

SUMMERTIME COOKING

By now the temperature is getting really hot in the afternoon, and I bet the last thing you want to do when you get home is to spend a lot of time slaving in a hot kitchen and heating up the house. Of course, you can always stop at the supermarket deli counter and get some cold cuts or prepared salads, but that gets expensive and sometimes it's nice to have a fresh-cooked meal. Here are some suggestions for fast simple suppers that don't heat up the entire kitchen.

Pasta is a great idea for weekday nights, as you can make a quickly prepared and tasty pasta dish without too much trouble. It used to be that in order to get good pasta sauce, you needed to work for hours making a good tomato or meat sauce just like momma used to make. But now many of the commercially prepared jar sauces aren't bad at all. All they need is some freshly grated Parmesan cheese to add to the pasta. And here are some other ideas for quick hot weather pasta dishes.

Cook some pasta. While the pasta water is boiling, roughly chop some ripe heirloom tomatoes, tear some leaves of fresh basil over them, and dress with a very little balsamic vinegar and some olive oil and salt and pepper. If you have some soft cheese, cut some in cubes and toss that in too. Add the cooked pasta and toss and serve. You can add a little chopped raw garlic as well. If you don't have soft cheese, add some freshly grated Parmesan.

Toss a handful of chopped fresh herbs in several tablespoons of warm olive oil for 30 seconds. Thin the sauce with a quarter cup of the pasta cooking water, and pour over angel hair pasta. Sprinkle on some freshly ground Parmesan cheese and some freshly ground black pepper.

Slice up a package of prosciutto. In a frying pan, heat a few tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil and add the chopped prosciutto along with a couple of cloves of crushed garlic and a pat of butter. Stir for about a minute and then add about half a cup of breadcrumbs. I use fresh breadcrumbs that I keep in the freezer. Cook for a couple of minutes, adding more oil if it looks a little dry. Serve over spaghetti with some chopped fresh parsley.

Put a stick of butter in a frying pan and add a handful of pine nuts. Cook, over medium heat, until both are a light to medium brown. Toss with cooked pasta and some freshly ground black pepper and some freshly grated Parmesan. You can add a handful of golden raisins a couple of minutes before taking the pine nuts off the fire if you like.

Heat some olive oil in a frying pan and add some chopped fresh tomatoes and some chopped fresh garlic. Sauté for a few minutes until the tomatoes soften and release their juices. Season with a little salt and pepper and add some chopped parsley and a tablespoon or so of capers and toss with cooked pasta.

If you're not counting calories or pennies, heat half a cup of cream and a stick of butter in a small saucepan. Add as much smoked salmon as you can afford and some freshly ground black pepper and toss with hot pasta.

Get some pitted green and some pitted kalamata olives at the supermarket, and chop them up roughly. You want about a cup. Heat some olive oil and add a pinch of red pepper flakes, a couple of cloves of minced garlic, the chopped olives, and some chopped parsley and serve over pasta.

If you have leftover cooked pasta, put it in a bowl and cut it up with some kitchen scissors of a couple of knives. Lightly brown the pasta along with some chopped garlic in a skillet with a couple of tablespoons of butter. Dump the browned pasta into a bowl with four beaten eggs and lots of grated Parmesan cheese and a little freshly ground black pepper, stir well and return to the skillet. Cook for a few minutes until the underside of the frittata starts to brown and flip and cook the other side until lightly browned. Cut in wedges and serve with a green salad.

With these quick recipes, the quality of the ingredients is all-important. That's why I recommend heirloom tomatoes that you can now get at the supermarket as well as at farmers markets. Fresh herbs rather than dry make all the difference in the world as well.