

## SICILIAN PASTA

While the Romans ate a sort of ancestor of lasagna, made of thin strips of unleavened dough and cooked up with chick peas and leeks, modern Italian pasta was developed about a thousand years later in southern Italy, in Sicily to be exact. Sicily, the home of so many wonderful foods including ice cream, had been conquered by the Saracens, the nomadic Arabs of the Syrian and Arabian deserts.

In the early 12<sup>th</sup> century, knights from Normandy, in France, descended on Sicily, drove the Saracens out, and decided to stick around themselves. Among the many things the Normans discovered was pasta. The people of Trabia, a town near Palermo, were making a kind of dried spaghetti called *itrijah*, which is the Persian word for string. That pasta, now called *tria*, is still popular in Sicily today.

Large quantities of this pasta were shipped to southern Italy and to other European destinations. One of the advantages of the dried pasta was that it shipped well and could be kept for long periods of time in a hot climate without spoiling, a big deal in the hot south.

And of course, as fish was a mainstay of the Sicilian diet, fish and pasta combinations like this spaghetti with cod and anchovies became part of Sicilian cooking.

You'll need about a pound of codfish cut in large chunks, plus about 8 anchovy fillets. Cook about 2/3 of a pound box of spaghetti in boiling salted water until done to your liking.

Chop up the anchovies coarsely, and heat about 6 tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil over medium heat in a large saucepan. When hot, add the chopped anchovies and cook, stirring, until the anchovies dissolve in the hot oil. Add the cod and sauté until the fish is cooked through, which will take a few minutes. Be careful not to overcook the fish. Add 2 tablespoons of chopped Italian parsley and cook for another minute or so.

Drain the spaghetti, reserving about ½ cup of the cooking liquid. Transfer the spaghetti to a warmed serving bowl, add the cod and its cooking oil, and stir well. Add some of the reserved cooking liquid if the dish looks too dry. Serve at once. This serves four.

You'll note this recipe doesn't call for cheese. The Italians don't usually put cheese on seafood dishes. Fish and cheese is generally not a happy combination.

Another traditional Sicilian pasta dish is *fusilli alla Siciliana*, which is fusilli with olives and cauliflower. *Fusilli* is a sort of coiled spaghetti, looking like a coiled spring. It is available at your local supermarkets.

You'll need about a pound of cauliflower. You can just get a pound of cauliflower florets, or if you use a whole head, break off the florets and then slice up the stalk, which is what the Sicilians do. You'll also need about half a cup of pitted black olives. You can buy already pitted kalamata olives at the supermarket, which cuts down on the preparation time.

This dish also needs capers and anchovies. Many Mediterranean pasta dishes call for cooking some anchovies in the olive oil as the first step in making the sauce. The anchovies dissolve in the olive oil, giving a delightful salty taste to the dish. Cook a pound of *fusilli* according to the package instructions, except that you're also adding the cauliflower florets and sliced stalks to the pasta cooking water. When the *fusilli* is done, drain the *fusilli* and cauliflower, reserving about a cup of the cooking liquid.

Meanwhile, heat four tablespoons of extra-virgin olive oil over medium heat in a large frying pan. When the oil is hot, add 4 chopped garlic cloves and sauté for a couple of minutes, until the garlic starts to become translucent. Add 4 more tablespoons of olive oil, half a cup of pitted kalamata or Greek olives, plus 4 chopped anchovy fillets, 4 tablespoons of capers, rinsed, and a couple of tablespoons of chopped Italian flat-leaved parsley. Cook, stirring, until the anchovies break down and dissolve.

Add the drained pasta to the frying pan and add about half a cup of the reserved cooking water and combine thoroughly. Add more of the cooking water if needed. The dish should be moist, but not swimming in sauce. Transfer to a warmed shallow serving dish and serve immediately. Again, no cheese. This serves four, and all you'll need is some good Italian country bread, a green salad, and your favorite wine. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.