

Essential Guide to Cooking Pasta

Cooking pasta seems simple—just boil water and wait—but cooking perfect pasta takes some finesse. Here's how we do it. BY SEAN LAWLER

PASTA BUYING GUIDE

ITALIAN PASTA

You have two basic choices—dried or fresh. Dried pasta is made from high-protein durum wheat flour, so it cooks up springy and firm and is suitable for thick tomato and meat sauces as well as concentrated oil-based sauces. Fresh pasta is made from softer all-purpose flour and is quite delicate. Its rough, porous surface pairs well with dairy-based sauces.



DRIED PASTA WINNER: RONZONI

Dried Semolina Pasta: No longer gummy and bland, American brands of semolina (which is coarsely ground durum wheat) pasta have improved so much that many bested their pricey Italian counterparts in our tasting.

➤ **COOKING TIPS:** When cooked to al dente, pasta retains some chew but is neither hard nor gummy at the center.

Fresh Egg Pasta: While your best bet for fresh pasta is still homemade, there are a few serviceable supermarket options. Our favorite brand is found in the refrigerator case, sealed in spoilage-retardant packaging and made from pasteurized eggs.



FRESH PASTA WINNER: BUITONI

➤ **COOKING TIPS:** Fresh pasta is easily overcooked, so taste early. Drain the pasta a few minutes before it reaches al dente, return it to the empty pot, and then cook with the sauce for another minute or two. The underdone pasta will absorb flavor from the sauce, and the starch from the pasta will help thicken the sauce.

Whole Wheat and Grain Pastas: Most of the whole wheat pastas we tried were gummy, grainy, or lacking in “wheaty” flavor, but there were a few that we really liked. Our favorite is made from a blend of whole wheat and regular flours. We were less thrilled about the alternative-grain pastas we tried. Made from



**WHOLE WHEAT WINNER:
RONZONI HEALTHY HARVEST**

rice, corn, quinoa, and spelt, these products were plagued by shaggy, mushy textures and off flavors. If you're desperate to avoid wheat, try Tinkyada Organic Brown Rice Pasta.

➤ **COOKING TIPS:** Cook and use as you would dried semolina pasta.

ASIAN NOODLES

Unlike Italian-style pasta, most Asian noodles are of a similar shape (long strands of varying thickness), but they can be made from a wide variety of flours. With some exceptions, they are usually best cooked like Italian pasta—in a large quantity of rapidly boiling, salted water, then drained (see specifics below). One note about judging doneness: In Asia, al dente is a foreign concept. Asian noodles are best cooked until completely tender (but not mushy).

Chinese Egg Noodles: These pale yellow, spaghetti-sized noodles are made from wheat flour and available dried, in the Asian ingredients aisle of your market,



or fresh, usually with the produce. Sometimes labeled “lo mein” noodles or generic “Chinese-style” noodles. (Don't confuse them with the bags of curly dried American egg noodles.)

➤ **COOKING TIPS:** Chinese egg noodles are good for stir-fries, cold salads, or pan-fried noodle cakes. Except when used in fried noodle cakes, egg noodles should be drained, rinsed under cool, running water, drained again, then tossed with a few teaspoons of toasted sesame oil (to prevent clumping).

Udon Noodles: Available fresh or dried, udon are white, ropelike wheat noodles that are especially thick and starchy. They are best used for hearty soups, but unlike ramen (below), the noodles are cooked separately, not in the broth.



➤ **COOKING TIPS:** Udon noodles are made with quite a bit of salt, so there is no need to add salt to the cooking water. Because they are so starchy, they should definitely be rinsed after cooking.

Ramen Noodles:

In Japan, the term *ramen* refers to a whole category of brothy noodle dishes, but in America we are limited to “instant ramen soup”—the

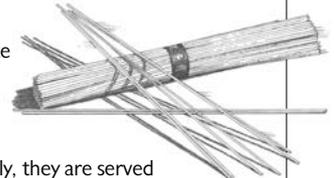


dried blocks of thin, wavy wheat noodles sold in cellophane with a seasoning packet.

➤ **COOKING TIPS:** Instant ramen noodles are first fried, then dried, so they cook in just a few minutes. We discard the seasoning packet, make our own broth (or doctor some canned chicken broth), and serve them topped with meat, seafood, or egg.

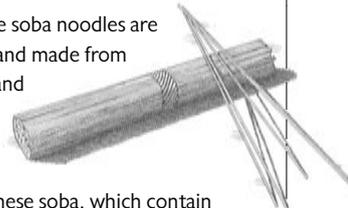
Somen Noodles:

These very long, thin white noodles are made from wheat flour that has been lightly oiled and are usually sold dried. Traditionally, they are served iced, along with garnishes and a dipping sauce, but they can also be used in soups.



➤ **COOKING TIPS:** Like udon, somen should be rinsed after cooking and need no salt added to the cooking water.

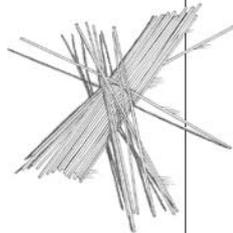
Soba Noodles: Japanese soba noodles are thin, like Italian linguine, and made from a mixture of wheat flour and buckwheat flour, which imparts a brownish-gray color and earthy flavor.



We prefer imported Japanese soba, which contain a higher percentage of buckwheat flour and therefore possess stronger flavor. Cooked soba noodles are added to broths to make soups, lightly dressed and served as salads (chilled, warm, or at room temperature), or eaten cold with dipping sauces.

➤ **COOKING TIPS:** No matter the application, soba noodles should be rinsed after cooking.

Rice Noodles: Chewy white rice noodles are especially popular throughout southeast Asia. American supermarkets generally carry only two sizes: thin, threadlike noodles (sometimes labeled “vermicelli” or “rice stick”) and thicker, flat noodles about 1/4 inch wide (confusingly, also called “rice stick”). Rice noodles are traditionally stir-fried (as in pad Thai) or served in soup.



➤ **COOKING TIPS:** If boiled, rice noodles overcook easily and tend to clump. We've had much better results soaking them in hot water until softened and pliable, draining them, then adding them directly to the soup or stir-fry. “Vermicelli” rice noodles need to soak for about five minutes, while thicker noodles need 15 to 20 minutes.

AT A GLANCE: Cooking Pasta

1. Add salt and pasta to water at a rolling boil.
2. Stir immediately to prevent sticking.
3. Cover and return to boil, stirring occasionally.
4. Check early and often for doneness.
5. Reserve some cooking water and drain.
6. Sauce, season, and serve immediately.

Water and Pot: You'll need 4 quarts of water to cook 1 pound of dried pasta. Any less and the noodles may stick. Pasta leaches starch as it cooks. Without plenty of water to dilute it, the starch coats the noodles, making them sticky.

The pot should be large, with at least a 6-quart capacity—to guard against boilovers. But forget expensive metal pots and fancy mesh inserts. A light-weight, inexpensive stockpot with sturdy handles and a lid does the job just fine.

ITALIAN PASTA COOKING GUIDE

Pasta cooks quickly and should be served immediately, so have all the necessary ingredients and utensils assembled before you begin, including your dinner guests. As the Italians say, "People wait for pasta, not the other way around."

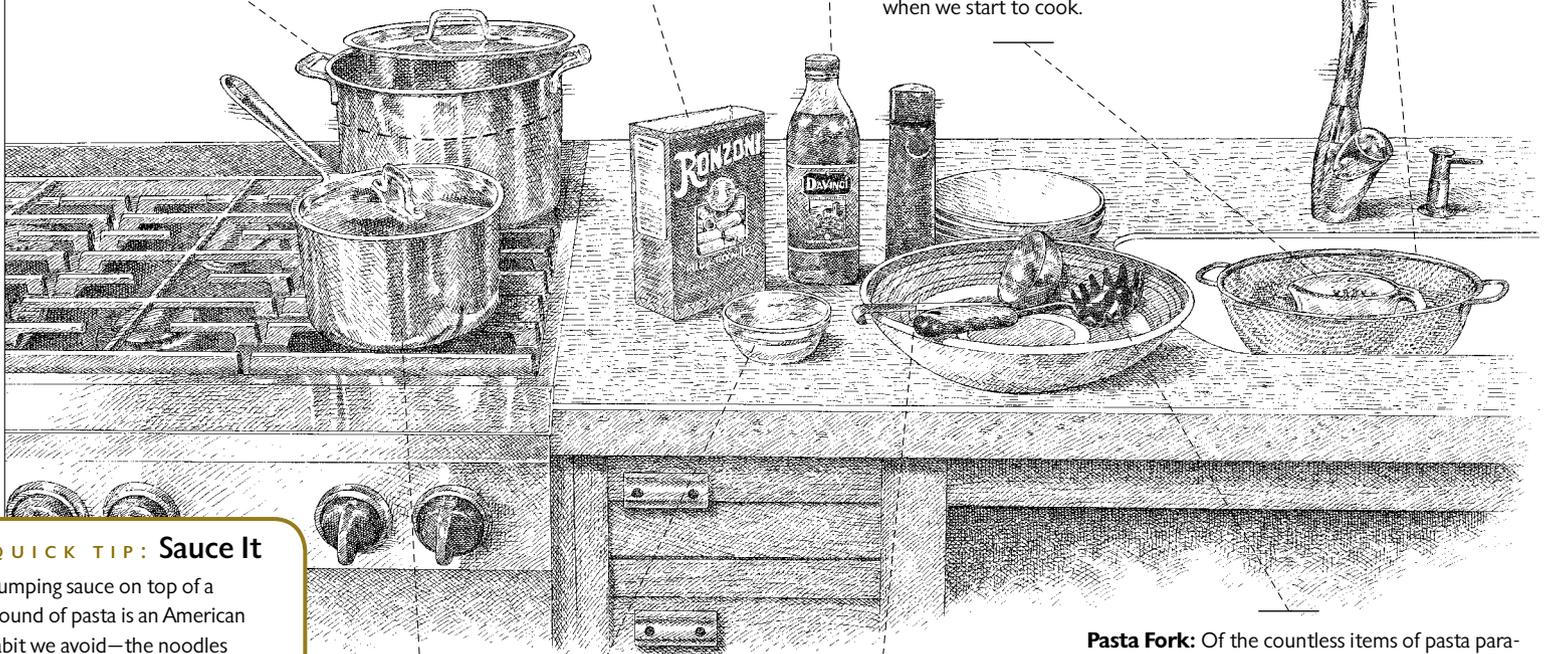
Oil: Unless you're serving a butter- or cream-based sauce, keep some extra-virgin olive oil on hand for drizzling over the sauced pasta for a final burst of flavor. Just don't waste it in the cooking water: It won't prevent the pasta from sticking (not a problem if you use enough water), but it will prevent the sauce from coating the pasta.

Pasta: One pound of dried pasta generally serves four to six people as a main course, depending on whether the sauce is light (tomato sauce), rich (creamy Alfredo or hearty Bolognese), or bulked up with other ingredients such as vegetables or seafood.

Liquid Measuring Cup:

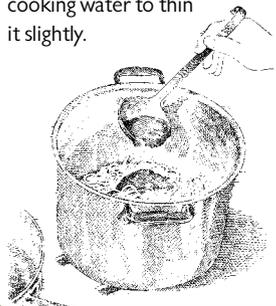
In that last flurry of activity before saucing the pasta and getting dinner on the table, it's easy to forget to reserve some cooking water to thin the sauce, if needed. We often place a measuring cup in the colander as a reminder when we start to cook.

Colander: Once the pasta is drained, give the colander a shake or two, but don't shake the pasta bone-dry. The little bit of hot cooking water clinging to the pasta will help the sauce coat it. Another no-no: rinsing cooked pasta.



QUICK TIP: Sauce It

Dumping sauce on top of a mound of pasta is an American habit we avoid—the noodles clump as they cool. Instead, we take a cue from the Italians, who transfer the drained pasta back to the hot pot and add just enough sauce to coat the pasta evenly, along with enough reserved pasta cooking water to thin it slightly.



Sauce: Don't drop the pasta into the water until the sauce is nearly ready. Smooth sauces and sauces with very small bits, such as garlic and oil, are best with long strands of pasta. Chunkier sauces are best matched with short tubular or molded shapes.

Salt: Properly seasoned cooking water is crucial for good flavor—use 1 tablespoon table salt (or 2 tablespoons kosher salt) per 4 quarts of water.

Serving Bowls and Ladle:

We like to serve pasta in wide soup bowls, as the edge provides an easy place to twirl noodles on a fork. To warm them before serving the pasta (especially important with cream sauces, which cool quickly and congeal), add a few extra cups of water to the pasta pot. When it boils, ladle about ½ cup of boiling water into each bowl and let stand while the pasta cooks.

Pasta Fork: Of the countless items of pasta paraphernalia we've tested over the years, the only one we recommend is a pasta fork, a long-handled, perforated spoon with ridged teeth. The wood variety is clunky and prone to splitting, but the plastic and stainless-steel versions are great. Not essential—basic tongs work fine—but we're glad we bought one.

QUICK TIP:

Warm the Serving Bowl

If you're using a large serving bowl, try placing it underneath the colander while draining the pasta. The hot water heats up the bowl, which keeps the pasta warm longer.



QUICK TIP:

Don't Forget the Salt

If you're worried that the salt may slip your mind, spoon it directly into the box of pasta.

