



Four Seasons Pasta

A Year of Inspired Recipes in the Italian Tradition

By Janet Fletcher

photographs by Victoria Pearson

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introduction

What's for dinner? At my house, on a typical weeknight, there's a good chance it's pasta with vegetables. If I could think of other dishes that were equally easy, healthful, quick, economical, and satisfying, I would make them—but I can't. In my estimation, it would be difficult to find a more sensible way to eat for life.

For convenience, I keep my kitchen stocked with the pasta basics: dried noodles, good olive oil, anchovies, capers, olives, canned tomatoes, and grating cheese. My own garden, neighborhood grocery, and local farmers' market provide the rest, a changing parade of vegetables for pasta sauces that follow the seasons.

It's impossible to grow bored when your pasta repertoire tracks the harvest. Just when you think you've had enough asparagus, they leave the stage, replaced by fava beans and peas. On the heels of the last tomatoes come the first autumn squashes, like the dense kabocha, perfect for stuffing ravioli. And when winter skies are grayest, the market fills with tempting pasta greens: mustard, broccoli rabe, cabbage, and kale.

From years of traveling in Italy, I know that many Italians share my passion, especially in the poorer south. In Puglia and Sicily, people eat pasta with vegetables daily, not because they are poor any longer, but because their communities once were and a regional taste for simplicity endures.

Orecchiette with broccoli rabe, the iconic dish of Puglia, could hardly be more humble. In times past, the broccoli rabe came from the household *orto*, or garden; the olive oil from a neighbor, probably in trade; the fresh orecchiette from the cook's hands, made with only semolina and water, not costly eggs. (Today, most Italian home cooks buy dried pasta.) For a pittance you had a nourishing meal, one that's still commonplace on Puglia's tables, and not just among the frugal. Even Italians of means take pleasure in these simple, seasonal dishes. I have eaten pasta with wild mustard greens at the table of a *marchesa*.

In the following pages, you'll find four seasons' worth of ideas for saucing pasta with fresh vegetables. Most of these recipes come from the Italian tradition, from dishes I've sampled in Italian restaurants and homes. A few are my own fantasies and incorporate vegetables I particularly love, such as fresh shelling beans. With the exception of the stuffed dishes—cannelloni and ravioli—the recipes are uncomplicated, easy to execute, and within the capabilities of beginning cooks.

Although I chose the sauces in this book because they showcase seasonal vegetables, the collection is not vegetarian. Many recipes include a little sausage, pancetta, prosciutto, or anchovy as an accent or enrichment, but vegetarians can simply leave them out. Those who make the recipes as written may be surprised at how satisfying a nearly meatless meal can be.

When entertaining, you can serve these dishes in small portions as a first course, followed, in the Italian style, by fish or meat. But as a daily matter, I enjoy these pasta preparations as a main course. When my husband and I dine alone, I make a half-recipe, supplemented by a few olives or toasted almonds to nibble on while we're cooking, and a salad or wedge of cheese afterward. If there's a better way to eat for long-term health and satisfaction, I don't know it.

A PASTA PRIMER

A good sauce is nothing without good pasta underneath. For the best results, take some time to master

the fundamentals of choosing dried pasta, making fresh pasta, and correctly cooking both. You'll find guidelines to these basic techniques in the following pages.

choosing pasta

The most significant step you can take in becoming a better pasta cook is to choose a good brand of dried pasta. Well-made pasta cooks to an evenly firm, al dente texture. It has a pleasant, wheaty flavor and a rough texture that encourages the sauce to adhere.

Inferior pasta is slippery. When boiled, it turns mushy outside before it's done inside. It has little wheaty taste and lacks the chewy elasticity of high-quality pasta, even when you take pains not to overcook it. Poorly made pasta can compromise the most carefully tended sauce, so it makes sense to insist on quality.

Superior pasta starts with high-quality durum wheat, typically blended from different sources to get a combination of flavor and strength. Manufacturers continually monitor their flour deliveries to make sure each batch has the low humidity and high protein content they want.

Beyond the flour, two other factors contribute significantly to quality: a long drying time at low temperatures, and the use of bronze dies. Inexpensive industrial pasta is dried in a few hours at high temperatures, which alters the protein characteristics and thus the flavor and texture of the pasta. More quality-conscious manufacturers may take 36 to 48 hours to dry their noodles, a costly practice but one that pays off by preserving taste and texture.

The dies are the disklike attachments used to cut the pasta into myriad shapes, from spaghetti to shells to wagon wheels. The better producers use heavy bronze dies, which yield a rough-textured pasta. But bronze dies are expensive and require frequent maintenance so more cost-conscious producers use Teflon dies. Pasta cut with a Teflon die is smooth and slick on the outside, so sauce doesn't cling well. You can feel the difference among shapes cut with bronze versus Teflon dies, and you can see it clearly with a magnifying lens.

Not surprisingly, good pasta costs more, but I think it's a price worth paying. Among supermarket brands, I think De Cecco is exceptional—a top-quality, affordable Italian pasta for everyday use. For guests or special occasions, I spring for the top-of-the-line Italian brands, such as Rustichella, Latini, and Martelli. I have yet to find a domestic pasta with the cooking and eating qualities I seek.

cooking pasta

Many myths persist about cooking pasta, and they turn up as questions whenever I teach a pasta class. Although the cooking process could hardly be simpler, people seem to want to make it complex. They worry about when to add salt to the water, whether to add oil, how to test for doneness, and how to keep noodles from sticking together.

You will cook perfect pasta every time if you follow these guidelines:

Use lots of water. Pasta needs to swim freely in rapidly boiling water to shed its starch and cook evenly. To cook 1 pound of pasta, I use an 8-quart pot filled with 6 quarts of salted water. Cooking pasta in too small a pot with too little water is the most frequent mistake I see others make.

Salt the water generously. The salt has nothing to do with helping the pasta cook faster, as some claim, and everything to do with flavor. Yes, salt raises the boiling point of water, but you would have to use a more-than-palatable amount to bring the boiling point up significantly. The salt's purpose is to flavor the pasta.

Many recipes insist that you salt the boiling water just before you add the pasta. I salt the water just after I fill the pot so I won't forget to do it. It makes absolutely no difference. Salt it whenever you like, as long as you do so before you add the pasta. Although I never measure, 2 tablespoons of salt to 6 quarts of water is about right.

Should you put oil in the pasta water to keep the noodles from sticking together? Definitely not, with one exception. Oil does prevent sticking, but it also keeps the sauce from clinging to the pasta—big drawback. If you sauce the pasta immediately after draining, the noodles won't stick. The only time I add oil to the pasta water is when boiling fresh wide pasta sheets for lasagne or cannelloni. The little slick of oil keeps the cooked sheets from sticking to each other as they wait their turn to go into the baking dish.

Stir the pasta immediately after adding it to the water to keep it from sticking to the bottom of the pot. Stir frequently during the first couple of minutes and occasionally after that.

Don't break long pasta to fit it in the pot. With a few exceptions (see [Spaghetti Spezzati con Piselli](#)), long pasta is meant to remain long. Part of the pleasure of eating it is twirling it around your fork, a pleasure diminished if you break the strands.

Unless you have a powerful stove, cover the pot after adding the pasta so the water returns to a boil as quickly as possible. Uncover once the water returns to a boil.

Test pasta for doneness by tasting it. There is no other way. I have cooked so much pasta that I can almost tell when it's done by sight, but I still set a timer and check by taste. Although many pasta packages include recommended cooking times, they are often inaccurate. De Cecco's recommended times are almost uniformly on target, but I distrust most others.

Dried pasta is done when it is no longer hard at the core but still firm and pleasantly chewy. This is what Italians mean by *al dente*. If it presents no resistance to the tooth, it is overcooked. Fresh pasta should be cooked until it is tender and no longer doughy, but with a slight resistance.

Before you drain the pasta, take out some “insurance.” Set aside about 1 cup of the hot pasta water to moisten pasta and sauce after you toss them together. I find that a little additional moisture is almost always needed, especially with fresh pasta.

Drain pasta in a large colander or sieve. Shake a few times to remove excess water, but don't shake it dry. Leave some water clinging to the pasta to help the sauce cloak it nicely. Return it to the warm pot you cooked it in and sauce it immediately.

Never rinse pasta, which would cool it off unnecessarily.

saucing and serving pasta

Use warmed platters and bowls when serving pasta. Either warm them in a low oven or by filling them with hot water until you need them.

Pasta is most appealing when it is lightly sauced so that you can actually taste the noodles. For a clingy sauce, such as one made of tomato or cream, use just enough to coat the noodles. A mere 1½ cups of tomato sauce is enough for 1 pound of pasta. There should be no sauce left in the bottom of the bowl when you finish the pasta.

Remember that pasta is bland, so sauces need to be highly seasoned.

For many recipes, I drain the pasta when it is about 1 minute shy of *al dente* and finish cooking it in the sauce. This technique allows the pasta to absorb some of the flavor of the sauce. It's a good method to use for “saucy” sauces with tomato or cream; when the sauce is predominantly olive oil and vegetables, such as for [Orecchiette con Cime di Rapa e Salsiccia](#), it's less useful.

Cream sauces on fresh pasta are a challenge for novice pasta cooks. If you reduce the cream too

much, the pasta will clump. You must keep the sauce much looser than you may imagine because fresh pasta is thirsty and will soak it up. This is especially true if your pasta is freshly made. Drying the pasta for a few hours makes it easier to work with and less absorbent. In any case, when saucing fresh pasta with a cream-based sauce, err on the side of under-reducing it. You can always cook the pasta and sauce together in the skillet if the sauce seems too thin.

You can serve pasta family style from a large platter, or you can serve it already portioned into individual bowls. Although I love the collegiality of serving family style, I usually portion the pasta in the kitchen so that each diner gets the right amount of sauce on the pasta.

about portion size

In my home, 1 pound of pasta serves four people as the main course of a simple dinner. If I'm serving the pasta as a first course or as part of a multicourse meal, I figure 1 pound for six people.

choosing the right shape for your sauce

Italians have firm opinions about which pasta shape goes with which sauce. These ideas aren't whimsical; they derive from generations of experience and observation. Although some sauces are versatile enough to use on virtually any noodle—short or long, fresh or dried—other sauces and shapes have traditional associations, and with good reason.

With long dried pasta, such as spaghetti or bucatini:

Tomato-based sauces; olive oil-based sauces with chopped vegetables such as broccoli rabe, cauliflower, or radicchio; braised vegetable sauces, such as slow-cooked onions, artichokes, or sweet peppers.

With short dried tubular pasta, such as penne rigate or rigatoni:

Tomato-based sauces; ricotta-based sauces; vegetable purees; baked pastas. Because you can't twirl these shapes, they are difficult to pair with vegetables that are not bound in tomato, béchamel, or cream.

With short dried pasta with hollows, such as fusilli, cavatappi, or conchiglie:

Chunky tomato-based sauces; vegetable purees; braised vegetables; sauces with nuggets of meat or bits of vegetable that can slip into the hollows.

With long fresh pasta, such as fettuccine or pappardelle:

Butter- or cream-based sauces; spring vegetables such as asparagus, artichokes, fava beans, and peas; tomato sauces; mushroom sauces.

With traditional regional shapes such as cavatelli:

Fresh shelling beans or dried beans; tomato sauce

With traditional regional shapes such as orecchiette:

Broccoli rabe; cauliflower; tomato sauce; artichokes; arugula; fava beans

MAKING FRESH PASTA

Your pasta-making skills will improve dramatically if you put them to regular use. I discovered this

when I moved to a town where I could no longer buy good fresh pasta. If I wanted it, I had to make it myself.

In the years since, I have shaved many minutes off my production time. I can now produce 1 pound of fresh pasta, from start through cleanup, in about 40 minutes. As a result, I no longer think of fresh pasta as a project for weekends only.

Even if you do have a source for high-quality fresh pasta, made daily with whole eggs, I encourage you to try making your own. Once you become comfortable with the motions and the feel of the dough, you will discover that your own pasta far surpasses what you can buy. It is more supple, more flavorful, more delicate. And for some dishes, such as lasagne and ravioli, that call for extra-thin pasta sheets, you may have to make your own. I've never found commercial fresh pasta rolled thin enough for these dishes, and it is often too dry by the time you buy it to roll it thinner at home.

FRESH EGG PASTA

I rarely use extra-large eggs in cooking but I use them in pasta dough. Why? Because when you mix 3 extra-large eggs with enough flour to make a dough, you get about 1 pound of pasta, the required amount for most recipes.

Approximately 2½ cups unbleached all-purpose flour
3 extra-large eggs, lightly beaten

To make the dough: Put the 2½ cups flour on a large work surface. Make a well in the center large enough to contain the eggs. Make sure your flour “walls” are high enough to keep the eggs from escaping. Pour the eggs into the well. With a fork, begin drawing in flour from the sides and whisking it with the eggs. Take care not to let the runny eggs breach the flour walls or you will have a mess. As you incorporate more flour and the egg mixture thickens, you can relax about the walls.

When the dough becomes too stiff to mix with the fork, continue with your hands. You won't be able to incorporate all the flour, at least not at first, but use enough to make a dough you can knead without it sticking to your hands. Sift the remaining flour to remove any coarse particles, and wash your hands to remove any caked-on bits.

Now knead by hand for several minutes, adding as much reserved flour as you need to make a smooth dough without a trace of stickiness. Shape the dough into a rectangle and divide it in half. Set aside one-half, covered with a clean dish towel. Now you will make pasta sheets with the other half, using the pasta machine.

Lightly flour the work surface. Firmly clamp your pasta machine to an immovable surface. Set the rollers on the widest setting. With a rolling pin, flatten the dough into a rectangle thin enough to go through the rollers. Feed it through one time. Lay the resulting ribbon on your lightly floured work surface, then fold it in thirds, matching edges to make a neat rectangle. With the rolling pin, roll it out in the other direction (with the open ends at the top and bottom), flouring as necessary to keep it from sticking. Try to keep the open ends matched up so you continue to have a neat rectangle.

With the roller still on the widest setting, repeat the process at least nine times: feeding the dough through, folding the ribbon in thirds, then flouring and flattening. With each successive trip through

the rollers, you should need less flour. At the end of this mechanical kneading, you should have a smooth, silky, well-blended ribbon of dough. If not, continue the process until you do.

To stretch the dough: Now you are ready to begin the stretching process by feeding the ribbon through progressively narrower settings, beginning again with the widest one. Cut the ribbon into manageable lengths whenever it gets too unwieldy. Resist flouring the dough at this point because the flour won't be well incorporated; dust lightly with flour only if the dough threatens to stick to the rollers. I find that setting number 5 on the KitchenAid attachment is thin enough for fettuccine, which should be delicate but not insubstantial. The noodles should be neither so thick that they are chewy, nor so thin that they clump after cooking. Pasta for lasagne and cannelloni should be thinner; I use setting number 6. Pasta for ravioli should be as thin as you can comfortably make it; I use setting number 7. You will need to find the settings you prefer on your own machine, which may take a few attempts. As you finish stretching each sheet, lay it on a clean dish towel to rest.

While you wait for the first batch of sheets to dry, repeat the mechanical kneading and stretching process with the second half of the dough.

To cut the noodles: Depending on how much flour you worked into the dough, the sheets may be ready to cut immediately or they may need to dry awhile. If they feel at all damp, the noodles will stick together when you cut them. Let the sheets air dry, checking them every 30 minutes, until they are no longer damp (but not too dry or they will crack in the cutter).

You can cut the sheets into noodles of the desired width by hand or using the pasta machine's cutting attachments.

To cut the pasta by hand, start at one of the sheet's narrow ends and loosely roll it like a jelly roll, leaving a 1-inch tail. With a sharp chef's knife, cut ribbons of the desired width. Grab the noodles by the exposed ends, lift them up, and they will unfurl.

Arrange the noodles on a dish towel or on a surface lightly dusted with semolina. Let dry at least 30 minutes before cooking.

You can make fresh noodles several hours ahead and keep them at cool room temperature. You can also freeze fresh pasta with some success. Freeze it in a sturdy plastic bag and cook it directly from the freezer; do not thaw first.

FRESH SAFFRON PASTA

You can buy powdered saffron, but I prefer to use saffron threads pounded in a mortar; that way I know I'm getting an unadulterated product.

Enough saffron threads to yield $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon powdered saffron

Approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ cups unbleached all-purpose flour

3 extra-large eggs, lightly beaten

Stir the saffron into the flour, blending well, then proceed according to the directions for Fresh Egg

FRESH SPINACH PASTA

¾ pound spinach (not baby spinach)

2 extra-large eggs

Approximately 2¾ cups unbleached all-purpose flour

Discard any thick spinach stems. Put the spinach in a large pot with just the wash water clinging to the leaves. Cover and cook over moderate heat until the spinach wilts. Drain and cool under running water, then squeeze to remove as much moisture as possible.

Put the spinach in a food processor with 1 of the eggs. Puree until the spinach is as fine as possible. Beat the other egg in a small bowl.

Put the flour on a large work surface and make a well in the center. Put the spinach and the beaten egg in the well. Proceed according to the directions for Fresh Egg Pasta.

To cut fettuccine or tagliatelle:

Use the wide cutter attachment on the pasta machine to make noodles about ¼ inch wide, or [cut by hand](#) into ribbons ¼ to ⅜ inch wide.

To cut laganelle:

Stretch the pasta sheets as thin as you would for fettuccine. [Cut by hand](#) into ribbons ½ inch wide.

To cut maltagliati:

In some kitchens, maltagliati, or “badly cut” pasta, are the scraps left over from making another pasta dish, such as ravioli. Mine are a little less random in appearance. To make maltagliati, stretch the pasta sheets as thin as you would for lasagne. Roll each sheet loosely like a jelly roll, leaving a 1-inch tail, then cut by hand into ribbons about ¾ inch wide. Unfurl the ribbons, stack them, and cut crosswise, but on an alternating diagonal, to make trapezoids roughly 2 inches in length.

To cut pappardelle:

Stretch the pasta sheets as thin as you would for fettuccine. Keeping the sheets flat, not rolled, cut by hand with a fluted pastry wheel into ribbons ⅝ inch wide.

To cut tonnarelli:

Tonnarelli are fresh noodles that resemble spaghetti, but they are square in cross section. You can make them with most home pasta machines by not stretching the sheets as thin as you would for fettuccine. (I stop at number 3, two settings before the setting I use for fettuccine.) Then use the narrowest cutter attachment.

To cut trenette:

Stretch the pasta sheets as thin as you would for fettuccine. [Cut by hand](#) into ribbons slightly narrower

than fettuccine, about $\frac{3}{16}$ inch wide.

EQUIPPING THE PASTA KITCHEN

I have eaten exquisite pasta in Italy made in what most Americans would consider a primitive kitchen. You don't need many tools to make good pasta. Nevertheless, a few pieces of kitchen equipment will make the process easier.

Box grater

A four-sided, stainless-steel box grater is useful for [grating plum tomatoes into pulp](#). I use the large holes for tomatoes and the medium holes for Parmesan and aged pecorino.

Food mill

I occasionally use a food mill to puree canned tomatoes before adding them to a sauce, or to make puree from [fresh tomatoes](#). Unlike the food processor or blender, the food mill removes the skins and seeds.

Pasta machine

Generations of Italian women have made fresh pasta with nothing more than a work surface and a rolling pin. With such regular upper-arm workouts, they did not need the gym. Nevertheless, we can be grateful for the modern pasta machines that make home production of fresh pasta so easy today.

I have used both the Atlas and Imperia hand-cranked pasta machines and find them good for home use. But if you have a KitchenAid standing mixer, consider purchasing that machine's pasta attachments. They clamp onto the head of the mixer, and the mixer's motor turns the rollers, leaving both of your hands free to feed dough into the rollers. What's more, the heavy mixer stays securely in place; it doesn't "walk" like the hand-cranked machines tend to do, no matter how firmly you clamp them. I think the KitchenAid attachments are a great leap forward in home pasta production.

I have never used the kind of pasta machine that mixes and kneads the dough for you. For me, a great part of the pleasure of making pasta is getting my hands in the flour and egg and feeling the pasta dough take shape.

Pastry wheel

Many pastry wheels actually have two wheels attached to one handle. One wheel has a straight edge, the other a fluted edge. I use the straight-edged wheel to cut some pasta shapes by hand, such as the semolina noodles for [Pasta e Ceci](#). I use the fluted cutter to give a rippled edge to some pasta shapes, [such as ravioli](#).

Wire-mesh skimmer

You will need a flat skimmer or strainer to lift ravioli out of the boiling pasta water. They are too delicate to drain in a sieve.

ABOUT INGREDIENTS

Good ingredients are the foundation of all good cooking. Whether you are purchasing preserved anchovies, canned tomatoes, or olive oil for your pasta pantry, select for quality, not price. On a cost-per-serving basis, the difference between a good brand and an inferior brand will be insignificant, but it can make a big difference to your results.

Anchovies

I suspect that so many people dislike anchovies because they have never tasted good ones. If I could, I would serve all these reluctant anchovy eaters the meaty, mild Sicilian anchovies packed by Agostino Recca, available today in many markets. These superior preserved fish are tasty enough to eat on their own, with a little minced garlic, chopped parsley, extra-virgin olive oil, and good bread.

Many canneries use strong jets of water to clean anchovies during processing, which beats up the delicate fish. At Recca, the fish are cleaned carefully by hand to preserve their integrity.

Recca packs anchovies both whole in salt and filleted in olive oil. I prefer the fillets because they come in small jars that you can use up quickly, before the fish oils oxidize. If you don't use all the anchovies, top off the jar with extra-virgin olive oil and refrigerate it. The olive oil protects the fish oils from oxidizing, but not indefinitely; try to finish the jar within a week or two.

Many professional chefs prefer Recca's whole, salt-packed anchovies, but they come in large tins and the anchovies go rancid before I get to the bottom. They must be rinsed of their salt and filleted before using. If you open the whole tin and don't expect to go through it immediately, it's a good idea to rinse and fillet all the anchovies and repack them in olive oil to cover, then refrigerate.

I never buy the salt-packed anchovies that some markets sell by weight from open tins. Unless the tin was freshly opened, the anchovies will likely be faintly or even flagrantly rancid.

Bread Crumbs

In southern Italy, especially in Sicily, some pasta preparations are finished with a sprinkling of toasted bread crumbs instead of cheese. Probably this practice dates from bleaker times, when many households had no money for cheese but were never without stale bread.

Even today, frugal Italian cooks always have homemade bread crumbs around. When toasted, the crumbs add an appealing crunch and substance to some pasta dishes, such as Spaghetti [con Radicchio alla Piemontese](#). The bread crumbs replace cheese; they are never used with it.

Bread crumbs for pasta should be almost as fine as cracker crumbs. To make them, use a country-style bread that contains only flour, water, yeast, and salt. Don't use breads that have fat or sugar in them. The bread should be quite stale. If it isn't, dry it out in a low oven. Let cool, then break into chunks, crust and all, and put the chunks in a food processor. Process until the crumbs are fine. If the crumbs remain coarse, the bread is probably not dry enough. Spread the crumbs on a baking sheet and put them back in the low oven until they dry further, then cool and process again.

Sieve the crumbs to remove the coarsest ones. If you have enough coarse crumbs, you can process and sieve them one more time. Discard any crumbs that fail to go through the sieve the second time. Half a pound of stale bread should yield about 1 cup of fine crumbs.

Store bread crumbs in an airtight container in the freezer. They will keep for 6 months.

To toast bread crumbs: Heat 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil in a small skillet over moderately low heat. Add ½ cup fine bread crumbs and stir to coat with the oil. Season lightly with salt. Cook, stirring often, over moderately low heat until the crumbs are an even, deep golden brown, about 10 minutes. Set aside to cool.

Cheese

Cheese is an indispensable addition to many vegetable sauces for pasta, but it is often overused and sometimes unnecessary. Don't reach for the Parmesan reflexively; instead, think about whether cheese would enhance the dish you are making. In some cases, cheese would mask the fresh, pure taste of the vegetables or make a simple dish overly rich. When I do put cheese on vegetable-sauced pasta, I tend

to use it sparingly.

~~For saucing pasta with vegetables, the most useful cheeses are Parmigiano-Reggiano; an aged pecorino such as pecorino romano or pecorino sardo; and ricotta salata.~~

Parmigiano-Reggiano: This is one cheese I am never without. Look for the name stamped on the rind to be sure you are getting authentic Parmigiano-Reggiano from Italy, not the younger and less flavorful Grana Padano or the unsatisfying American and Argentinian versions of Parmesan. Parmigiano-Reggiano has a deep, complex, well-balanced flavor that its imitators don't begin to match.

Always buy Parmigiano-Reggiano in chunks and grate it as you need it. Pregrated Parmesan quickly loses its savor. At the store, look for wedges with as little rind as possible to get the most cheese for your dollar. If the cheese is plastic wrapped, take it out of the plastic at home and rewrap it in aluminum foil, then refrigerate. It will keep for weeks. Change the foil wrap every time you use the cheese.

Pecorino: In Italian, the name *pecorino* signifies that the cheese is made from sheep's milk. (*Pecora* is Italian for sheep.) Italy produces dozens of pecorino cheeses of various styles. Some are young, mild, and creamy; others are well-aged and rock-hard, with the sharp, salty flavor that most Americans associate with pecorino.

Aged pecorino is a superb grating cheese for many vegetable-sauced pastas, often surpassing Parmesan to my taste. It complements sauces made with tomato, cauliflower, broccoli, broccoli rabe, eggplant, green beans, or fava beans. Sauces of southern Italian origin—as so many vegetable sauces are—tend to call for pecorino over Parmesan, a cheese of the north.

The most widely available aged pecorinos in this country are pecorino romano and pecorino sardo, with romano the more common. Both are grating cheeses, and either type will work in these recipes. As with Parmesan, pecorino is best grated as you need it. It keeps for weeks, so don't hesitate to buy a large chunk. Store it in the refrigerator, wrapped in aluminum foil, and change the wrap whenever you use the cheese.

Ricotta salata: When salted, pressed, and matured for a few weeks, fresh ricotta is transformed into a firm, dense, chalk-white cheese that you can grate or shave with a cheese plane into fine shards. It has a mild saltiness and recognizable sheep's-milk character. I don't find it particularly appealing as a table cheese, but it is a wonderful complement to many vegetable-sauced pastas. I particularly like it with sauces that include tomato, eggplant, fava beans, green beans, or broccoli.

Despite its dry appearance, ricotta salata is not a great keeper once cut. I try to use it within a few days of purchase, before it develops a sourish smell and taste. Keep it wrapped in aluminum foil in the refrigerator.

Chiles

Calabrian chiles: From Italy's Calabria region, these small red chiles packed in olive oil have a fruit dimension in addition to their heat. I like to use them in sauces that aren't cooked, such as *Penne "Orchidee delle Eolie"*. When making cooked sauces, I tend to reach for hot pepper flakes out of habit, but these flavorful chiles would be excellent for that use, too.

Hot pepper flakes: I count on hot pepper flakes to add an undercurrent of warmth to many pasta

saucers. You can make them yourself by pulverizing small dried red chiles in a spice grinder, or you can buy them already ground on most supermarket spice racks.

Because brands vary in their pungency, I'm reluctant to specify a quantity of hot pepper flakes in recipes. Instead, I have called for a pinch, which you can adjust up or down to your taste. To my palate, ¼ teaspoon of hot pepper flakes is about right for sauces that cover 1 pound of pasta.

Keep hot pepper flakes in a cool, dark, dry place as you would other spices. They will stay potent for at least 1 year.

Nuts

Pine nuts, almonds, and walnuts enhance many vegetable sauces, adding richness and texture. In some recipes, such as *Trenette al Pesto* or *Spaghetti ai Capperi*, they act as a thickener. I always toast nuts before using to heighten their flavor.

To toast nuts: Preheat the oven to 325° or 350°F. Put the nuts on a rimmed baking sheet or, if the amount is small, in a metal pie tin. Bake until the nuts are fragrant and lightly colored, shaking the pan once or twice. Pine nuts take 5 to 10 minutes, almonds and walnuts a little longer. With almonds and walnuts, break one open to make sure it's toasty throughout. Let cool before using to allow them to crisp.

Porcini Mushrooms

Many supermarkets now carry dried porcini (*Boletus edulis*) in plastic packages, and many delis sell them by the ounce, which is usually a better buy. These dried mushrooms must be reconstituted before using. Put them in a small bowl and add enough lukewarm water that they swim a bit. (Most recipes call for using some or all of the soaking liquid, so don't dilute its flavor by using more water than necessary.) Let the mushrooms stand until softened, 30 minutes to 1 hour. Lift them out of the soaking liquid with a slotted spoon to leave any grit behind. Strain the liquid through a damp paper towel or a double thickness of cheesecloth, also damp (to prevent the straining medium from soaking up the flavorful liquid), and use as called for in the recipe.

Keep dried porcini in an airtight container in a cool place. They will keep indefinitely.

Salt

I use only sea salt or kosher salt for seasoning pasta sauces and encourage you to do the same. Iodized table salt such as Morton's contains dextrose and an anti-caking additive that give the salt a harsh taste. In contrast, many sea salts and all true kosher salts have no additives. I prefer the flavor of sea salt, but kosher salt is a good alternative.

Tomatoes

Fresh tomatoes: In summer and fall, I use fresh tomatoes for pasta sauce—almost exclusively the meaty plum tomatoes. These tomatoes, also known as Roma or paste tomatoes, have a high proportion of flesh to juice, so you don't have to cook them long to get a thick, tasty sauce. Slicing or salad tomatoes have higher water content and are not well suited to cooked sauces. I use them in summery raw sauces where their flavor really shines, such as *Spaghetti con Salsa Rapida*.

In times past, I would peel, seed, and dice fresh plum tomatoes for sauce. Then I learned an easier way. Grating plum tomatoes produces a skinless, seedless pulp in less time, with less equipment. To grate tomatoes, you need a four-sided, stainless-steel box grater. Cut the tomatoes in half and scoop out the seeds and juice with your fingers. Holding the cut side of a tomato half against the grater's

large holes, grate until only the thin tomato skin remains in your palm.

~~Sometimes I want a smoother tomato texture than the box grater yields. To make pureed fresh plum tomatoes, cut them in half lengthwise, then pass them through the medium blade of a food mill to remove the skins and seeds.~~

A handful of my recipes call for peeled, seeded, and diced tomato, not pulp. Here's how to do that:

Bring a pot of water to a boil over high heat. Have ready a bowl of ice water. Cut an X in the rounded end of each tomato. Place them in the boiling water and simmer about 30 seconds. (Less ripe tomatoes may need a little longer.) Transfer them with a slotted spoon to the ice water to stop the cooking. When cool, lift the tomatoes out of the ice water and peel them; the skin should peel back easily from the X. Core, cut in half, and scoop out the seeds and juice with your fingers. Then chop as the recipe specifies.

Canned tomatoes: Canned tomatoes are not a second-best substitute for fresh tomatoes. In winter and spring, when fresh plum tomatoes are rock-hard, slippery with wax, and tasteless, canned tomatoes are by far the better choice for sauces.

However, there are canned tomatoes and canned tomatoes. Because they are critical to the flavor of your sauces, take some time to compare the brands available to you. Seek out the packers that consistently use ripe, meaty tomatoes and pack them in flavorful, not watery, juice. It is not true that imported brands are always better.

When using canned tomatoes, you can chop them finely first or simply crush them between your fingers as you add them to the skillet.

The baking soda trick: Unless you are using sweet, height-of-summer tomatoes, chances are your tomato sauce will taste more tart than you might like. Many recipes call for adding a pinch of sugar in that case, but sugar doesn't eliminate the tartness; it just makes the sauce sweeter. Nevertheless, I did that for years until my scientist husband reminded me that the way to neutralize an acid is with a base. He suggested adding a pinch of baking soda to overly tart tomato sauce.

It works like a charm. You don't need much baking soda to have an impact, so start with a pinch. The sauce will foam briefly as you stir it in. Let the sauce simmer for a minute or so, then taste again. Add a little more baking soda if necessary. Be careful not to add too much or your sauce will taste soapy.

I almost always use baking soda when making a sauce with canned tomatoes, and even sometimes when fresh tomatoes yield a sauce that needs mellowing.

spring

After months of eating winter's rugged vegetables, preparing pasta with spring produce feels like throwing off a heavy cloak. By mid-February I am craving asparagus, but I try not to leap on the first shipments, knowing that tastier spears will soon follow the pale ones the growers rush to market.

Next, usually by mid-March, come the artichokes from coastal California—baby chokes the size of eggs to braise and toss with orecchiette and bread crumbs, and jumbo specimens with meaty bottoms to sauce maltagliati.

By mid-April, my own garden is yielding the first velvety fava beans. Simmered briefly with a mint sprig and a touch of garlic, they make a simple pasta sauce. A little later, as the beans grow fleshier and firmer, I'll make Sicilian *maccu*, long-braised favas with fennel, to serve with fusilli.

Peas bring up the rear, as spring segues into summer, and for a brief few weeks there's the possibility of *frittella*—the Sicilian spring vegetable stew. Tossed with fresh or dried pasta, it's a highlight of the season.

Orecchiette con Carciofini

EAR-SHAPED PASTA WITH BABY ARTICHOKEs, WHITE WINE, GARLIC, PARSLEY, AND BREAD CRUMBS

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In fertile Puglia, the “heel” of Italy’s boot, no scrap of land lies bare if it can possibly nourish an artichoke plant or a few tomatoes. Farmers even grow cauliflower, broccoli rabe, and other vegetables between the neat rows of their olive trees, apparently determined to squeeze the highest return from what ground they have. A good share of the harvest ends up in the family pasta pot, paired with the signature shape of the region: orecchiette. The vegetables, like the artichokes in this recipe, are always fully cooked, never al dente, to produce a simple but deeply flavorful sauce for the sturdy pasta.

Serves 4 to 6

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1 lemon

24 baby artichokes, 1½ to 2 ounces each

8 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

Salt and a pinch of hot pepper flakes

¼ cup dry white wine

4 cloves garlic, minced

¼ cup minced fresh Italian (flat-leaf) parsley

1 pound orecchiette

¼ cup **toasted bread crumbs, plus more for passing at the table**

Fill a large bowl with water and add the juice of the lemon. To trim the artichokes, peel back the outer leaves until they break off at the base. Keep removing leaves until you reach the pale green heart. Cut across the top of the heart to remove the pointed leaf tips. If the stem is still attached, cut it down to 1 inch, then trim the stem and base to remove any dark green or brown parts. Cut each heart into 6 or 8 wedges, then immediately place in the lemon water to prevent browning.

Heat 6 tablespoons of the olive oil in a large skillet over moderate heat. Drain the artichokes and add them to the skillet. Season with salt to taste and the hot pepper flakes. Add the wine and ¼ cup water. Bring the liquid to a simmer, then cover, adjust the heat to maintain a gentle simmer, and cook until the artichokes are very tender and beginning to break apart, 30 to 35 minutes. Uncover occasionally, stir, and add more water if the mixture threatens to cook dry.

While the artichokes are cooking, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. When the artichokes are tender, stir in the garlic and parsley. Cook for a couple of minutes to release their flavor. Keep the artichokes warm over low heat.

Add the pasta to the boiling water and cook until al dente. Drain the pasta and return it to the warm pot over low heat. Add the remaining 2 tablespoons olive oil and toss well, then add the artichokes. Toss

again, divide the pasta among warm bowls, and sprinkle each portion with some of the bread crumbs.
Pass the additional bread crumbs at the table.

Maltagliati con Carciofi e Speck

“BADLY CUT PASTA” WITH ARTICHOKES AND AIR-DRIED BEEF



In the Sicilian countryside near Ragusa, my husband, Doug, and I stayed at a former monastery that had been converted into a comfortable small inn. The handsome restaurant at the Eremo della Giubiliana drew from its own garden for some of its dishes, including this one.

Although you must remove the artichoke leaves and use only the bottoms, don't throw away the leaves. Steam them the next day and enjoy them with a vinaigrette or aioli for dipping.

Look for speck at specialty-food stores. Prosciutto can be substituted. **Serves 4 to 6**

1 lemon

4 large artichokes

6 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling

1 yellow onion, minced

Pinch of hot pepper flakes

1 bay leaf

Salt

2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian (flat-leaf) parsley

2 ounces speck (air-dried beef) or prosciutto, thinly sliced, then julienned

¾ pound [Fresh Egg Pasta](#), cut as [maltagliati](#)

Fill a large bowl with water and add the juice of the lemon. To trim the artichokes, peel back the tough outer leaves until they break off at the base. Keep removing leaves until you reach the pale yellow-green heart. Cut across the heart, leaving only about ¾ inch of leaf attached to the base. Cut off all but 1 inch of the stem, if attached, then trim the stem and base to remove any dark green or brown parts. Cut the trimmed artichoke in half. With a spoon, scoop out the fuzzy choke and the prickly inner leaves. Cut each half into thin wedges and immediately place them in the lemon water to prevent browning.

Heat the olive oil in a large skillet over moderately low heat. Add the onion and hot pepper flakes and sauté until the onion is soft, about 10 minutes. Drain the artichokes and add them to the skillet. Add the bay leaf, 1 cup water, and a generous pinch of salt. Bring to a simmer, cover, and adjust the heat to maintain a gentle simmer. Cook, stirring occasionally, until the artichokes are tender, 15 to 20

minutes. There should be a few tablespoons of flavorful juices left in the skillet. (If the artichokes threaten to cook dry before they are tender, add a little water.) Remove the bay leaf and gently stir in the parsley and speck.

While the artichokes are cooking, bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta and cook until about 1 minute shy of al dente. Set aside 1 cup of the pasta water, then drain the pasta and return it to the warm pot over low heat. Add the sauce and cook for about 1 minute to allow the pasta to absorb some of the flavor of the sauce. Moisten with some of the reserved pasta water as needed. Divide among warm bowls and drizzle each portion with a little olive oil. Serve immediately.

Bucatini con Carciofi alla Pugliese

LONG PIERCED PASTA WITH ARTICHOKES, PANCETTA, EGGS, AND PECORINO

Like the familiar spaghetti carbonara, this artichoke sauce depends on eggs to make it thick and creamy. The beaten eggs must be added off the heat or they will scramble; you don't want to see any trace of cooked egg or egg white. Because the technique is a little challenging, you may want to have practice run before you make this dish for guests.

I have found similar recipes for artichoke sauces in several cookbooks from Puglia. This version is based on one in *The Land of Olive Trees*, edited by Mario Adda. **Serves 4 to 6**

1 lemon

4 large artichokes

1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil

3 ounces pancetta, minced

1 large yellow onion, minced

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

3/4 cup dry white wine

1 pound bucatini (perciatelli) or spaghetti

2 eggs, lightly beaten

2/3 cup freshly grated aged pecorino cheese

Fill a large bowl with water and add the juice of the lemon. To trim the artichokes, peel back the tough outer leaves until they break off at the base. Keep removing leaves until you reach the pale yellow-green heart. (You can steam the leaves the following day, if desired, and enjoy them with a dipping sauce.) Cut across the heart, leaving only about 3/4 inch of leaf attached to the base. Cut off all but 1 inch of the stem, if attached, then trim the stem and base to remove any dark green or brown parts. Cut the trimmed artichoke in half. With a spoon, scoop out the fuzzy choke and the prickly inner leaves. Cut each half into thin wedges and immediately place them in the lemon water to prevent browning.

Put the olive oil, pancetta, and onion in a cold skillet and cook over moderately low heat, stirring, until the onion is soft, 10 to 12 minutes. Drain the artichokes and add them to the skillet. Season with salt to taste and add the wine. Stir gently and simmer uncovered for 3 to 4 minutes to allow the alcohol to evaporate, then add 3/4 cup water, cover, and continue cooking until the artichokes are tender, 30 minutes or longer. There should still be a little liquid left in the skillet. (If the artichokes threaten to cook dry before they are tender, add a little water.) Taste and adjust the salt, then set the sauce aside to cool for at least 10 minutes.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta and cook until al dente.

About 2 minutes before the pasta is done, stir the eggs into the cooled sauce, then return the sauce to low heat. Cook gently, stirring constantly, until the sauce just begins to thicken; if you cook it too

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