



Grains of truth about PASTA

Definitions

“Pasta,” an Italian word meaning paste, describes the various shapes and sizes of products made with flour and water. Pasta products may be divided into two types; dried or commercial and fresh. Fresh pasta is often made at home or in restaurants. Pasta may also be categorized by shape:

- ◆ Long goods such as spaghetti, fettuccine or linguine.
- ◆ Short goods, including elbows, rotini, penne and ziti.
- ◆ Specialty products, such as shells, bow ties and lasagna.

Noodles, which have ribbon-like shapes and are generally made with eggs. By law, pasta labeled “egg noodle” must contain 5.5 percent egg solids by weight. Commercial pasta may be made with 100 percent durum semolina or durum flour; or a combination of durum and other hard wheat flours (farina).

Durum, from the Latin word meaning “hard,” is the hardest wheat known to man. The durum grown in the United States is used primarily for pasta and couscous. Semolina is the coarsely ground endosperm of durum. Granular in texture, semolina is used in spaghetti, macaroni and specialty products.

Durum flour is a finer granulation (similar to all-purpose flour) that is used in noodle products. It is produced as a by-product when grinding semolina or is ground directly from durum wheat.

- ◆ Farina is the coarsely ground endosperm of other high quality hard wheats. (Cream of Wheat cereal is an example of farina.)

History

By 3,000 B.C., the Chinese were eating noodles: long and flat, wide or thin, made with wheat, corn, rice or peas. Italians swear, however, that pasta was in Italy long before Marco Polo’s first trip to China (the first in 1255).

Thomas Jefferson is credited with introducing pasta to the United States. As the U.S. minister to France from 1785 to 1789, he first tasted pasta while visiting Italy.

When he returned to the United States, he brought four cases of “macaroni” and a pasta machine with him. However, pasta did not appear commercially in the United States until 1848. The first pasta factory was built in Brooklyn, New York by a Frenchman who spread his spaghetti strands on the roof to dry in the sunshine. Pasta production increased during World War I when all Italian imports were cut off.

Pasta’s popularity in the United States has been steadily increasing since. Per capita consumption was 11.3 pounds in 1975 and currently has increased to an average of 19.52 pounds per person in 2005 according to the 2006 U.S. Pasta Market Outlook Report. In comparison, Italians eat about 62 pounds per year.

Choosing your pasta

Although Italy and pasta are practically synonymous, you do not have to buy Italian pasta to obtain a quality product. Publications such as *U.S. Consumer Report* have judged U.S. pasta equal to or better than Italian pasta. In addition, U.S. manufacturers have to follow regulations concerning ingredients and manufacturing inspections. Laws prohibit the use of artificial coloring and most U.S. pasta is enriched with iron and four B-vitamins: thiamin, riboflavin, niacin and folic acid.

There are approximately 600 shapes worldwide. Pasta shapes can be used interchangeably in recipes. A general guideline to selecting shapes:

- ◆ Thin delicate pasta should be served with light, thin sauces.
- ◆ Thicker shapes work well with heavier sauces.
- ◆ Pasta shapes with holes or ridges are best for chunkier sauces. Some shapes have ridges in which to hold sauces better.

Pasta can be purchased plain or in a variety of colors and flavors—tomato, spinach, herb and whole wheat, to name a few. Good quality pasta is a golden color, with a fine even grain. Pasta that is too white or too gray indicates poor quality flour; the pasta will not cook properly and will be limp and sticky and the water will be cloudy after cooking.

Allow 2 ounces of dry pasta for a side dish serving and 4 ounces for a main dish serving. Although it will vary with the shape, 1 pound of pasta will yield about 8 cups of cooked pasta.

Cooking & Storage

Dry pasta can be stored up to two years if kept in a tightly sealed package or a covered container in a cool, dry place.

To cook pasta, boil 4 to 6 quarts of water for 1 pound of dry pasta. Add salt if desired.

Follow package directions for cooking time. If the pasta is to be used as part of a dish that requires further cooking, undercook the pasta by 1/3 of the cooking time specified on the package. Pasta should be cooked “al dente” meaning “to the tooth,” or tender, yet firm. It should be slightly resistant to the bite, yet cooked through. Drain pasta to stop the cooking action. Do not rinse unless the recipe specifically says to do so. For salads, drain and rinse pasta with cold water.

If cooked pasta is not to be used immediately, drain and rinse thoroughly with cold water. Allowing the pasta to sit in water will cause it to absorb water and become mushy. When the pasta has cooled, toss lightly with salad oil to prevent it from sticking and drying out. Cover tightly and refrigerate or freeze. Refrigerate the pasta and sauce separately or the pasta will become soggy.

To reheat, put pasta in a colander and immerse in rapidly boiling water just long enough to heat through. Pasta may also be reheated in a microwave.

Nutritional value

The 2005 Dietary Guidelines for Americans recommends five to ten ounce-equivalents of bread, cereal, rice and pasta daily (depending on age, gender and activity level), with half of them coming from whole-grains. One ounce-equivalents equals 1/2 cup of cooked pasta. Pasta is a complex carbohydrate and very low in fat, calories, sodium and cholesterol. Following is the nutrient profile for a 1/2 cup cooked, enriched pasta: 99 Calories, 3 g protein, 20 g carbohydrates, 1 g fiber, 0 g fat, 0 mg cholesterol, 49 mcg folate, 1 mg iron, 5 mg calcium, 22 mg potassium, 15 mcg selenium and 1 mg sodium. Egg noodles are a little higher in calories, but nutritionally, approximately the same.

The protein in pasta contains six of the eight essential amino acids. When combined with meat, poultry, cheese, dairy products, beans or tofu all of the essential amino acids are present.

FOR MORE INFORMATION: For nutrition details and recipes, visit these sites on the World Wide Web of the Internet:

- ◆ www.ilovepasta.org
- ◆ www.ndwheat.com
- ◆ www.wheatfoods.org



Recipes

ZESTY PASTA SALAD

- 10 ounces rotini pasta
- 1 1/2 cups broccoli, cut into florets
- 1 can (15 oz.) kidney beans, drained & rinsed
- 1 large red or green sweet pepper, chopped
- 1/3 cup chopped onion
- 4 ounces part skim Mozzarella cheese, cubed or grated
- 1 can (2 oz) chopped ripe olives
- 1 large carrot, diced
- 8 ounces lean, deli roast beef, cut in julienne strips
- 2/3 cup low-calorie Italian dressing

Cook pasta according to package directions. Drain and rinse with cold water. Pour boiling water over broccoli, drain and immediately rinse with cold water. Combine additional ingredients and chill before serving. Makes 6 servings.

Nutrient Analysis: One serving provides approximately: 379 calories, 23 g protein, 53 g carbohydrates, 7 g fiber, 8 g fat (3 g saturated), 25 mg cholesterol, 106 mcg folate, 4 mg iron, 205 mg calcium, 218 mg potassium and 873 mg sodium.

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