

COOKING WITH CARLA

COOKERY CLASSES IN ROME

Pasta divides and unites, shall we make a long or short shape?.. al dente or not ?...but all agree on how easy it is to make and the first taste of homemade is a turning point. Shop bought will never again be good enough.

The taste and texture of fresh homemade pasta is an unsurpassed joy for the palate and the marvel of what two simple ingredients can produce.

After a little know-how is acquired, the time lapse from thinking about and eating it could be just half an hour, with enough time to make a quick sauce, too.

My little piece of advice is this: never ever store your pasta machine at the bottom of a stack of boxes at the back of the store room (you will never want or be able to retrieve it..) and also think about a surface where to clamp it. Keep the pasta machine in a handy place.

The most important items besides flour are fresh eggs, free range and organic, if at all possible. Even if the quality of your flour is not excellent the use of fresh eggs would balance things out.

The most frequent questions asked to me are: how many eggs and what is the consistency of pasta dough to aim for.

Unless you intend to use very large ones, I would say that one medium egg per person would suffice.

To make a dough all you need to do is to break your eggs into a bowl placed on a scale and then add almost double the amount of flour. If you want to have a dry run without wasting any eggs, place 50 gr of

cold water in a little bowl and then add 95 gr of plain flour. Mix the two ingredients and knead the dough few times to have a feel of the consistency. Obviously, a pasta dough has a different feel but you will get an idea of the consistency and also worth mentioning is that if made to be rolled out with a hand-cranked machine it must not be too soft. It will stick to the rollers and you will not want to make it again.

This basic pasta dough is suitable for any pasta shape you wish to make, the likes of tagliolini, tagliatelle, maltagliati, squares for cannelloni, lasagna sheets and also stuffed pasta the likes of ravioli, tortellini e cappelletti.

Serves 4

4 medium size eggs – at room temperature

600 gr 00 grade Italian flour or if not available any fine milled white soft wheat flour

Break the eggs in a bowl and weigh them. Beat lightly with a fork and then add almost double the weight of flour. Gradually, with the aid of your fork or fingertips, work the eggs into the flour until you get a shaggy mass. If the dough is a little dry add a little cold water. Upturn the content of the bowl onto a worktop (wooden preferably or maybe a large chopping board) and start to knead it. The pasta machine will do most of the work later so you only should knead the dough until it comes together. Unless your hands are very cold, body heat should work its magic on the eggs and turn the dough silky smooth. The right definition for it is ‘soft as a baby skin’.

Leave the dough to rest for at least 15 minutes, under an upturned mixing bowl or if the day is too hot wrap it in cling film and leave it in a cool spot.

At this stage, the dough may be refrigerated till the day after and slowly brought back at room temperature prior to use.

Once the dough has rested it can be rolled out into sheets.

With 4 eggs you might end up with a dough of 650 gr approximately that for easy handling I would split into 4 pieces. Work with one piece at the time and keep the others covered.

Firmly clamp the pasta machine to a work surface and set the rollers to the widest setting.

Flatten the piece of dough out so that it will go easily through the pasta machine. Roll the dough through, fold the strip of dough like an envelope and roll it again. If the dough feels tacky, give it a little dusting of flour to dry the surface. Never ever put any flour directly onto the rollers. Repeat this process 5/6 times, making sure that the end result would be a smooth and silky piece of dough almost the width of the rollers. Now that the kneading is over it is time to stretch the dough. Set the machine one notch down and roll the dough out. There is no need to fold the dough again and it is run just the once every time the setting is changed. Remember to dust the strip of pasta with a little flour whenever necessary. If you start getting holes in the pasta or the edges are not smooth maybe some bits of unwanted pasta are causing the problems. Roll off the dough and run your hand underneath the rollers. You most probably will find little bits of dough that are causing the pasta to tear when it is rolled out. Just wipe them off with your fingers. Roll the dough to the desired thinness and cut the strip into lengths (I would say no more than 25 cm). Lay to dry on tea-towels or a tablecloth lightly dusted with flour. If you do not feel brave enough to roll the dough out very thin, just stop at the stage you would feel confident, rather than the dough dragging through the rollers. Before cutting the pasta, allow it dry out for at least 20 minutes, turning it over every 5 minutes. Please keep pasta away from sunlight, too much breeze or heat. It will dry out too fast with the risk of crumbling

once it is being cut. Pasta is then ready for cutting when it is still pliable but fairly dry to the touch. If unsure do a little test with a piece of dough and if once cut the strands stick to each other wait a little longer. On hot/humid/rainy day pasta making could be a challenge. On very hot days is advisable to work fast and on humid and rainy it takes a long time to dry. Once the pasta is laid out to dry, bring to the boil a large pot of water, add salt and most important have your sauce ready. Fresh pasta cooks in a couple of minutes and as a broad rule absorbs more sauce than dry pasta. Have plenty of sauce at hand and always keep a cupful of the cooking water in case you need to loosen up the content of the pan with the pasta and sauce.

Most pasta machines come with the standard attachment that allows you to make tagliatelle and tagliolini. However, there are a lot of other shapes that you may cut by hand with a knife or a crinkly wheelie cutter. Pappardelle, flat noodles twice the width of tagliatelle; farfalle (bow ties), little rectangular piece of dough pinched in the middle; maltagliati (literally translates into badly cut), in which the lengths of dough are cut – at an angle – into medium sized pieces.

If you have made too much pasta it can be stored away for other meals. It can be fully dried and kept in tight sealed boxes up to three months. However, if a cool spot for storing is not available it may be stored under refrigeration up to 5 days or kept in the freezer for a long time.

How to care for your pasta machine.

Do not wash with water and soap or a strong detergent. Use a brush to remove excess flour and just wipe with a damp cloth. Buff it up with a dry tea towel. Leave out on the worktop for a day and then turn the rollers few times and shake upside down to dislodge any piece of dough.

Some of my favorite pasta shapes and sauces

One of the shapes I like best is *maltagliati* and what better way to enjoy them than in this very traditional way during the spring months. The maltagliati are tossed in a sauce made with new season white onions called cipollotti, fresh peas, marjoram, cured pig's cheeks— guanciale and Roman pecorino. Very easily prepared but the watch points are that the sliced onions must never brown, or they will impart a bitter taste to the sauce, and the fresh peas must be stewed very gently or the skin will harden up.

Tagliatelle is another favorite of mine because my maternal grandmother made them on most Sundays of her adult life. I believe I have inherited my love of fresh pasta from her, from watching her rolling out by hand (with her special very long rolling pin) huge mounds of pasta dough to the size of large tablecloths. I was mesmerized.

I know that the lovely summery sauce of fresh tomato, fillets of tuna in oil, capers, black olives and basil is always paired with spaghetti. But I am not very fond of them so I always have it with tagliatelle. One of the quickest sauce ever, and almost all prepared with store cabinet items. Gently fry some tomatoes in olive oil, add some chopped capers and black olives, a handful of torn basil leaves. Add the little chunks of tuna in oil at the very end when the pan is off the heat. If you want to prepare the sauce ahead add the tuna once it has been re-heated otherwise it will go tough and stringy.

Buon appetite

Carla Tomasi