

Casareccia con la Frutta Secca (Casareccia Pasta with Nut Pesto Sauce)

1/2 cup almonds
1/2 cup hazelnuts
1/2 cup walnuts
1/2 cup pistachio nuts
1/2 cup pine nuts
6 garlic cloves, peeled
2 cups fresh basil leaves
1/3 cup freshly chopped Italian parsley

1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese, plus more for topping
1/2 cup freshly grated pecorino
Salt and freshly ground pepper
3/4 cup olive oil, or as needed
2 pounds casareccia, gemelli, or penne
2 tablespoons sweet butter

This exquisite version of an Arab-inspired Sicilian pasta dish with a nut pesto sauce was given to us many years ago by an old family friend who insisted that its success lies in crushing each ingredient separately with a mortar and pestle. For a while we faithfully followed her instructions—a time-consuming, tedious job. Now we have become modern, or too lazy, so we accomplish the task quickly and efficiently in the food processor. The sauce tastes better than ever, and it is one of the most popular dishes at our restaurant.

When our friend tasted her sauce prepared by machine, she shrugged. Preserving the beloved past, she continues laboriously grinding the ingredients one by one. Although Mamma doesn't understand why her friend is so stubborn, Mamma herself still refuses to use the food processor, so I must always make the sauce.

Casareccia are twin-twisted short-shaped pasta pieces, very popular in Sicily, but gemelli, penne, or any other similar-size pasta can be used. The recipe below is the right amount for 2 pounds of pasta that will serve 8 to 12 people. The recipe can be cut in half to serve 4 to 6. The sauce freezes well, so you might want to make the larger amount and save half the sauce for another day. To use the frozen sauce, thaw it at room temperature. Reheat the sauce in the top pan of a double boiler, stirring it often, just until thoroughly heated.

Put all the ingredients, except the olive oil, pasta, and butter, into the bowl of a food processor. Turn on the machine and immediately begin pouring the olive oil through the feed tube in a slow, steady stream. The mixture should be a thick, creamy, spreadable consistency. Add a little extra olive oil, if necessary. Do not over-purée the sauce; the nuts should remain grainy in texture and crunchy. Transfer the sauce to a large saucepan or heatproof bowl and set it aside.

Bring 6 quarts of water to a rolling boil in a large pot. Stir in 3 tablespoons of salt, stir again, and add the pasta. Cook until al dente, or just tender, stirring often.

Meanwhile, add the butter and 2 cups of boiling water from the pasta pot to the sauce, and thoroughly combine.

Remove 1 cup of the hot pasta water and reserve it. Drain the pasta and transfer it to a large serving bowl. Adding 1 cup of the sauce at a time, toss the pasta until all the sauce is used. Add a little hot pasta water, if necessary. Taste for seasoning.

No extra cheese is required, but if you like, pass the Parmesan cheese.