



Jeremy Norman

- IN PRAISE OF PASTA -

In 1984 to most Londoners, the word pasta meant either spaghetti in a tomato sauce or macaroni cheese. You might be able to find dried spaghetti in the better supermarkets but rigatoni or orecchietti – forget it. And as for pasta sauces, these came with the spaghetti in the same can. Basil was hardly known and pesto a sauce too far.

A visit to Tuscany opened my eyes to the glory of Italian food, its essential simplicity and rich earthy flavours. So, in partnership with my boyfriend Derek Johns, I opened a retail shop called Pasta Pasta on the Pimlico Road, SW1. The stylish interior was designed by Derek and we installed a commercial kitchen in the basement to produce the fresh pasta and a variety of sauces. Customers could take away a gourmet feast they could prepare at home in minutes. We received a great deal of publicity in glossy magazines and the London press – an instant hit.

Pasta is made in two ways; dried, extruded, usually eggless pasta; or the real thing made with eggs and rolled and cut to become lasagna, tortoloni, linguine, fettucine or ravioli. This type of pasta cooks in a fraction of the time of dried pasta – usually a couple of minutes in salted boiling water suffices. The texture is sublime, unctuous and silky. For the first year or so we sold all we could produce. We stocked a variety of genuine Italian salamis and cheeses such as Parmesan, Tallegio and buffalo Mozzarella plus some sweet things like Pan Forte (a sticky, dense cake made with dried fruits, almonds and flour) to end the repast. Our best sellers were the ever-popular Pesto Genovese and Puttanesca, or whore's sauce, so called as it originated in the red-light district of Naples and is made with olives, tomatoes and anchovies.



People went wild for these new, fresh tastes; so different from the bland, manufactured products that lined the shelves in supermarkets back then. It was not long before we had imitators and the better supermarkets started sourcing fresh pasta and sauces. Our business model had not taken sufficient notice of this possibility, alas.

I have retained my love of Italian food and could talk for hours about pasta and its various sauces. I make my own pasta and sauces and I love plain olio e aglio meaning oil and garlic with perhaps a little dried chilli topped with fresh grated Parmesan. Never buy grated Parmesan in cardboard boxes; its taste is unmentionably horrid. From Sicily, Pasta Norma made with aubergine and tomato and pasta con sardo – a

concoction of filleted fresh sardines, pine nuts and raisins topped with deep fried breadcrumbs, trust me its delicious but not easy to make at home. The combination of fish and raisins sounds odd but harks back to Sicily's Arab past; North Africans love to combine fruit with meat or fish as in their delicious tagines. The beauty of this cuisine is that it is easy and quick to make but you must use the best fresh ingredients. Be bold, experiment for yourself. Create new and unusual combinations of flavour and see how they work for you and your friends. Pasta is versatile, so should you be.

**A surprisingly good, quick and cheap pasta recipe.
I recently discovered a surprisingly good way to serve spaghetti.
It costs little and people love it.**

Steam some cauliflower heads al dente then break them up quite small. Meanwhile heat a generous amount of oil and garlic in a pan, add anchovy filets and cook until they seem to melt. Add the cauliflower then the cooked pasta and top with fried breadcrumbs - simple but majestic.