

National Pasta Day is tomorrow. For many of us, any day is a good day for pasta. After all, who doesn't love pasta? Nine out of ten kids choose it for their birthday dinners. (I just made that up but it sounds true – doesn't it?) A favorite of athletes, it's the meal of choice before every marathon. Warm and cozy, pasta is perfect for simple family dinners and casual entertaining.

Growing up in the suburbs, my pasta vocabulary was limited to spaghetti, macaroni and ravioli. Who knew there were as many as 350 different and all wonderful pasta shapes? I guess suburbia will do that to you. Lush green lawns are not a problem but the international aisle at the supermarket, well, it's limited at best.

Anyway, with age and broadened horizons, I have discovered a whole heap of options. If you speak Italian, most types are fairly descriptive. Think cavatappi (corkscrew), tagliatelle (ribbons), conchiglie (shells) and conchiglioni (big shells). From the charm of campanelle (bell flower) to the more curious orecchiette (little ears), it's all good.

Then again, at least one or two have a darker side. Strozzapreti or priest chokers are cursed. Poor farmers and innkeepers fed them to gluttonous priests who cared more about their stomachs and purses than the wellbeing of their congregations. The vengeful plan called for the clergy, with their voracious appetites and greed, to gobble up too much too fast and choke on the delicious pasta.

Pasta's versatility is more than the wonderful shapes and sizes. With a seemingly endless array of great sauces, you can probably toss up a different dish every night for a year. That simple marinara or red sauce of our childhood is both delicious and a good start. Add a touch of the devil with spicy red pepper flakes, a little sophistication with vodka or turn it into a hearty Bolognese.

Creamy sauces are wonderful on a chilly night. After a crazy, busy day, you can have dinner on the table in minutes with fettuccine carbonara or Alfredo. Or relax and get cozy with macaroni baked in a cheesy béchamel sauce. No need to stick to the tried and true cheddar. Get creative and experiment with gorgonzola, Fontina and mozzarella. Add depth and flavor to your dish by adding vegetables, meats or poultry, even lobster.

Not sure what goes with what when it comes to pasta and sauces. Thin, delicate pastas, like angel hair, are best with light sauces. Thicker pasta, like fettuccine, is great with heavier sauces. Chunky sauces work best with pasta which has holes or ridges, like rigatoni, penne rigate or fusili.

When serving pasta as a main course, two ounces of dried pasta per person should do it. Italians traditionally serve pasta as a first course. If you decide to adopt this tradition, cut the portions in half. Same goes for pasta as a side dish, plan on one ounce per person. With fresh pasta, three to four ounces will satisfy most people. Of course, all of these measures go out the window if a horde of hungry college students or marathoners gather around your table.

The cardinal rule of pasta is not to overcook it. Italians eat their pasta *al dente* or *to the tooth*. Pasta should be firm, a bit chewy, but not crunchy. Taking a taste is the best way to check. However, you can always entertain your friends by throwing spaghetti at the refrigerator. If it sticks it's done.

Enjoy warm and wonderful pasta throughout the fall and buon appetito!



Susan

Fettuccine with Seared Scallops and Vodka Sauce

A delightful change from a traditional marinara sauce, vodka sauce pairs beautifully with fettuccine and scallops. Enjoy!

Serves 8

2 pounds sea scallops
1 teaspoon dried oregano
1/2 teaspoon paprika
1/4 teaspoon chili powder
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper to taste
Olive oil

Sprinkle the scallops with oregano, paprika, chili powder, salt and pepper and let sit while the water comes to a boil for pasta.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Cook the pasta according to package directions, less 1 minute. Drain. Return the pasta to pot and add enough Vodka Sauce to coat and gently toss. Cover and set on low to keep warm.

Meanwhile, lightly coat a heavy large skillet with a little olive oil to and heat over medium-high. Add the scallops to skillet and cook until opaque in center, about 1 minute per side.

Transfer the fettuccine to a large, deep serving platter or individual shallow bowls, top with scallops and serve.

Vodka Sauce

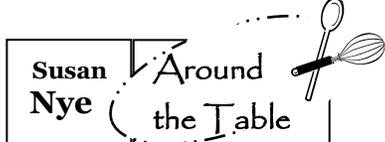
Makes about 2 quarts

Olive Oil
1 medium onion, finely chopped
1 medium carrot, finely chopped or grated
4 cloves garlic, minced
1 tablespoon dried Italian herbs
1/4 teaspoon (or to taste) crushed red pepper flakes
Kosher salt and freshly ground pepper
2 cans (28 ounces each) crushed tomatoes
1 bay leaf
1/2 cup vodka
3/4 cup heavy cream



Coat a heavy sauce pan with enough olive oil to lightly coat and heat over medium. Add the onion, carrot and garlic, sprinkle with herbs, pepper flakes, salt and pepper. Sauté until the vegetables are tender.

Add the crushed tomatoes and bay leaf. Bring to a simmer, reduce the heat to low and simmer for 30 minutes.



*Another recipe from Susan Nye:
Fall 2018/Volume 627*

Optional – Let the sauce cool slightly, then transfer to a blender in batches and process until smooth.

Return the sauce to the pot, add the vodka and bring to a simmer over medium-high heat. Reduce the heat to low and continue to simmer, stirring frequently for about 20 minutes. Whisking constantly, slowly pour the cream into the sauce and whisk until well combined.

Refrigerate or freeze left over sauce.

Like what you read? Like to cook? For recipes, menus, tips and more subscribe to my blog

Susan Nye – Around the Table at www.susannye.wordpress.com

© Susan Nye, 2018