

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT PASTA

Why is pasta so popular?

According to National Pasta Association, among the reasons cited for pasta's increased popularity are its nutritional value, taste, convenience and economical value. In a consumer survey, 84% of consumers considered pasta to be a healthy food and an important part of a well-balanced diet. In fact, 77% of the 1,003 Americans surveyed said they eat pasta at least once a week, while a third eat it three or more times a week.

What's more, consumers who describe themselves as health conscious are more likely than others to eat pasta three or more times a week. In addition, 44% of the health-conscious are eating more pasta today than they were five years ago.

Who "invented" pasta?

Popular legend has it that Marco Polo introduced pasta to Italy following his exploration of the Far East in the late 13th century; however, we can trace pasta back as far as the fourth century B.C., where an Etruscan tomb showed a group of natives making what appears to be pasta. The Chinese were making a noodle-like food as early as 3000 B.C. And Greek mythology suggests that the Greek God Vulcan invented a device that made strings of dough (the first spaghetti).

Pasta made its way to the New World through the English, who discovered it while touring Italy. Colonists brought to America the English practice of cooking noodles at least one half hour, then smothering them with cream sauce and cheese. But it was Thomas Jefferson who is credited with bringing the first "macaroni" machine to America in 1789 when he returned home after serving as ambassador to France.

The first industrial pasta factory in America was built in Brooklyn in 1848 by, a Frenchman, who spread his spaghetti strands on the roof to dry in the sunshine.

How is pasta made?

1. Mixing

American dry pasta is made with semolina, which is produced by grinding kernels of durum wheat. Sometimes other hard wheats are also used. The semolina is mixed with water until it forms a dough. If any other ingredients are being added to the pasta, such as eggs to make egg noodles, or spinach or tomato to make red or green colored pasta, those ingredients are added at this stage.

2. Extruding

The dough is kneaded until it reaches the correct consistency, and then it is pushed, or extruded, through a die, a metal disc with holes in it. The size and shape of the holes in the die determine what the shape of the pasta will be. For instance, dies with round or oval holes will produce solid, long shapes of pasta, such as spaghetti. When the extruded pasta reaches the right length, it is cut with sharp blades that rotate beneath the die.

3. Drying

The pasta is then sent through large dryers which circulate hot, moist air to slowly dry the pasta. Because different pasta shapes vary in degrees of thickness, they dry for different lengths of time. Most take 5 or 6 hours to dry.

4. Packing

The dried pasta is then packed in bags or boxes. Some of the more fragile pasta shapes, such as lasagna and manicotti, are often packed by hand to protect them from breaking.

What countries are the leading pasta producers?

According to the International Pasta Organization, Italy is the leading pasta manufacturing country, with the US in second place. Brazil takes the #3 spot, followed by Russia and Turkey

Is pasta fattening?

Pasta is not fattening. According to the US Dept of Agriculture, a 1/2 cup serving of cooked pasta (spaghetti) contains a mere 99 calories, less than half a gram of fat and less than 5 milligrams of sodium.

How do you cook pasta perfectly every time?

1. Boil four to six quarts of water for one pound of dry pasta. (You can divide this recipe depending on how much pasta you are cooking.)
2. Add the pasta with a stir and return the water to a boil.
3. Stir the pasta occasionally during cooking.
4. Follow the package directions for cooking times. If the pasta is to be used as part of a dish that requires further cooking, undercook the pasta by 1/3 of the cooking time specified on the package.
5. Taste the pasta to determine if it is done. Perfectly cooked pasta should be "al dente," or firm to the bite, yet cooked through.
6. Drain pasta immediately and follow the rest of the recipe.

How should I store pasta?

Uncooked Pasta

Store uncooked, dry pasta in your cupboard for up to one year. Keep in a cool, dry place. Follow the "first-in, first-out" rule: Use up packages you've had the longest before opening new packages.

Cooked Pasta

Refrigerate cooked pasta in an airtight container for 3 to 5 days. You may add a little oil (1-2 tsp. for each pound of cooked pasta) to help keep it from sticking. Because cooked pasta will continue to absorb flavors and oils from sauces, store cooked pasta separately from sauce.

Freezing Pasta

The best pasta shapes for freezing are those that are used in baked recipes, such as: lasagna, jumbo shells, ziti and manicotti. You'll have better results if you prepare the recipe and freeze it before baking. To bake, thaw the dish to room temperature and bake as the recipe directs.

What are the most popular pasta shapes?

The most popular pasta shape is spaghetti, followed by thin spaghetti, elbows, rotelle, penne, and lasagna. For more pictures of pasta shapes, go to <http://www.ilovepasta.org/shapes.html>

How does pasta consumption vary by region?

Northeasters are more likely than people in other parts of the country to eat pasta, followed closely by households in the mid-Atlantic region. Consumers on the West Coast are the least-frequent pasta consumers.

How much pasta do Americans eat?

About 85% of US households purchased pasta in 2008. The average American eats about 4-1/3 lb. of pasta per year.