixing the dough at low temperatures and then extruding it through bronze dies. The dies give the surface of the pasta a microscopic roughness, a porosity that makes for a more perfect marriage with the sauce, which will cling instead of sliding off.

The most important factor in producing good, flavorful pasta secca is the drying. Traditionally, pasta is dried at low temperatures, around 104 degrees, for a long time -- as long as 30 hours for spaghetti and longer for more complicated shapes. Industrial pasta may be dried very quickly at temperatures ranging from 140 to 194 degrees, or even higher.

Low-temperature drying maintains the aroma and flavor of the wheat, as well as some of its nutritional value, including wheat protein.

At 140 degrees, Carlo Latini says, the starch molecules in wheat open, and a Maillard reaction, a chemical term for toasting, begins. The dark yellow color that this toasting produces in conventionally made pasta is an easy way to distinguish the product from traditionally made pasta, which has a pale creamy hue.