

Classic cucina

Australia's top Italian restaurateurs nominate the regional pasta dishes that are the heart and soul of Italian cooking.

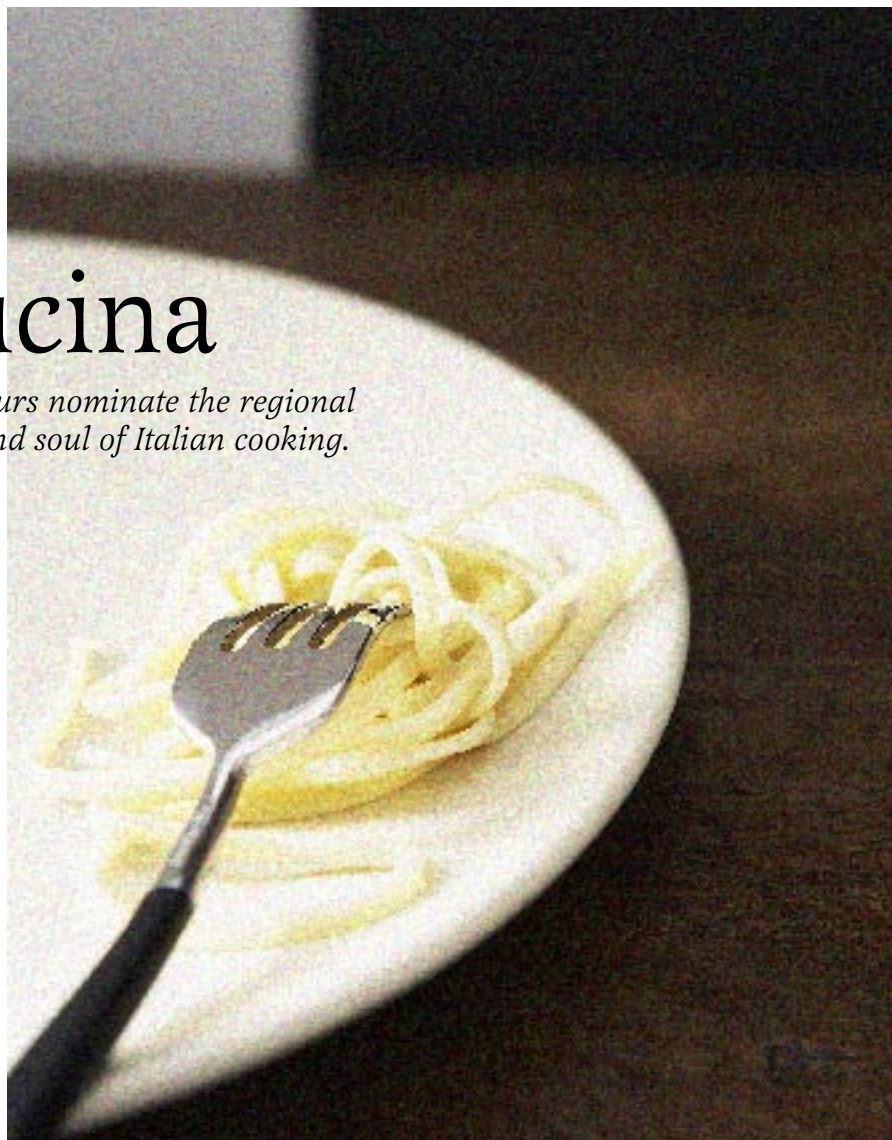
Pasta is still one of those dishes whose essentials elude many cooks. With that in mind, and as a companion to this issue's pasta cookbook, we invited some of the members of the Council of Italian Restaurants in Australia (CIRA) to take us through a few of Italy's traditional pasta dishes. We've asked each chef to choose a speciality of their region.

Lucio Galletto nominates Liguria's trenette al pesto, Giovanni Pilu picks Sardinia's malloreddus alla Campidanese, Salvatore Pepe opts for Calabria's rigatoni with nduja and prawns, and Massimo Bianchi and Armando Percuoco pick Rome's spaghetti carbonara and Naples' linguine Napoletana respectively.

Rustic dishes all, yet followed to the letter, they are fine examples of the Italian way: excellent produce, cooked simply for maximum flavour.

BUYING PASTA

Pasta comes in two basic forms: dried (more typical of southern Italy) and fresh (more often associated with the north). Dried pasta is best used for more robust (often tomato-based) sauces while fresh pasta is best for delicate sauces. Only buy dried pasta that is made from durum wheat – a particularly hard variety of wheat. Under Italian law, no other wheat variety may be used in pasta making. The best dried pastas, and the most expensive, are extruded through bronze rollers, which leave a rougher, more porous surface, which gives the sauce a better surface to cling to. Some of the best artisanal (bronze-extruded) pastas available in Australia, from select delicatessens and specialty shops, are Rustichella d'Abruzzo, Benedetto Cavalieri, Martelli and Giuseppe Cocco. Of the mass-produced pastas,



Barilla, Buitoni and De Cecco are reliably good. Fresh pasta is now widely available from speciality shops.

PASTA SHAPES

Italian cooks are particular about serving certain pasta shapes with certain sauces. Short pasta shapes such as penne, rigatoni, or conchiglie are great with a textured sauce, such as Bolognese ragù, as they trap the chunks of sauce inside their hollows. Long pasta is best with a smooth sauce, such as a simple tomato sauce or olive oil, garlic and chopped parsley. Tiny pasta shapes such as risoni are used for soup.

COOKING PASTA

Pasta should always be cooked in plenty of salted water, which has been brought to a rolling boil: four litres of water, at least, for every 500 grams of pasta. It should be cooked until it is al dente (literally 'to the tooth'), which means it still has some resistance or bite to it,

without being too hard. Fresh pasta cooks a lot quicker than dried pasta (as it contains a lot more moisture), taking only two or three minutes to float to the top of the water, the sign that it is ready. Cooking times for dried pasta vary and the packets' instructions should be followed as a guide. It should, however, be checked regularly during cooking. Once it's cooked, act quickly. Drain in a large colander (reserving some of the cooking water to moisten the sauce if need be), toss it through the sauce and serve immediately.

EATING PASTA

Australians have become used to pasta served with a lot more sauce than would ever be served in Italy. Italians don't eat their pasta swimming in a plate of sauce. The sauce is simply meant to dress the pasta to flavour it, not drown it. The sauce should be mixed through the hot pasta, so that every strand is coated, with the pasta served in warmed bowls. →



MALLOREDUS ALLA
CAMPIDANESE (recipe p122)

MASTERCLASS

Pesto is all about the strength of the sauce; it's the amount of garlic used and the sharpness of the Pecorino.



LUCIO GALLETTO, LUCIO'S

"Basil originated in Asia and Africa but it is present all over the Mediterranean, and found a habitat in Italy in the climate and soil of Liguria," explains Sydney's Lucio Galletto. "It is there that the best of many varieties grow, and the Ligurian people learnt quickly how to use it gastronomically in the noblest way: pesto. This symbol of Ligurian cucina has very ancient origins: its roots are in an oriental sauce (Arabic or Persian) that was based on a mixture of pine nuts and fresh acidic cheese. Throughout the centuries, oil and basil were added to these ingredients, and the fresh cheese was substituted with grated parmesan and Pecorino because of the abundance of these ingredients in the region. The great debate is about the strength of the sauce: the amount of garlic used and the sharpness of the Pecorino. In the Riviera di Levante, near the Tuscan border (where this recipe is from), it is quite a mild sauce, and traditionally served with a durum wheat pasta such as trenette or spaghetti, with green beans and potatoes. Other types of pasta that can be served with pesto include trofie (little dumplings of wheat and chestnut flour, without egg) or gnocchi, mandili de sea ('silk handkerchiefs'; very fine fresh rag pasta). Purists may insist on using a stone mortar and a wooden pestle, but today almost everybody uses a blender, which gives excellent results. It is essential, however, not to overheat the oil, as this ruins the aroma of the basil, so minimum speed and frequent pauses for cooling are necessary."

TRENETTE WITH PESTO

Serves 6

- 300 gm green beans, trimmed
 - 1 large waxy potato (such as Desiree), peeled and diced
- 400 gm dried trenette (see note)
- 40 basil leaves
 - 1 clove of garlic
- 50 gm (½ cup) pine nuts
 - 2 tbsp finely grated parmesan
 - 1 tbsp finely grated Pecorino Sardo
- 60 ml (¼ cup) extra-virgin olive oil
 - 2 tsp butter

- 1 Bring a large pot of salted water to the boil, add beans and potatoes and return to the boil. Add pasta and cook until al dente.
- 2 Meanwhile, carefully wash basil leaves and pat dry. Place garlic and a pinch of sea salt in a mortar and, using a pestle, crush to a paste, add basil and continue pounding, then add pine nuts and cheeses and pound to a smooth paste. Transfer to a bowl and stir through olive oil. If using a blender, pulse all ingredients on lowest speed until pesto is creamy.



RIGATONI WITH NDUJA AND PRAWNS

3 Drain pasta, beans and potatoes, reserving some of the cooking water. Place pesto into a large mixing bowl and combine with pasta, 2 tbsp reserved cooking water, beans, potatoes and butter. The sauce is used only 'a crudo', that is, not cooked, so when adding to pasta it must be mixed off the heat. Serve immediately.

Note Trenette is a narrow, flat pasta, thicker than linguine, that is traditionally served with pesto.

SALVATORE PEPE, CIBO ESPRESSO

"Nduja is a very hot chilli paste originally made with pork offal and is typical of the southern Italian region of Calabria," says Adelaide's Salvatore Pepe. "The distinctive flavour of the Calabrian version comes from chilli that has been slow-dried in a wood oven, imparting a smoky flavour. The finished paste is encased in intestine and cured like a cacciatore sausage. The fiery spread can be used to give heat and flavour to just about any dish from crostini to pasta. Nowadays, the paste is made using better cuts of meat and although there are many 'secret' recipes as there are butchers in Calabria, this is a good one, passed on to me by my friend, Francesco, a fourth-generation butcher from my home town of Polistena."

RIGATONI WITH NDUJA AND PRAWNS

Serves 4

- 320 gm dried rigatoni
 - 2 tbsp extra-virgin olive oil
 - 2 cloves garlic, coarsely chopped
 - 20 medium green prawns, peeled
- 250 gm cherry tomatoes, coarsely chopped
 - 1 cup (loosely packed) flat-leaf parsley leaves, coarsely chopped
 - 8 basil leaves, coarsely torn
- Nduja**
 - 200 gm coppa
 - 140 gm pork back fat (lard)
 - 2 tbsp sweet smoked paprika
 - ¼ cup dried chilli flakes
 - 2 tbsp sea salt

- 1 For nduja, coarsely chop coppa and fat. Add remaining ingredients and pass through a mincer or food processor on a fine setting or finely chop with a knife. Nduja will keep refrigerated for about one week. Makes about 250gm.
- 2 Cook pasta in a large saucepan of boiling salted water until al dente.
- 3 Heat olive oil in a frying pan, add garlic and sauté over low heat until golden, add ¼ cup nduja and sauté for 5 minutes or until it melts. Add prawns and cook until they change colour, then add tomatoes and cook for 5 minutes or until soft.
- 4 Drain pasta, add to sauce, add basil and parsley, and combine well. Serve immediately. →

MASTERCLASS



LINGUINE NAPOLETANA

MASSIMO BIANCHI, BUON RICORDO

Carbonara is a traditional pasta dish from Rome. Some sources date it as far back as ancient Rome, while others say it was a post-WWII invention. There is as much controversy over how the name came about. 'Carbone' is Italian for coal, and some say this dish is named for the charcoal makers or coal miners with whom it was popular. Whatever its origin, authentic carbonara includes eggs, black pepper, guanciale (pork cheek) and parmesan or Pecorino. It should be eaten as soon as it's mixed, while it's still hot.

SPAGHETTI CARBONARA

Serves 6

50 ml extra-virgin olive oil
200 gm guanciale (see note),
finely chopped
6 egg yolks
3 eggwhites
25 gm (½ cup) finely grated parmesan
25 gm ½ cup) finely grated Pecorino
500 gm spaghetti

- 1 Heat olive oil in a frying pan, add guanciale and sauté over medium heat until crisp and set aside.
- 2 In a large bowl whisk together egg yolks and whites. Add parmesan and Pecorino and season with freshly ground black pepper.

3 Cook pasta in a large saucepan of boiling salted water until al dente. Drain, reserving some cooking water.

4 Add spaghetti to egg mixture with guanciale and oil and mix quickly to combine, adding cooking water if pasta is too dry. Season to taste with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper and serve immediately.

Note Guanciale is cured pork cheek, available from Italian delicatessens and butchers. Pancetta is the nearest substitute.

ARMANDO PERCUOCO, BUON RICORDO

"A lot has been said and written about Neapolitan sauce," says Sydney's Armando Percuoco of the sauté of tomatoes that forms the basis of many Italian recipes. "There will never be one agreed recipe for all of Italy. But from discussions with countless chefs in Naples and from my lifetime of experience, this is the recipe I use. I know many chefs will say it needs ingredients like onions, carrots or celery. But this gets us away from what Neapolitan sauce really is – the most important thing is the tomatoes. Equally important is the method of cooking – this is not a slow-cooked ragù, it is a sauce made quickly at the last moment, it should not be cooked for a long time."

LINGUINE NAPOLETANA

Serves 4

10 Roma tomatoes
280 gm linguine
80 ml (½ cup) olive oil
2 tsp finely chopped garlic
4 basil leaves, chopped
Finely grated parmesan, to serve

- 1 Blanch tomatoes in boiling water, refresh in iced water, peel and cut into 1 cm pieces.
- 2 Meanwhile, cook pasta in a large saucepan of boiling salted water until al dente. Drain.
- 3 Combine oil and garlic in a large saucepan and sauté over high heat until garlic is golden, add tomatoes and basil and cook for 4 minutes. Add pasta and stir to combine, season to taste, scatter with parmesan and serve immediately.

GIOVANNI PILU, PILU AT FRESHWATER

"For an island-dwelling people, Sardinians traditionally use surprisingly little seafood, as they were primarily shepherds and farmers living inland, away from the coast," explains Giovanni Pilu. "As such, Sardinian dishes often feature sheep, goat or pork meat. Malloreddus, (also called gnocchetti Sardi) a sort of shell-shaped pasta coloured with saffron, is a classic Sardinian pasta. In this dish, malloreddus is combined with a sauce that originated in the Campidano region, around the capital Cagliari."

MALLOREDUS ALLA CAMPIDANESE

Makes 8 (pictured p 119)

60 ml (¼ cup) olive oil
1 small onion
1 small carrot, peeled and finely chopped
1 celery stalk, finely chopped
500 gm gnocchetti Sardi (malloreddus)
250 gm Italian sausages, skins removed
1 tbsp tomato paste
400 gm tinned tomatoes
5 saffron threads
2 bay leaves
1 sprig of rosemary
5 basil leaves
Finely grated Pecorino, to serve

- 1 Heat olive oil in a large frying pan, add onion, carrot and celery and cook over medium heat for 6 minutes or until soft, add sausage meat and cook, breaking up with the back of a spoon, for 10 minutes.
- 2 Add tomato paste and cook for 1 minute, then add tomatoes, saffron and herbs. Reduce heat to low and cook, stirring occasionally, for 45 minutes. Season to taste with sea salt. Sauce should be thick.
- 3 Cook pasta in a large saucepan of boiling salted water until al dente. Drain and stir through sauce. Serve with grated Pecorino. *

LINGUINE NAPOLETANA: TABLE FROM THE COUNTRY; TRADER: LINEN NAPKIN AND CARAFE FROM HONEYBEE; CUTLERY FROM CHEE SOON & FITZGERALD; PASTA BOWL FROM THE BAY TREE; BLACK PLATE FROM MUD AUSTRALIA; PRISM TUMBLER FROM COUNTRY ROAD HOMEWARE; SPAGHETTI CARBONARA BACKGROUND PAINTED IN 'JAGUAR' AND 'MILK' FROM PORTER'S PAINTS; TABLE AS BEFORE; FROM RIGHT: SMALL AND LARGE WINE GLASSES FROM HONEYBEE; FRENCH WINE GLASS FROM THE ART OF WINE & FOOD; RED PASTA BOWL FROM THE BAY TREE; FORK FROM CHEE SOON & FITZGERALD; DEEP PASTA BOWL FROM RHUBARB; PARIS PEUGEOT PEPPER GRINDER FROM THE BAY TREE; DECANTER FROM ORSON & BLAKE; PILLUVYT BOWL FROM THE BAY TREE; MEAT SUPPLIED BY VIC'S PREMIUM QUALITY MEAT; FRUIT AND VEGETABLES SUPPLIED BY MURDOCH PRODUCE; STOCKISTS P.170.



SPAGHETTI CARBONARA