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GENNARO'S PASTA PERFECTO!

Written by **Gennaro Contaldo**

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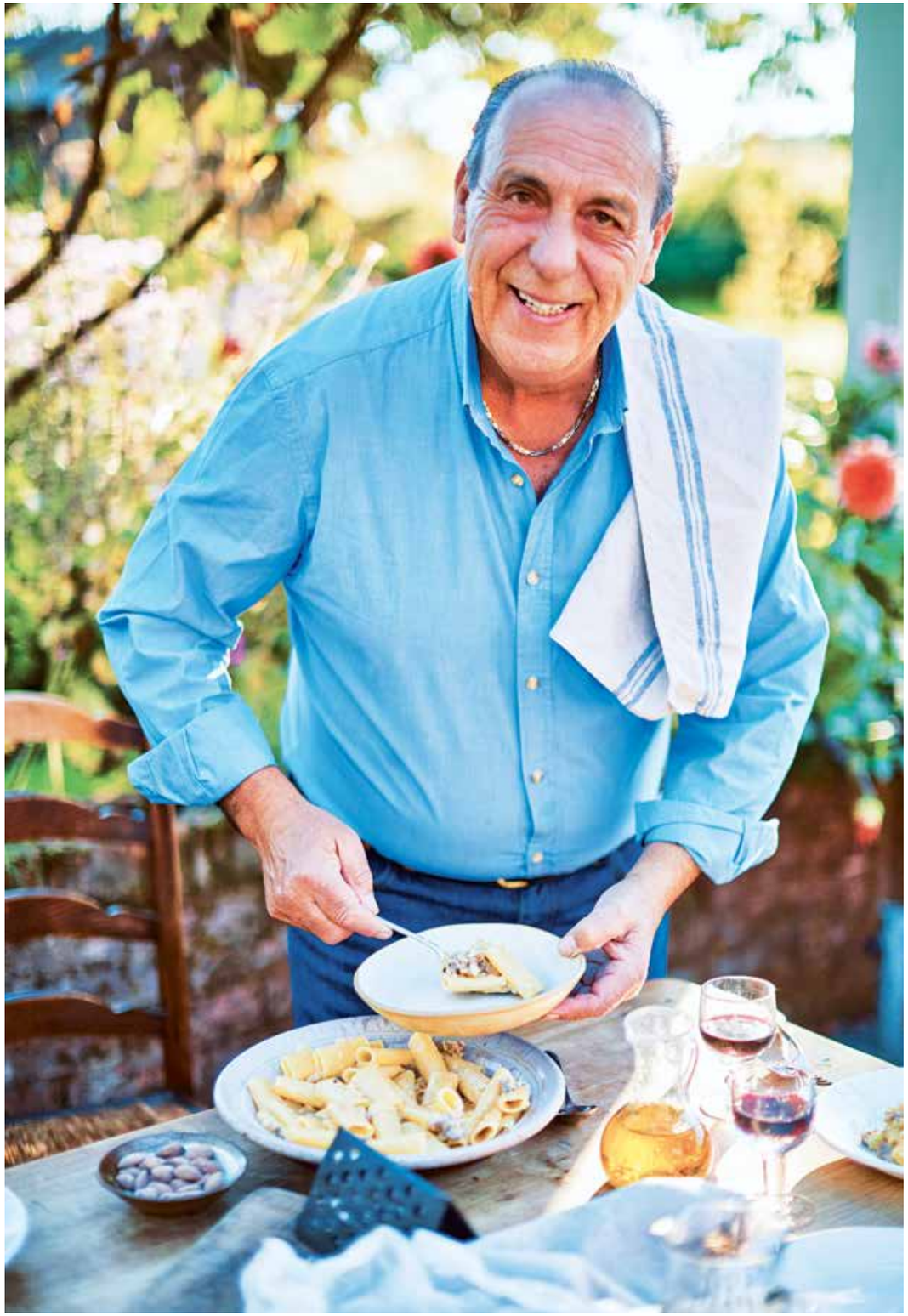

PASTA PERFECTO

I am so excited to be writing a whole book on my favourite food – pasta!

In Italy, pasta is more than just a food – it is a tradition and a way of life, with a long history. In most Italian homes, no meal is complete without a plate of pasta, no matter how it is enjoyed – whether dried, fresh, filled, baked or served in a soup.

There are many arguments about how pasta first came to Italy and one is the popular myth that it was brought back by Marco Polo from a trip to China. However, historic evidence shows that *macaroni* and *spaghetti* existed in Italy long before this time and that a pasta known as *lagane* was around in Roman times. *Lagane* was baked rather than boiled, which is probably how our modern-day *lasagne* came to be.

Pasta, as we know it today, started out in the housewives' kitchens of southern Italy, made from the basic ingredients of flour and water. Italy's climate is ideal for cultivating durum wheat, and this is what makes the all-important flour for making pasta. Gradually, it spread throughout the country until it became the beloved staple it is today.

The method of drying pasta was introduced as early as the 1300s, which meant that it could be taken on sea voyages, where its long shelf-life made it the ideal foodstuff. Pasta drying in the streets of Naples in the late 1800s was not an uncommon sight – long strands of pasta would be left out in the hot sun hanging on cane poles resembling washing lines. During my childhood, my home village of Minori had a flour mill and a small pasta factory, and I have vague recollections of the pasta drying in the sun. It would then be packaged in locally manufactured bright blue paper and sold on. Over time, drying processes have changed – the traditional methods were updated and technology has taken over. Much larger factories now produce pasta all over Italy, creating a huge and important industry. Probably the largest and most-loved factories producing excellent pasta are in Gragnano, a town not far from Naples.

Whenever Italians emigrated, wherever it was in the world, they brought their beloved pasta with them. This is probably why it became such a globally loved food. Pasta is quick, simple and versatile. Recipes can range from the speediest, simplest tomato or pesto sauce tossed through some *spaghetti*, to more elaborate and rich baked dishes, or slow-cooked ragù sauces. That's the beauty of pasta – you can make it to suit any occasion and budget, and everyone loves it. Pasta can be made simply with flour and water, or with eggs as it is in northern Italy; it can also be made with wholemeal flour. These days, gluten-free pasta is becoming increasingly popular, with varieties made with lentil and chickpea (gram) flours.

Pasta is very much part of the Mediterranean diet and, if eaten in the right quantity with a good homemade sauce, it is very beneficial to our health. It is an excellent carbohydrate, releasing energy slowly, is cholesterol-free and has a low glycemic index score, ideal for diabetics. Apart from its nutritional value, pasta also contains serotonin, a substance associated with feelings of peace and contentment.

There is no limit to the joys of pasta and I can quite happily enjoy it every day, cooked in a different way, safe in the knowledge that I am eating a good, nutritional and balanced diet. I have divided this book into chapters about dried pasta, fresh pasta, filled pasta and baked pasta dishes, as well as giving you some basic recipes for making your own fresh pasta and sauces. I hope you will enjoy recreating some of my favourite recipes, from the traditional classics to more updated versions of Italy's greatest food.

HOW TO COOK PERFECT PASTA

Make sure you use a large saucepan filled with plenty of water; pasta needs room to move around when cooking.

Use 1 litre (34 fl oz/4 cups) of water for every 100 g (3½ oz) of pasta.

Bring a large saucepan of water, covered with a lid, to the boil. When the water is just beginning to boil, remove the lid and add salt.

Use 7–10 g (1½–2 tsp) of salt for every 1 litre (34 fl oz/4 cups) of water. This might seem like a lot, but the pasta really needs this flavour boost!

When the water is vigorously boiling, add the pasta and stir with a wooden spoon to avoid it sticking. Do not cover with a lid.

Cook the pasta until slightly underdone or, as Italians like to say, *al dente*. This literally means 'to the tooth' – it should be soft enough to eat but still retain a little bite. This way, the pasta takes longer to chew, which gives you more time to taste and enjoy and, thereafter, digest it properly. There really is nothing worse than overcooked pasta!

When cooking dried pasta, check the directions on the packet for timings – I almost always reduce that time by a couple of minutes. Keep tasting until it is cooked to your liking. Fresh pasta, such as *spaghetti* or *tagliatelle*, takes just a minute or two, and fresh filled pasta just a bit longer. Again, taste until satisfied.

Always keep a little of the pasta cooking water aside before draining – just ladle a few spoonfuls out into a bowl. You may not always need it, but adding a little of the cooking water will loosen sauces so that they coat the pasta better, making it nice and glossy.

Drain the pasta in a colander. Alternatively, you could use tongs for long pasta and a 'spider', pasta fork or slotted spoon for short pasta, to transfer the cooked pasta immediately to the sauce.

DRIED PASTA

This is the chapter to which I've dedicated the most recipes. Dried pasta is just so versatile, quick and easy to cook and can be made in a different way every day. Like all Italians, I always keep a good selection in my storecupboard – at least a couple of varieties of *pasta lunga* (long pasta) such as *spaghetti*, *linguine* and *tagliatelle*; *pasta corta* (short pasta) such as *penne, farfalle* and *rigatoni*; as well as tiny shapes for soups. Along with some storecupboard essentials and fresh produce, I know I can rustle up a satisfying meal in no time.

There is such a huge variety of dried pasta shapes on the market these days. In Italy, you really are spoilt for choice, with over 650 different types to choose from! Even the ubiquitous *spaghetti* comes in many varieties, from thin *spaghettini* to thicker *spaghettoni*. I love to discover new shapes and imagine how I will cook them.

Cooking times for dried pasta vary greatly, depending on size, shape and brand. This is why I haven't put cooking times in any of the recipes in this chapter and suggest you check the cooking directions on your packet. I like my pasta to be very *al dente,* so I always reduce the cooking times stated and do several taste tests along the way.

I find the quality Italian pasta brands, which take a little longer to cook, are really worth paying a little bit extra for. The producers use good-quality durum wheat flour and adhere to strict rules and regulations on the making and drying of the pasta. Look out for pasta that has been 'bronze-cut', meaning the shapes have been cut with traditional bronze moulds; this makes the pasta shapes coarser, giving them the classic rough texture that sauces can better cling to, which in turn ensures you enjoy every mouthful. Don't be tempted to buy the cheaper 'quick cook' varieties and, if you can, always go for the better quality Italian brands – it really will make a huge difference to your final dish.

MINESTRONE GENOVESE

Minestrone with Pesto

This soup was originally made with fresh homegrown produce and offered to sailors docking at Genova so that they could enjoy fresh food after being away at sea. Traditionally the vegetables were boiled and the soup was made so thick you could stand a spoon in it! If there was any left over, it was sliced and fried. My version is not so thick and I like to sweat the vegetables to obtain more flavour. That said, if your veggies are of the freshest homegrown quality, then simply boiling them will be fine. The addition of pesto gives this soup a lovely green colour, as well as the pungent flavour of basil.

Serves 4–6

4 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
1 large onion, finely chopped
1 celery stalk, finely chopped
1 large carrot, finely chopped
1 small courgette (zucchini), cut into small chunks
1 large potato, peeled and cut into small chunks
140 g/5 oz Swiss chard, finely chopped, including stalks
2 fresh plum tomatoes, seeded and diced
1.5 litres/52 fl oz/6½ cups hot vegetable stock (bouillon)
1 x 400-g/14-oz can of borlotti beans, drained
120 g/4½ oz thick *spaghetti* pasta, broken into 5-cm (2-in) pieces
1 x quantity of Basil Pesto (see page 168)
freshly ground black pepper

Heat the olive oil in a large saucepan over a medium heat, add the onion, celery and carrot, and sweat for 2–3 minutes until softened. Stir in the courgette, potato, Swiss chard and tomatoes, and continue to sauté for 1 minute or so. Add the stock, season with some black pepper, then cover with a lid, increase the heat and bring to the boil. Reduce the heat and simmer, covered, for about 15 minutes until the vegetables are cooked but not mushy.

Stir in the borlotti beans and cook for 2 minutes. Increase the heat and bring to the boil, then add the *spaghetti* pieces. Reduce the heat and simmer until the pasta is cooked *al dente* (check the instructions on your packet for cooking time).

Remove from the heat, let rest for about 3 minutes, then stir in the pesto and serve.

BIRBONI ATTERRATI

Wholemeal Tagliatelle with Anchovies and Walnuts

***Birboni* is an ancient pasta of the Amalfi Coast, the origins of which lie in the housewife's kitchen. Whenever fresh pasta was made, in order not to waste a thing, all the flour that did not end up in the pasta dough would be collected (even swept up from the floor!) and reused to make into more pasta! It became so popular that factories started to make this wholemeal (whole wheat) variety of tagliatelle, sold as '*birboni*'. Obviously, it is now made with clean flour!**

***Birboni* are usually combined with a few simple, local ingredients: anchovies and *Colatura di Alici*, a concentrated anchovy sauce that comes from the coastal village of Cetara. The sauce is available in Italian delis, however *birboni* are only obtainable in the local area, so I have substituted wholemeal (whole wheat) tagliatelle here.**

Serves 4

300 g/10½ oz wholemeal (whole wheat) tagliatelle
6 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
½ red chilli, finely chopped
4 garlic cloves, left whole
10 anchovy fillets
60 g/2¼ oz/½ cup very finely chopped walnuts
a handful of parsley, finely chopped
1 tbsp *Colatura di Alici* (anchovy sauce)
sea salt

Bring a large saucepan of salted water to the boil and cook the pasta until *al dente* (check the instructions on your packet for cooking time).

Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a large saucepan or frying pan (skillet) set over a medium heat. Add the chilli and garlic, and sweat for 1 minute, then add the anchovy fillets and continue to cook until the anchovies have melted. Stir in the chopped walnuts, half of the parsley, and a couple of tablespoons of the pasta cooking water. Continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the pasta is cooked. Remove and discard the garlic cloves.

Drain the tagliatelle, add to the sauce along with the *Colatura di Alici* and mix well to combine. Remove from the heat and serve with the remaining parsley sprinkled over.

FUSILLI CON CAVOLO NERO E SALSICCIA

Fusilli with Sausage and Cavolo Nero

This is a nutritious dish traditionally enjoyed during the winter months when cavolo nero is in abundance. For maximum flavour, use good-quality Italian pork sausages such as *luganica* (easily obtainable from Italian delis). Quick and simple to prepare, it's a great way of combining winter favourites for a comforting midweek supper.

Serves 4

400 g/14 oz cavolo nero, roughly chopped
6 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra to serve
2 garlic cloves, left whole and squashed
1 red chilli, finely chopped (optional)
4 Italian pork sausages, skinnned and roughly chopped
320 g/11½ oz *fusilli bucati* pasta
sea salt
grated Parmesan, to serve

Bring a large saucepan of slightly salted water to the boil and cook the cavolo nero for about 10 minutes until softened. Drain, reserving the cooking water, and set aside.

Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a frying pan (skillet) over a medium heat. Add the garlic and chilli, and sweat for 1 minute, then add the sausage meat and stir-fry for about 5 minutes. Add the cavolo nero to the pan and continue to cook on a medium–low heat while you cook the pasta.

Bring the cavolo nero cooking water back to the boil, adding more water if necessary, and cook the pasta until *al dente* (check the instructions on your packet for cooking time).

Drain the cooked pasta, reserving a little of the cooking water. Add the pasta to the cavolo nero and sausage with a little of the cooking water, and mix well to combine.

Serve with a drizzle of extra-virgin olive oil and some grated Parmesan.

ORECCHIETTE FRESCHE AL POMODORO CON BURRATA AL LIMONE

Fresh Orecchiette with Tomatoes and Lemon Burrata

Orecchiette (literally 'little ears') originate from Puglia in southern Italy, where it is not uncommon to see ladies outside their houses making this traditional eggless pasta. Local restaurant menus serve freshly made _orecchiette_ with _cime di rape_, a type of broccoli, with meat ragù or simply with a delicious fresh tomato sauce, as here. To finish, I have added burrata, a soft, creamy buffalo-milk cheese from Puglia, and a sprinkling of lemon zest for a refreshing taste. If you can't get _burrata_, use buffalo mozzarella. If you want to make your own _orecchiette_, use the Eggless Pasta recipe on page 79. Otherwise, they can be bought in good Italian delis.

Serves 4

2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil

1 small onion, very finely chopped

325 g/11½ oz baby plum tomatoes, halved

a handful of basil leaves

400 g/14 oz fresh *orecchiette* pasta (store-bought or see Eggless Pasta recipe on page 79)

30 g/1 oz/⅓ cup grated Parmesan

250 g/9 oz burrata, roughly torn

zest of 1 small unwaxed organic lemon

sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

Heat the olive oil in a frying pan (skillet) over a medium heat, add the onion and sauté for 2 minutes. Add the tomatoes and basil leaves, season with a little salt, and cook for 10 minutes, stirring with a wooden spoon from time to time.

Meanwhile, bring a large saucepan of salted water to the boil and cook the *orecchiette* until *al dente*, about 5 minutes.

Drain the pasta and add to the tomato sauce along with the grated Parmesan. Mix well, then remove from the heat.

Serve immediately with the burrata, lemon zest and a sprinkling of black pepper.

Bring a large saucepan of water to the boil and cook the octopus for 30–40 minutes, until tender. Remove from the heat and leave to cool in the water until you are ready to use, then roughly chop into small chunks.

In another saucepan, cook the calamari in boiling water for about 20 minutes, until tender. Leave to cool, then chop into small chunks.

Put the cleaned mussels and clams into a large saucepan with a splash of white wine and the whole garlic clove, cover with a tightly fitting lid and cook over a medium heat for 3–5 minutes, until the shells have opened. Discard any shells that have not opened. Remove from the heat and, when cool enough to handle, remove the flesh from the shells, pass the cooking liquid through a fine sieve (strainer) and set aside.

Preheat the oven to 180°C fan/200°C/400°F/gas mark 6.

Meanwhile, prepare the other elements.

To make the sautéed tomatoes, heat the olive oil in a pan over a medium heat, add the garlic and sweat for 1 minute, add the cherry tomatoes, parsley and a little salt to taste, and sauté over a medium–high heat for about 3 minutes, until tender but not mushy (the tomatoes must still retain their shape). Remove from the heat and set aside.

To make the white sauce, combine the hot fish stock with the liquid left from cooking the mussels and clams. Melt the butter in a saucepan, then remove from the heat and whisk in the flour. Add a little of the stock and mix to a smooth paste. Return the pan to a medium heat, gradually whisk in all the stock and cook until the sauce begins to thicken. Remove from the heat and set aside.

For the gratin mixture, combine the breadcrumbs and parsley, and set aside.

To finish cooking the seafood, heat the olive oil in a large frying pan (skillet) over a medium heat, add the chopped garlic and sweat for 1 minute. Add the mussels, clams, octopus, calamari, prawns and parsley, and sauté over a high heat for 3 minutes. Remove and set aside.

To assemble the *lasagne*, line the bottom of a baking dish with a little of the white sauce and top with a few sautéed tomatoes. Place a couple of *lasagne* sheets on top, followed by a layer of the seafood mix and a few more sautéed tomatoes, sprinkle over some gratin mixture and then add another layer of white sauce. Continue making layers in this way until you have used up all the ingredients, ending with a layer of white sauce and a sprinkling of the gratin mixture.

Cover with foil and bake in the hot oven for 25 minutes. Remove the foil and continue to bake for 15 minutes, until just golden. Remove from the oven, leave to rest for 5 minutes and serve.