

Pesto Paradiso

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Irrespective of my Italian antecedents, I hold no fondness for tomato sauce. Used sparingly on pizza, it's okay. Mixed into a meatloaf it's actually good. But used as a sauce, slopped around other stuff, no thanks. I think it's because I enjoy the taste of pasta and sausage and meatballs themselves just fine. To my palate, these are simply overwhelmed by the sauce.

Is tomato sauce even Italian? Before 1523 the tomato plant was unknown in Europe. It was a transplant from the Far West, as, arguably, pasta was from the Far East. This horticultural oddity was introduced to Italy via Naples, courtesy the Spanish. At first it was grown as an ornamental because it was considered a poisonous botanical cousin to belladonna, another member of the nightshade family. The roots and leaves of the tomato plant do in fact contain the poison solanine, but, as some brave soul inevitably verified, its fruit is eminently palatable. How or why someone seized the notion to render perfectly toothsome tomatoes into a cerise soup is protected by the mists of time.

I may be odd, but I'm unashamed. There are some perfectly good, and several particularly exquisite alternatives to tomato sauce as a complement to pasta. For everyday fare my preference is pasta simply tossed with butter and a little parmesan. A real treat, though, is pasta with pesto.

The quintessential pesto is Pesto Genovese, the ironically Kelly-green, basil-based sauce. I have seen the uninitiated turn up their noses at the thought of eating that "green stuff", even though they don't even blink at eating that red stuff. Think about this: The first tomatoes sent to Europe may have been a yellow variety – pomodoro means "golden apple". Imagine how appetizing a murky yellow sauce might have been.

Pesto Genovese is the classic paste of basil, olive oil, garlic, pine nuts, parmesan, pecorino and salt. In Liguria, its province of origin, preparing pesto is the Italian equivalent of the Japanese Tea Ceremony. Nevertheless, while purists consider the process sacrosanct, the ingredients are anything but. All agree that the most tender leaves of local greenhouse-grown basil and delicate Ligurian extra virgin olive oil are mandatory. Beyond these basics, every household has its secrets. Coarse sea salt is often used and some cooks still add a little butter, as recommended in 19th century cookbooks (and probably earlier) for a creamier texture. Pine nuts are traditional Genoese, but fresh walnuts are sometimes used. Pesto may have actually been inspired by the walnut-based sauces that Genoese sailors enjoyed at their trading outposts around the Black Sea. Pesto recipes most often call for grated parmesan, but the traditional formaggio for pesto is a combination of parmesan reggiano and pecorino sardo (pecorino romano is often too salty). Some practitioners prefer just one cheese or the other; some use a favorite ratio.

Pesto is fundamentally a vehicle for garlic and as such, each "secret" recipe is predicated upon the success with which the tastes from all other ingredients combine to compliment and support its flavor. The soul of pesto can be preserved with even a relatively small amount of garlic if the impact of the other ingredients is balanced. On the other hand, garlic junkies can concoct a prescription strength pesto that is not overpowering by the type and proportions of basil, cheese and nuts employed.

The traditional Ligurian preparation of pesto requires a marble mortar and a wooden pestle (pesto derives its name from the pestle – pestello). The pestle, however, is not the teardrop-shaped affair common to laboratories, but a broad bottomed variety that more closely resembles a mallet. Good "pestling" technique involves a combination of pressure on the pestle, rather than pounding with it, as the head is twisted and simultaneously pushed in circles around the mortar. The goal is to disintegrate the physical structure of all the solid ingredients, thereby creating a smooth and homogeneous paste.

For about one cup of pesto, the process starts with 2 cloves of garlic (center shoots removed) and a little coarse salt, which serves added duty as a grinding aid. These are ground into a smooth paste before the pine nuts are added a little at a time to a total of three tablespoons. When this is all reduced to a coarse paste, two cups of packed basil leaves is introduced in increments. The basil leaves must be tender, washed, and with any tough stems removed. Properly working the basil leaves into the paste is time and labor intensive, but considered critical for properly releasing the flavor and aroma of the basil while ensuring a suitably creamy pesto. The grated cheese is incorporated next, four to five tablespoons, and lastly three tablespoons of oil. The result is a thick creamy paste that does not readily separate. It is actually too thick to evenly coat pasta, so the final ingredient is a little of the water in which the pasta was cooked. This water serves two purposes. It turns the paste into a sauce and it heats the pesto to bring out its aroma and flavor.

This sounds like a lot of bother, and it is, even though the pesto is well worth it. Personally, I like to spend more time eating it than making it. To be perfectly candid, it is my wife, Claudia, who usually makes it. She also gets credit for inspiring me to think beyond basil. I experiment with the weirder pesto permutations, some of which only I'll eat. Since I consider pesto an interesting alternative to aglia olio for delivering garlic, there are nearly countless possibilities. This has doubtless consigned me to the permanent enemies list of the Order of the Knights of Pesto Brotherhood. This Ligurian organization is the keeper-of-the-faith pesto-wise. It is the self-proclaimed standard bearer of authentic Pesto Genovese, at least as far as the bottled stuff of commerce is concerned.

They allow their logo and imprimatur "True Typical Genoa Pesto" to be affixed only to those products that are made from the prescribed traditional ingredients, and which represent the taste and quality of "true" Genoa pesto. This is probably a good thing for those cooks who want to measure their efforts against the real stuff. However, those are probably the same people who consider cookbooks instruction manuals, rather than the concept pieces I believe them to be.

To me, pesto is a convenience food. It has a leg up on other sauces because it doesn't have to be cooked. It can be made quickly, thanks to the twin wonders, blenders and food processors. And if your mind is imaginative and your palate adventurous, it can accommodate unlimited ingredient substitutions – except, of course, the garlic. The only concessions when preparing dissident pesto, are those required by the laws of physics. Blenders and processors get hot quickly. If the pesto gets too hot as it's being prepared, the cheese may start to coagulate, in which case you'll never get a smooth sauce. Some of the more volatile components of the garlic and basil (or other greenery) may be lost, taking some of the flavor and aroma with them, and the sauce may be more prone to oxidation, seen after storage as a change in surface color. Blenders and processors can do their homogenizing thing only if their contents remain sufficiently fluid. Processor pesto will therefore usually require more oil than pestle pesto. It will have more of a tendency to separate out an oil layer, but you'll need to add less or possibly no water to get good coating of the pasta.

In my house nuts are rarely used in pesto, but that's just personal preference. Other pestophiles have used pistachios, macadamia nuts, brazil nuts and even peanuts in place of pine nuts or walnuts. This leads me to believe that using any natural, unsweetened nut butter might be an option for the convenience-minded (i.e., lazy). Likewise, most vegetables are candidates as alternatives to basil. I've tried canned artichoke hearts (pretty good), canned clams (yeah, I know they're not veggies, but this was really good), lima

beans (a bit heavy), peas (once is enough), and the boiled cabbage and carrots left after the corned beef was gone (St. Patrick would approve).

Fresh roasted pepper pesto is both tasty and colorful; sun-dried tomato pesto is an absolute treat. My favorite, however, is Claudia's spinach pesto. She came up with this at a time when our pesto-loving children shunned vegetables. Substituting fresh spinach leaves for the basil provides a subtly smoother taste that really lets the garlic shine. I reproduce it here with her permission because it's too good not to share. It is also an excellent prototype processor pesto on which to experiment with substitutions. The amount of oil stipulated usually allows for a fluid enough pesto that addition of pasta water is unnecessary. Because of its somewhat milder taste, it does not suffer well the watering down; using a little more oil works better for me. Spinach pesto keeps well under refrigeration and can be fearlessly frozen. If you, like me, prefer to use it in its pristine anhydrous state, the only way to safely heat it after refrigeration is very gently in the microwave.

If Popeye had known of this, what might have befallen Olive Oyle?

Spinach Pesto

- 1 cup olive oil
- 2 cloves garlic
- 3 Tbs. pinoli or chopped walnuts (optional)
- 2 cups fresh spinach leaves (stems removed)
- 1 Tbs. dried basil
- 1 tsp. salt (optional)
- 1 cup grated Parmesan or Pecorino

Combine oil and garlic in food processor (or blender). Add nuts, if desired, and blend well. With blades spinning, add spinach leaves a few at a time. Add dried basil, salt and cheese. Pulse the processor, if necessary, to keep the pesto from becoming too hot.

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