

SPAGHETTI A LA CARBONARA

The first dish I ever learned how to cook was spaghetti a la carbonara, or spaghetti in the style of the charcoal makers. There are many different versions, but I got mine from my mother, who got it back in 1951, from the chef of a little trattoria just off of the Via Sistina in Rome, near the Spanish steps. This is real peasant food, and the ingredients plain and simple. All you need is spaghetti, salt pork, onion, eggs, parsley, black pepper, and cheese. Nowadays you often see spaghetti a la carbonara on the menus of fancy Italian restaurants, sometimes made with bacon and mushrooms, and floating in a cream sauce. That may satisfy some cook's need to gussy everything up, but the real deal is a simple, homey treat, using common and inexpensive ingredients.

Pull the leaves off some Italian parsley, (that's the flat-leafed kind), until you have about a cup's worth, loosely packed. Chop the parsley. I like to use a food processor—it's so much quicker. Take a package of salt pork, about $\frac{3}{4}$ of a pound to a pound, and cut the meat off the rind. Chop the salt pork—again, I like to use the food processor to grind it very coarsely. Peel and dice a largish onion into roughly quarter-inch dice. I do this by hand, as the food processor tends to chop the onion too finely.

Bring a pot of water to the boil to cook a pound of spaghetti. While the pasta water is heating, put about a tablespoon of olive oil into a frying pan and heat it over medium heat. Add the salt pork and sauté for a few minutes, stirring often, until the pork renders some fat and starts to turn opaque. Add the onion and keep cooking, stirring often. You want to make sure the salt pork is cooked thoroughly, without letting the onion get too brown. Turn off the heat under the salt pork and onion mixture if it cooks before you've cooked the spaghetti.

Cook the spaghetti according to the package instructions. While the spaghetti is cooking, break two eggs into a large serving bowl and whisk them thoroughly. Add some freshly ground black pepper—I like the taste of black pepper, so I add lots, around a teaspoon or so—but use less if you prefer. Just before the spaghetti is cooked, turn the heat back on under your salt pork/onion mixture. Then when the spaghetti is cooked, drain it and put the hot spaghetti into the bowl with the beaten eggs. Toss the spaghetti—the heat of the pasta will cook the eggs. Add the salt pork/onion mixture—this will further ensure that the eggs are cooked. Add the chopped parsley and continue to mix well. You won't need to add any extra salt—there's enough in the salt pork.

Then add some grated cheese, either Parmesan or Romano or a mixture of both. I generally use about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated Parmesan and $\frac{1}{4}$ cup grated Romano. Mix well and serve immediately. This is supposed to serve four, but it's so tasty that it will probably only serve three. A green salad with a garlic or mustard vinaigrette, a robust red wine, like one of our Amador County zinfandels or a Barbera or a Syrah, and some fresh fruit for dessert are all you need for a delicious dinner.

If you don't have Italian parsley, the regular curly-leaf works as well, although I like the taste better of the flat-leaf variety. If you don't want to use salt pork, you can use pancetta, an unsmoked Italian bacon. And if you are worried that the salt pork might be a little too salty, put the ground pork into some boiling water for a minute or so, just to rinse off the excess salt.

Any leftovers can be cut up with a knife, mixed with several beaten eggs, and fried up into the most delicious frittata for breakfast or lunch. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Cook.