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THE *pasta* PERFECTIONIST

THERE ARE MANY misconceptions surrounding what has become almost a staple food wherever Italians have settled. Pasta and the myriad ways it can be prepared for the quickest and simplest of meals, has won its place on mainstream restaurant and home tables alike. It might be quick, cheap, filling and very versatile, but, spending an afternoon with an expert on the subject and watching him execute some stunningly simple, but very edgy dishes that pack a powerful flavour punch, says that pasta remains a much misunderstood gem.

Luca Ciano, as Executive Chef for Barilla Pasta's Australian operations and this edition's guest chef, fires pasta tips constantly as he cooks. Some are glaringly simple, but make a world of difference and most come from generations of kitchen trial and error. Lesson number one is that not all pasta is created equal. There are as many individual recipes and methods as there are people cooking traditional pasta, but there are some general rules that can transport you from simply grabbing the first packet you see to rave reviews at mealtimes. Whether it is quality of ingredients, type of ingredients, fresh versus dry, how it will react in the cooking process or how to use the right shape for a particular sauce, there is seemingly no end to the ways of transporting simple to sensational. If you consider that there are more than 360 different shapes of pasta in Italy, you could, as

Luca says, eat a different one every day for a year while travelling around the country. Some are specific to certain regions, but the larger manufacturers have covered as many bases as possible in the shape department. But, because today's demand for pasta means they are produced in bulk, take care to study the quality of what you are buying. The list of basic facts outlined are a great starting point and by making them your guide when buying or cooking pasta, it is hard to go wrong.

And, there are also some entrenched habits that have crept into how Australians approach pasta as opposed to the methods Italians would use. "There are some specific rules, but the bottom line is that it is what appeals to you," Luca says. One particular difference is that Australians will usually opt for a sauce that drowns the pasta. But, Luca suggests that the pasta is the star and far from burying it, if you pay for a premium product and know how to cook it properly then you want to be able to taste it.

The rule of thumb is to use 400 grams of a sauce to 500 grams of pasta. This also ensures that luxurious items such as fresh prawns or great pancetta only needs to be applied in small amounts when used cleverly with basic, but excellent quality sauces.

Similarly, where he uses pre-prepared sauces, it is usually done to form a simple base and then your inner chef takes over with some special touches. The Barilla sauces are basic "and you

become the chef" from there, Luca says. If you have your own homemade sauce bases on hand then use that in our recipes. But, for a quick and delicious fix, look for imported sauces that contain 100% Italian tomatoes or basil, for instance. A company such as Barilla will source the best tomatoes or basil from a region that is noted for the quality of a particular product. Basic doesn't mean boring. On the contrary, it is the quality of the base that is vital. The still family-owned Barilla company is Italy's largest pasta producer and at its Acadamia Barilla in Parma, it employs leading chefs to constantly refine its products. Chefs from around the world also come here to train. This approach has transformed pasta out of the notion, in Luca's words, as just "something that mums cook and not what chefs would use," and into a dish for any occasion and to be used at any culinary level. With an export market into 150 countries, the maintenance of quality and standards is paramount. What this army of chefs concentrate on perfecting are rustic, simple combinations of pastas and sauces. The combinations they use are based on rustic, simple and seasonal. Where possible, we have added extra hints from Luca to the recipes. Many apply generally to cooking pasta and they will make a difference to end results. Take note of them as you try the recipes and they will become habitual. They may seem very simple, but many of us still either don't use them or haven't been



made privy to them. For instance, the amount of water that needs to be used for the amount of pasta being cooked. When Luca refers to using a large pot, that's exactly what he means. How often have we crowded the pasta in too small a pot of water and ended up with stuck together spaghetti or uncooked pieces of penne lurking among the overcooked? It is one of the most common mistakes we make.

At the end of the day, it comes down to personal preference as to which shapes you may prefer, but we have included suggestions as to which sauces may marry better with particular shapes.

Even for the pasta purists, there are choices to be made when choosing what to buy. A high quality dried pasta that

Luca's love affair with pasta is underpinned by a wealth of experience in leading kitchens. Born and raised in Milan, he describes himself as "a member of a passionate food family" with a mother who is a fantastic cook.

uses 100% durum wheat will have a golden colour. Poorer quality products will usually have a lighter, more bland colour. Compare the colour in packets and it will quickly become obvious that there is a wide variation. Even handmade, artisanal pastas will cook and behave differently depending on their makeup - whether eggs have been added, what type of flour has been used. There is also a school of pasta thought that will argue for the use of bronze dies over teflon ones in the manufacturing process, not to mention how rapidly the pasta has been dried. They do make a difference. Teflon dies are used more in mass-production because they don't wear out as rapidly or cost as much as bronze. Bronze-died pasta will have a rougher surface, whereas teflon will create a smoother surface and retain the golden colour. Bronze-died will remain more porous, but it will also

release more starch during cooking. Top quality teflon-died pasta will produce a brilliant result when you cook it properly.

Pasta cooks through absorption and for this reason, many of Luca's recipes are cooked for a few minutes less than instructions specify. This way, the dish can be finished off in a pan with the sauce so that the pasta absorbs all the flavours. We often have a tendency to place our cooked pasta in the bowl or on the plate and then to dollop sauce on top of it.

Luca's love affair with pasta is underpinned by a wealth of experience in leading kitchens. Born and raised in Milan, he describes himself as "a member of a passionate food family" with a mother who is a fantastic cook. He never wavered from wanting to become a chef to indulge the food passion, but also because it provided the opportunity to travel. He has achieved both. By 18, he was working in London and then travelled to Australia to work for the Sheraton group during the Olympic Games. He returned to London and at 24 was a chef manager during Millenium celebrations at the Gloucester Hotel.

He had also worked in the Caribbean. After that he says, he returned to Italy to do "some serious cooking." This included working at the famous 2 Michelin-Star restaurant, Il Luogo di Aimo e Nadia, in Milan. He married an Australian and it was his wife, Georgia, who inspired a return to Australia and positions at the Sheraton on the Park, Cypress Lakes Resort and the Westin, Sydney. Luca has also aimed to cover all facets of hospitality, from restaurants to catering and private dining. In his current role, not only must he be able to display a complete knowledge of Italian regional cuisine, but he also has to be a teacher and entertainer as he conducts cooking schools and chef training throughout Australia and New Zealand and some parts of Asia.

THE 10 BASIC FACTS TO BEAR IN MIND WHEN USING AUTHENTIC ITALIAN PASTA:

- To tell if pasta contains high quality ingredients, take note of how much froth forms when you place it in boiling water. If there is no intense frothing, the water remains clear after cooking and the pasta stays golden, then it is good quality.
- Always use a large pot with one litre of water to 100 grams of pasta.
- Salting the water will enhance the pasta's flavour. Add salt just before the water boils and before adding pasta with 7 grams of salt to a litre of water.
- There is no need to add oil to premium quality pasta. It causes the sauce to slide off. Poor quality pasta may need oil to overcome the surplus of sticky starch.
- There is no need to rinse quality pasta as only a small amount of starch will be released during cooking. A light starch coating is important for holding the sauce.
- The argument regarding how healthy pasta is can be determined by understanding that no fats are added to the dough. It is also a low Glycemic Index (GI) carbohydrate.
- Still on the health front, pasta is high in complex carbohydrates, which provides a slow release of energy.
- Pasta should be cooked "al dente." This means "to the tooth" or slightly firm when you bite it. Taste it from the pot and if

necessary drain and finish cooking in a pan with the sauce over heat.

- Don't drown good pasta and examine what shapes go with which sauces. Short pasta, such as penne, go with chunky meat and vegetable sauces, while fettuccine or pappardelle suit rich, cream sauces and bucatini or cannelloni are suited to being oven baked.
- Much is made of durum wheat in pasta production. Better pasta is made from semolina, which is made by milling durum wheat kernels. Top quality pastas will be made of 100% durum wheat. Fresh pastas often use softer 00 flour and eggs.

FETTUCCINE RIGATE WITH MUSHROOM AND ITALIAN PANCETTA WITH ARRABBIATA SAUCE

Serves: 6

Prep time : 10min

Cooking time : 10min

500gr	fettuccine rigate
½	thinly sliced onion
200gr	cubed pancetta guanciale if available *
1 jar	Barilla Arrabbiata sauce
200gr	swiss mushrooms sliced
100gr	Pecorino or Grana Padano grated
10	basil leaves torn
	Extra virgin olive oil to serve
	Rock salt for pasta water

Bring plenty of water to the boil in a large pot. When boiling add rock salt. Drop pasta in the water and stir. Cook according to the instructions on the packet. In a large frying pan add the onion and pancetta and cook gently. Then add the mushrooms and season. Add the Arrabbiata sauce and cook for a further few minutes. Drain the pasta 2 minutes before the suggested cooking time, reserving a cup of cooking water. Toss the pasta and reserved water in the frying pan and cook for a couple of minutes to finish the cooking process then add basil. Serve with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil and grated Pecorino or Grana Padano on top.

*Guanciale is an unsmoked bacon made from pigs' cheeks. It has a strong pork flavour and is a delicacy in central Italy, particularly Umbria and Lazio.

CHEF'S NOTE

This is another example of how a little of the pasta cooking water becomes a vital ingredient to finish the dish and bind the pasta and the sauce together. Arrabbiata sauce has something of a "kick" to it. If using your own tomato sauce base, add a little chilli to taste. Experiment with other cheeses too, such as the pecorinos, for a change.



WARM PENNE RIGATE SALAD WITH CHICKEN, ASPARAGUS AND BARILLA PESTO ROSSO

Serves: 6
 Prep time: 15min
 Cooking time: 15min

- 500gr Penne Rigate
- 1 jar Barilla Pesto Rosso
- 1 punnet cherry tomatoes, washed and halved
- 1 spring onion thinly sliced
- 2 chicken breasts fillets thinly sliced
- 1 bunch asparagus
- 30gr Grana Padano, shaved
- Extra virgin olive oi for cooking and serving
- Salt and pepper to taste
- Rock salt for cooking pasta

Place the cherry tomatoes and spring onions in a bowl. Season and add a little oil. Set aside.

Bring plenty of water to the boil in a large pot and add salt. Meanwhile, peel the lower stalks of the asparagus and slice each spear in half. Set aside. Add the Penne Rigate to the water and stir occasionally. Cook according to the packet's instructions. Meanwhile, in a large frying pan, add a little oil and cook the chicken for 2-3 minutes. Add the asparagus to the pan, season and continue cooking until the chicken is cooked through. Drain the pasta and toss with the cherry tomatoes and spring onion. Stir well then add the chicken and asparagus to the pasta.

Add the Pesto Rosso and stir to combine. Serve immediately with Grana Padano and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil, if desired.

CHEF'S NOTE

A warm pasta salad is an ideal, lighter summer dish. Drizzling a dish with good quality extra virgin olive just before serving adds a beautiful finishing flavour. Oils from Liguria suit lighter dishes; Tuscan oils are ideal for red meats and Sicilian oils can be used for both.

CASERECCO PASTA WITH PRAWNS, PANCETTA AND ARRABBIATA SAUCE

Serves: 5

Prep time: 10min

Cooking time: 10min

500gr	Caserecce pasta
1	garlic clove crushed
2	shallots thinly sliced
100gr	pancetta cubed
1 jar	Arrabbiata sauce
1/2 glass	of white wine
16	raw prawns peeled and deveined
	Extra virgin olive oil
	Rock salt for pasta water
	Salt and pepper

Method

Bring water to the boil in a large pot

Once boiling, add rock salt and add the pasta. Cook according to packet instructions.

In a large frying pan cook the garlic and shallots in a little oil. Once golden, add the pancetta and cook for 2 minutes then add prawns, a little salt and pepper and gently cook for a few minutes, add the wine and allow to evaporate. Add the Barilla Arrabbiata sauce and bring to simmer. Drain the pasta, reserving a cup of cooking water and toss into the sauce for 2 minutes. Use the reserved water if pasta dries out. Divide pasta between four bowls and serve immediately with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

CHEF'S NOTE

This is a great example of how a dish can be given a luxurious edge with very little effort. When using garlic in a quickly cooked recipe, crush the clove to release the flavour, but don't chop it. Stirred around in the pan, it will impart flavour, but can then be removed. This avoids having it burn if it is finely chopped, or not cooked enough.



TAGLIATELLE WITH VEAL BOLOGNESE SAUCE AND BAKED RICOTTA CHEESE

Serves: 5 people
 Prep time: 10min
 Cooking time: 15min

- 250gr Tagliatelle
- 1 jar Barilla Bolognese sauce
- ½ an onion finely chopped
- ½ a carrot finely chopped
- ½ bunch celery finely chopped
- ½ teaspoon dry chilli
- 1 garlic clove crushed
- 1 glass of red wine (good quality)
- 100gr Italian Pancetta finely chopped
- 300gr minced veal
- 2 bay leaves
- 10 basil leaves torn
- 3 tbsp Olive oil
- 100gr grated baked ricotta
- Salt and pepper
- Rock salt, for pasta water

In a large casserole pot, cook the onions, garlic, carrots, celery, chilli and pancetta in a little oil. Once golden add the meat and cook making sure there are no lumps. Add wine and allow to evaporate. Add the Barilla Bolognese sauce and bring to a simmer. Add the bay leaves and cook covered for 15 min on a low heat. Stir occasionally. Bring water to the boil in a large pot. Once boiling add rock salt and then add the pasta. Cook according to the instructions on the packet. Once the pasta is cooked, drain and toss it with the sauce and cook for 1 to 2 minutes. Remove from the heat, add the ricotta and a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil.

CHEF'S NOTE

This dish is full of delicious flavour and is done very quickly. There is no need to cook the sauce for a long time if you use a top quality pre-prepared sauce or your own homemade version. Tossing the drained pasta with the sauce and cooking it for a few extra minutes will allow the flavours to be fully absorbed into the pasta. Crumble the ricotta into reasonable sized chunks and place in a low oven on a baking tray. Allow to brown. You can also add porcini or other mushrooms to this dish if desired. Ever wondered how chefs get a pasta dish using long pasta such as tagliatelle to stand up in a perfect mound on the plate? Follow the rules regarding cooking the dish off in the sauce. Then get a large soup ladle and a large fork (such as a carving fork). Twirl the pasta in the ladle, as you would with a smaller fork and spoon, until it is all twisted into a circle. Then, carefully slide it onto the serving plate.

CHEESE TORTELLINI WITH PESTO GENOVESE, SUN DRIED TOMATOES AND SHAVED PARMESAN

Serves: 3-4 people
 Prep time: 10min
 Cooking time: 10min

- 250gr Tortellini
- 1 190gr jar Barilla pesto genovese
- 10 sundried tomatoes sliced
- 50gr grana padano or parmigiano reggiano cheese shaved
- extra virgin olive oil
- rock salt, for pasta water
- Sea salt and pepper

Bring water to the boil in a large pot. When the water is boiling add rock salt. Drop the tortellini in the water and stir. Let it simmer and cook for the length of time suggested on the packet. Drain the tortellini 2 minutes before the suggested time and toss it into the frying pan away from the heat with a little cooking water. Add the pesto. The cooking water will allow the tortellini and pesto to bind together. Then add the sun dried tomatoes. Stir to ensure the pasta is nicely coated with pesto. Serve with a drizzle of extra virgin olive oil on top. Also top with the shaved parmigiano.

CHEF'S NOTE

Here is a perfect example of a simple dish that employs favourite ingredients such as basil pesto and sundried tomatoes with top quality parmigiana reggiano. As fresh basil has a relatively short growing season, there are numerous jarred varieties on the market. Make sure the label specifies that it is a fresh basil product made in Italy as the flavour intensity will be greater. Should you stir pasta during the cooking process? Luca says yes, just after you add the pasta to the water and a few times during cooking.

PAPPARDELLE PASTA WITH LAMB, PANCETTA, ROSEMARY AND NAPOLETANA SAUCE

Serves: 4 people
 Prep time: 15min
 Cooking time: 45min

- 250gr pappardelle
- 1 jar Barilla Napoletana sauce
- ½ onion diced
- ½ carrot diced
- ½ celery stick diced
- 1 garlic clove crushed
- 100gr pancetta diced
- 400gr lamb shoulder diced into 1cm cubes
- 300ml chicken or veal stock
- 3 juniper berries optional
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 rosemary sprigs
- 1 glass red wine

- 2 tbsp olive oil
- 100gr grated Grana Padano
- Salt and pepper
- Rock salt for pasta water

Method

In a large casserole, cook the onions, garlic, carrots and celery in a little oil, then add the pancetta and cook for a further 2 to 3 minutes. Once golden, add the meat and sear to seal, then add the wine and allow to evaporate. Add ½ a jar of Napoletana sauce and the stock. Add the herbs and spices and bring to a simmer. Let the meat and spices cook for 30 to 45 minutes with a lid on until the meat is tender. Once ready, add the remaining sauce left in the jar. Bring 3.5 litres of water to the boil in a large pot. Once boiling add rock salt and then add the pasta. Cook according to the instructions on the packet. Once the pasta is cooked, drain and toss it with the sauce and cook for 2 minutes. Remove from the heat, add the Grana Padano and a drizzle of olive oil.

CHEF'S NOTE

A rich sauce with larger chunks of meat o produce a hearty meal. Take care when cooking pancetta. It can become hard and dry if not treated gently. Note that meat sauces are served with the flatter pastas and not spaghetti. Luca says such sauces tend to slide off spaghetti.



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SALMON AND PESTO GENOVESE LASAGNA WITH SAUTÉED VEGETABLES

Serves: 6

Prep time: 20min

Cooking time 25-30

4 tbs olive oil
1 onion sliced julienne (fine, even, long slices)
1 celery stalk sliced julienne
1 carrot sliced julienne
1 zucchini sliced julienne
1 eggplant sliced julienne
1 leek, sliced julienne
300gr diced, skinned fresh salmon fillets, bones removed
250gr Barilla lasagna sheets
190gr Pesto Genovese

Bechamel

1.5lt milk
100gr butter
100gr flour
Salt and pepper

METHOD

Preheat oven to 180C. Sauté all vegetables one by one in a large frying pan with 2 tablespoons of olive oil (starting with onion, then celery, carrot, zucchini, eggplant and leek). Add a little salt and pepper and cook for a further few minutes. Set aside to cool.

In a large frying pan add a little olive oil and sear the salmon on both sides. Don't cook it through. Season and set aside.

For the lasagna, in a rectangular baking dish, spread a layer of béchamel (see method below) on the bottom of the dish then add lasagne sheets to cover. Add another layer of béchamel then a little of the salmon and vegetables. Dot the pesto on top. Repeat the process four times, ending with a layer of béchamel. Bake lasagna in preheated oven for 20-30 minutes and allow at least 5 minutes before serving.

Method for Béchamel

Add milk to a pot and bring to the boil. In a separate pot, place butter and heat gently to melt. Add flour to the butter and cook stirring over low heat for a few minutes.

Once the milk is boiling, transfer a little at the time to the butter mixture whisking at all times to prevent lumps. Bring mixture to the boil and stir continuously. Simmer for 10 minutes and adjust seasoning if desired. Pass béchamel through a sieve before using it in the lasagna.

CHEF'S NOTE

A traditional lasagne should be soft, moist and "a little wobbly," it should not look like what Luca describes as "a brick" on a plate. The key is to make your béchamel sauce a little runnier than usual when using dried pasta sheets. This allows the pasta sheets to cook properly, with enough moisture to ensure they remain soft and tender. Letting it rest for about 10 minutes before serving will set the dish without it totally collapsing. This is a stunning dish for a special dinner and well worth the effort.





FUSILLI WITH TOMATO AND RICOTTA SAUCE, EGGPLANT AND BASIL

Serves: 6

Prep time: 10min

Cooking time 15min

500gr	fusilli
1 small	eggplant diced
½ punnet	cherry tomatoes sliced
1 jar	Barilla Ricotta sauce
10	fresh basil leaves torn
50gr	Grana Padano grated
1	buffalo mozzarella diced into 1.5 cm thick cubes
	Extra virgin olive oil
	Rock salt, for pasta water
	Salt & Pepper

Bring water to the boil in a large pot. When the water is boiling add rock salt (7gr for every litre of water). Drop the pasta in the water and stir. Cook according to the packet instructions.

In a large frying pan heat some oil. Once hot add the eggplant and cook till soft then add the cherry tomatoes. Finally, add the Barilla Tomato and Ricotta sauce and bring to a simmer.

When the pasta is ready, drain and toss with the tomato and ricotta sauce for 2 minutes.

Remove frying pan from the heat and add, torn basil leaves, Grana Padano and mozzarella.

Allow the mozzarella to melt, drizzle the pasta with a little extra virgin olive oil and serve immediately.

CHEF'S NOTE

You can modify what vegetables you use, depending on seasonal availability. Also, look at using different Italian cheeses in pasta dishes. Pecorino, ricotta and mozzarella are all ideal. If a sauce seems a little dry, add some of the water the pasta has been cooked in. The pasta water has the pasta flavour and a little extra starch will help the sauce hold together.

PICCOLINI PENNE PASTA SALAD WITH MARINATED CHERRY TOMATOES, SALTED RICOTTA AND ROCKET LEAVES

Serves: 6

Prep time: 15min

Cooking time: 10min

- | | |
|---------|---|
| 500gr | Penne "Piccolini" |
| 1/2 jar | Barilla Pomodoro ricotta sauce |
| 4 tbs | extra virgin olive oil |
| ¼ | bunch basil leaves washed, torn |
| 1 | spring onion thinly sliced |
| 2 | punnets cherry tomatoes washed, quartered |
| 1 | celery stick thinly sliced |
| 2 | handfuls rocket washed |
| 100gr | salted ricotta grated |
| | Extra virgin olive oil to serve |
| | Salt and pepper |
| | Rock salt, for cooking water |

Bring plenty of salted water to the boil in a large pot. When the water is boiling, add rock salt. Drop the penne in the water and stir. Cook according to packet instructions. Meanwhile, in a bowl, place extra virgin olive oil, basil, spring onion, cherry tomatoes and celery and season to taste. Once the pasta is cooked, drain and toss into the bowl with the vegetable mixture. Allow the pasta to absorb all juices while warm and add the ricotta sauce. Add the grated salted ricotta and rocket and stir well to combine.

CHEF'S NOTE

This pasta salad is destined to become a favourite. "Piccolini" is a range of Barilla pasta designed for children and features smaller versions of classic shapes. It is also ideal for salads and soups. For the salad, prepare the vegetables hours earlier to really intensify the flavours. All that's left to do is to cook the pasta and quickly assemble the dish. Ideal as part of a barbecue or a wonderfully fresh stand-alone dish full of flavour. Seek out the dried, salted ricotta at specialist cheese outlets as it adds a sensational touch. It makes a great change grated onto many pasta dishes and also has a place on a cheese platter. These raw ingredients salads are popular in regions such as Puglia when the freshest and most flavoursome vegetables are at their peak and speak for themselves.



**SLOW COOKED COD
FILLETS IN TOMATO AND
OLIVE SAUCE**

Serves: 4 people

Prep time: 5 min

Cooking time: 10min

- 4 medium-sized cod fillets skin removed, boned
- ¼ onion thinly sliced
- 1 garlic clove crushed
- ½ cup of white wine
- 10 anchovy's fillets
- 1 jar Barilla Olive sauce
- 1 tbs capers
- 10 parsley leaves
- 1 tablespoon of dried oregano
- 1/2 teaspoon of dry chilli
- Extra virgini olive oil
- Salt and pepper

In a large frying pan heat a little oil, add onion, garlic and chilli and cook until golden. Quickly sear the cod fillets for 2 minutes on both sides and then add capers and anchovies. Add the wine allowing it to evaporate. Add the Barilla olive sauce and bring to a simmer. Add the oregano and parsley and cook for a further 3 to 5 minutes with a lid on until the fish is cooked. Serve with a drizzle of oil.

CHEF'S NOTE:

No, this recipe doesn't include pasta. But, it is a great example of what you can do with any leftover base sauce that usually ends up parked in the fridge. If there is a pasta dish on the menu and you need something else, this great treatment of fresh fish can be quickly put together.

