

COOKING SKILLS

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Cooking and saucing pasta: tomato, oil, cream, egg and meat sauces, baked pasta, soups and salads

9 Chapters

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COOKING SKILLS: PASTA 1

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Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 1 · Know Your Pasta

SKILL GOAL

Choose the right shape of dried pasta for a sauce, and portion and cook it sensibly.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Dried pasta is made from just two things: **durum wheat semolina** (a hard wheat that is high in protein) and water. The dough is pushed through shaped holes, then slowly dried. Durum is used because it keeps its shape and a little firmness when boiled, where soft wheat flour would turn to paste. Pasta should be tender but not mushy, which cooks call **al dente**, "to the tooth".

SHAPE	EXAMPLES	BEST WITH
Long strands	Spaghetti, linguine, tagliatelle	Smooth sauces, oil, light tomato, seafood
Tubes	Penne, rigatoni, macaroni	Chunky, thick or baked sauces; the sauce gets inside
Twists and bows	Fusilli, farfalle	Pesto, vegetable and cream sauces; pasta salad
Shells and cups	Conchiglie, orecchiette	Chunky sauces, peas, small pieces; they scoop
Tiny pasta	Orzo, ditalini	Soups and stews (chapter 8)

The golden rule of matching is that **thin sauces suit long pasta**, because they coat the strands, and **thick or chunky sauces suit short, hollow or twisted pasta**, which trap them. But no police will arrest you for ignoring it.

- **Read the packet.** It tells you the cooking time. Start tasting about 2 minutes before it.
- **Bronze-cut** pasta is pushed through bronze dies and has a rough, matt surface that holds sauce better than smooth, shiny pasta. It costs a little more.

- **Wholewheat pasta** has more fibre, a nuttier taste and a chewier bite. It is a good healthy swap, especially with strong sauces.
- **Store dry pasta** in a cool, dry cupboard. It keeps for a year or more.

> **GLUTEN-FREE PASTA**
>
> Gluten-free pasta (made from corn, rice or legumes) behaves differently: it cooks unevenly, goes mushy quickly and gets sticky as it cools. Follow the packet carefully, taste early, rinse lightly if it is cold, and eat it freshly cooked. This course doesn't have separate gluten-free recipes.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Pasta with butter and parmesan (your baseline)

15 minutes | 1 portion | the plainest pasta there is

Everything in this course is compared with this. It has almost nothing in it, so you can taste the pasta itself and how well you cooked it. Chapter 2 explains the cooking method in detail; for now, follow the steps.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried penne or spaghetti
1 litre	water
1 tsp	salt
15 g	butter
15 g	parmesan, finely grated
1 pinch	black pepper

1. Bring the water to a rolling boil in a medium pan. Add the salt, then the pasta, and stir well for the first 30 seconds so the pieces don't stick.
2. Boil, uncovered, for the time on the packet **minus 1 minute**. Then bite a piece: it should be tender with the faintest firmness in the centre.
3. Scoop out a small mugful of the cooking water, then drain the pasta in a colander. Don't rinse it.
4. Return the pasta to the pan off the heat. Add the butter, the parmesan, a splash (about 2 tablespoons) of the cooking water and the pepper. Toss for 20 seconds until glossy.
5. Taste it before adding anything else.

> **HOW MUCH PASTA?**
>
> 75 g dry pasta is a sensible main-meal portion for most people, 90 to 100 g if you are hungry, and 50 g as a starter or side. It roughly doubles in weight (to about 170 g) once cooked.

LEVEL 2 · TASTE AND COMPARE

The shape tasting plate

40 minutes | 1 plate, 5 tastes | needs five small pans or two rounds

Five common shapes, each cooked the same plain way and tossed in a little olive oil, then lined up on a plate. Buy the smallest packets, because you will use them all through this course.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

30 g	dried spaghetti
30 g	dried penne
30 g	dried fusilli
30 g	dried farfalle
30 g	dried conchiglie (medium shells)
2.5 litres	water, split between the pans (500 ml each)
1 pinch	salt per pan
1 tbsp	olive oil, for tossing

1. Put **500 ml of water and a pinch of salt** in each of five small pans (or cook in two or three rounds). Bring to the boil.
2. Add each shape to its own pan, stir, and set a timer for the shortest time on its packet (or the times in the table below), then test a piece a minute later.
3. Drain each, toss with a few drops of olive oil so the pieces don't stick together, and arrange on one plate.
4. Look at each: how it is shaped, how thick, how hollow. Taste each plain, then press a piece with the back of a fork to see how much "bite" it has.
5. Write what you notice in the tasting-notes table.

COOKING TIMES (CHECK YOUR PACKET)

SHAPE	DRY WEIGHT	BOIL FOR
Spaghetti	30 g	9 to 11 min

SHAPE	DRY WEIGHT	BOIL FOR
Penne	30 g	10 to 12 min
Fusilli (twists)	30 g	10 to 12 min
Farfalle (bows)	30 g	9 to 11 min
Conchiglie (shells)	30 g	10 to 12 min

LEVEL 3 · MATCH THE SAUCE

One sauce, two shapes

25 minutes | 2 small portions | how shape changes the meal

The same simple tomato sauce on a long shape and a twisted one. Pasta shape is not only decoration: it decides how much sauce each mouthful carries.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

75 g	dried spaghetti
75 g	dried fusilli
200 ml	tomato passata (for both)
2 tsp	olive oil
1	garlic clove, crushed
4	basil leaves, torn
1 pinch	salt and sugar

1. Warm the oil in a small pan over a low heat. Add the garlic for 30 seconds, then the passata, the salt and sugar. Simmer for 10 minutes and stir in the basil.
2. Boil the spaghetti and the fusilli in separate pans of salted water until tender (see the tasting plate for times). Drain, keeping a little cooking water.
3. Divide the sauce between the two pans. Toss each pasta with its half of the sauce and a splash of cooking water over a low heat for 1 minute.
4. Eat a forkful of each, and look at how much sauce is left on the plate.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Salted or unsalted water

Does salting the water really change anything?

1. Cook two lots of 50 g spaghetti in 700 ml of water, one with 1 teaspoon of salt in the water and one with no salt.
2. Drain both and eat them plain, with nothing on them, side by side.

Look for: The unsalted pasta tastes flat, however good the sauce. Only a small part of the salt ends up in the pasta, but it makes the difference. Notice that adding salt later doesn't give the same result.

EXPERIMENT

Wholewheat or white

Is the healthier pasta worth it?

1. Cook 50 g of white penne and 50 g of wholewheat penne in separate pans of salted water. The wholewheat usually needs 1 to 2 minutes longer.
2. Eat each with a little butter and parmesan, and then with a spoonful of tomato sauce.

Look for: The wholewheat has a nuttier taste and a chewier texture. With plain butter it stands out. With a strong tomato sauce it is hard to tell apart.

EXPERIMENT

Smooth or rough

Does the surface of the pasta matter?

1. If you can find both, buy a standard dried pasta and a bronze-cut one of the same shape. Cook them in the same way.
2. Toss each with the same amount of tomato sauce, and notice how much sauce stays on the pasta and how much is left on the plate.

Look for: Bronze-cut pasta has a rougher surface and holds more sauce. If you can only find one kind, look at the surface of your pasta under a light: smooth and shiny, or dull and slightly rough?

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Butter and parmesan baseline				
Spaghetti				
Penne				
Fusilli				
Farfalle				
Conchiglie				
Salted vs unsalted				
Wholewheat vs white				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Pasta stuck together in a clump	Pan too small, or not stirred at the start	Use a bigger pan with plenty of water; stir for the first minute
Bland pasta	No salt in the water	Add a teaspoon of salt per litre when the water boils
Soft and gluey	Overcooked	Taste earlier; drain 1 minute before the packet time and finish in the sauce
Hard, chalky core	Undercooked	Cook a minute longer and bite again
Spaghetti sticking out of the pan	It hasn't softened yet	Push it down with a wooden spoon after 30 seconds; don't snap it
Sauce slides off	Smooth pasta, or pasta rinsed, or sauce too thin	Don't rinse; finish pasta in the sauce with a splash of cooking water

FOOD SAFETY: COOKED PASTA

Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through. Draining boiling water produces a lot of steam, so keep your face back and use oven gloves if the pan is heavy.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can name the main pasta shapes and what they suit.
- ☐ I know what al dente means and how to test for it.
- ☐ I can measure a sensible portion of dry pasta.
- ☐ I know why the water must be salted.
- ☐ I have a baseline bowl of plain pasta to compare everything with.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 2 is Cooking Pasta: how much water, when to add salt, how to time it, why you save the cooking water, and why you never rinse it (or add oil).

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 2 · Cooking Pasta

SKILL GOAL

Cook dried pasta properly every time: enough water, salt, careful timing, and saved cooking water.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Cooking pasta looks too simple to have a method, and that is why so many people do it badly. Five things matter: **enough water**, **salt**, **timing**, **saving some of the cooking water**, and **finishing the pasta in the sauce**.

STEP	WHAT TO DO	WHY
Big pan, lots of water	About 1 litre per 100 g of pasta, in a pan big enough to move it around	Keeps the water boiling when the pasta goes in, and dilutes the starch so the pieces don't stick
Salt the boiling water	About 1 teaspoon per litre	Flavours the pasta from the inside, and most of the salt is poured away
Stir at the start	30 seconds to a minute after adding	Stops the pieces sticking while the starch is wet and sticky
Lid off, steady boil	A rolling boil, not a lid-rattling one	Even cooking, and no boil-overs
Taste early	A minute or two before the packet time	Only your teeth can tell you when it is done
Save a mug of water	Before you drain	It makes the sauce silky and helps it cling
Don't rinse, don't add oil	Drain and sauce at once	Rinsing washes away the starch the sauce needs; oil in the water coats the pasta and makes the sauce slide off

STEP	WHAT TO DO	WHY
Finish in the pan	Toss with the sauce for a minute or so over the heat	The pasta soaks up flavour and the sauce clings

The only time you rinse is when the pasta is going into a cold dish, such as a salad.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Spaghetti with olive oil, lemon and parmesan

15 minutes | 1 portion | the method, step by step

A sauce with almost nothing in it, so the technique is on show. This is the recipe to practise the whole method on: boil, taste, save water, drain and finish in the pan.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried spaghetti or linguine
1 litre	water
1 tsp	salt
1 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil
½	lemon, zest and a squeeze of juice
15 g	parmesan, finely grated
1 pinch	black pepper

1. Fill a medium pan with the water, cover, and bring to a **full rolling boil**. Add the salt (it foams up, so add it carefully), then the spaghetti. Push it under as it softens, and stir for the first 30 seconds.
2. Set a timer for **2 minutes less than the packet time**. At that point, take out a piece, let it cool for a moment and bite it. Repeat every 30 seconds until it is tender with a tiny firmness in the middle.
3. Scoop out a mugful of the cooking water. Drain the pasta (don't rinse it), and return it to the pan off the heat.
4. Add the olive oil, lemon zest, a squeeze of juice, the parmesan, pepper and 3 tablespoons of the cooking water. Toss with tongs for **30 seconds**, until glossy and lightly creamy. Add a splash more water if it looks dry.

WHY THE COOKING WATER?

> The cooking water is cloudy with starch. A splash makes oil and cheese cling to the pasta as a creamy sauce instead of sliding to the bottom of the bowl. Always scoop some out before you drain.

LEVEL 2 · VEGETABLES IN THE POT

Pasta with peas, lemon and ricotta

20 minutes | 1 portion | healthy and quick

Frozen peas go into the same pan as the pasta for the last few minutes, so you only need one pan and one colander.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried penne or conchiglie
1 litre	water
1 tsp	salt
80 g	frozen peas
½	lemon, zest and a squeeze of juice
40 g	ricotta
1 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil
1 tbsp	chopped mint or parsley
1 pinch	black pepper

1. Boil the pasta in the salted water for the packet time minus 3 minutes.
2. Add the frozen peas to the pan and cook for the **last 3 minutes**, until the pasta is tender.
3. Scoop out a mugful of the cooking water, then drain.
4. Return to the warm pan with the lemon zest and juice, ricotta, olive oil, herbs and pepper. Add 3 tablespoons of the cooking water and stir until the ricotta melts into a light, creamy sauce.

LEVEL 2 · COLD

Pasta salad

25 minutes, plus cooling | 1 portion | the one time you rinse

Warm pasta is sticky with starch, which is great in a hot sauce but sticks into a lump in a cold salad. Here, you rinse the pasta, and let it cool completely before dressing.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried fusilli or farfalle
1 litre	water
1 tsp	salt
6	cherry tomatoes, quartered
5 cm	cucumber, diced
40 g	feta or mozzarella pearls
1 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil
1 tsp	lemon juice or red wine vinegar
4	basil leaves, torn

1. Boil the pasta in the salted water for the packet time, so it is fully tender (it firms up as it cools).
2. Drain and rinse under cold running water for about **30 seconds**, until the pasta is cool. Shake off the water and leave it in the colander for 5 minutes to dry.
3. Toss with the olive oil and lemon juice first, then fold in the tomatoes, cucumber, cheese and basil. Season with pepper.
4. Eat at once, or chill. For a lunchbox, pack with an ice pack.

LEVEL 3 · A DIFFERENT WAY

One-pan pasta (the less-water method)

20 minutes | 1 portion | no draining

The pasta cooks in just enough water, together with the sauce, and the starch it releases thickens the liquid into a sauce. It is quick and gives you less washing up, though it needs more attention than the boil-and-drain method.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried penne or spaghetti, spaghetti snapped in half to fit
200 g	cherry tomatoes, halved
1	garlic clove, thinly sliced
1 tbsp	olive oil
300 ml	cold water
1 pinch	salt
4	basil leaves, torn
15 g	parmesan, grated

1. Put the pasta, tomatoes, garlic, oil, water and salt in a wide, deep frying pan or sauté pan. The pasta should be mostly under the water.
2. Bring to the boil, then keep the liquid bubbling steadily. Stir often for **10 to 12 minutes**, pressing the tomatoes against the pan to burst them.
3. When the pasta is tender and the liquid has reduced to a creamy sauce that coats it, take off the heat. If it is dry but the pasta is still hard, add a splash of hot water.
4. Stir in the basil and parmesan and serve at once.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

How much water

Is a big pan really needed?

1. Cook three lots of 75 g spaghetti in 500 ml, 1 litre and 2 litres of boiling salted water, all for the same time. Use pans of different sizes if you must.
2. Drain each and compare how sticky and evenly cooked they are.

Look for: The smallest pan of water may clump and cook unevenly. More water is gentler, but there is a point at which you gain nothing more.

EXPERIMENT

Time to bite

Learn what al dente tastes like.

1. Boil 100 g of spaghetti in 1.5 litres of salted water.
2. Fish out a piece at 8, 10 and 12 minutes (or use your packet's time minus 2, exactly, and plus 2). Cool for a moment and taste each.
3. Write down how each one felt.

Look for: The first has a firm white core, the last is soft with no resistance. The middle one is al dente. Where do you like it?

EXPERIMENT

Oil in the water, or not

Does oil stop the pasta sticking?

1. Cook two lots of 75 g penne, one in water with a tablespoon of oil added and one in plain salted water.
2. Drain both and stir each with 3 tablespoons of tomato sauce. Compare how well the sauce clings.

Look for: Oil doesn't stop sticking (stirring does). It can make the pasta slippery so the sauce slides off. Save your oil for the sauce.

EXPERIMENT

Rinsed or not rinsed

When does rinsing help?

1. Cook two lots of fusilli. Rinse one under cold water. Leave the other, but spread it on a plate to cool.
2. Dress each with oil and lemon as for the pasta salad, and look at them an hour later.

Look for: The unrinsed pasta tends to clump and stick, the rinsed pasta stays loose. In a hot sauce the situation is reversed: you want the starch.

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Spaghetti with oil, lemon and parmesan				
Pasta with peas, lemon and ricotta				
Pasta salad				
One-pan pasta				
500 ml, 1 litre, 2 litres				
8, 10 and 12 minutes				
Oil in the water				
Rinsed vs unrinsed				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Pasta stuck in lumps	Not enough water, or not stirred	Use more water, and stir in the first minute
Water boils over	Heat too high, or pan too full	Lower the heat a little; use a bigger pan; lid off
Sauce slides off	Pasta rinsed, or oil in the water	Don't rinse (unless it's a salad); toss with a splash of starchy water
Sauce too dry	Pasta absorbed it	Add a splash of the cooking water and toss
Pasta gone cold while you made the sauce	Sauce not ready in time	Make the sauce first, or keep it warm; finish the pasta in the sauce pan
Pasta salad is dry	Pasta absorbed the dressing	Add a little more oil and lemon just before serving

FOOD SAFETY: LEFTOVER AND COLD PASTA

Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through. Pasta salad for a lunchbox needs an ice pack and an insulated bag, and should be eaten the same day.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can cook pasta in the right amount of salted water.
- ☐ I can tell when pasta is al dente.
- ☐ I know why I save the cooking water and finish pasta in the pan.
- ☐ I know why I don't rinse or add oil (and when I do rinse).
- ☐ I can cook a pasta salad and an easy one-pan pasta.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 3 is Tomato Sauces: quick, slow, arrabbiata and puttanesca, from a tin of tomatoes and a few store-cupboard flavours.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 3 · Tomato Sauces

> **SKILL GOAL**
>
> Make good tomato sauces from a tin and store-cupboard flavours, and toss pasta in them properly.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

A good tomato sauce is a balance of four things: **sweetness** (from the tomatoes and a little carrot or sugar), **acidity** (from the tomatoes themselves), **salt** and **fat** (olive oil). If the sauce tastes sharp, it needs more time, a pinch of sugar or a little more oil. If it tastes flat, it probably needs salt. Simmering evaporates the water, so the flavour concentrates and the sauce thickens.

TOMATO	WHAT IT IS LIKE	BEST FOR
Tinned chopped tomatoes	Convenient, already in small pieces	Quick sauces, everyday use
Tinned whole plum tomatoes	Often better quality; crush them yourself	Slow sauces, bigger flavour
Passata	Sieved and smooth, thin	Smooth sauces, pizza, soups
Tomato purée	Concentrated paste	A spoonful adds depth to any sauce
Fresh tomatoes	Best only when ripe and in season	Summer sauces, cherry tomato sauces

- **Tinned tomatoes are very good.** They are picked ripe and canned straight away. Out of season they are often better than fresh.
- **Cook garlic gently.** Browned or burnt garlic is bitter, and it ruins the sauce. Warm oil, not hot.

- **Simmer uncovered** so the water can escape. The sauce is ready when you can draw a spoon across the pan and the trail stays open for a second.
- **Add the basil at the end.** Its flavour is delicate, and long cooking destroys it.
- **Finish the pasta in the sauce** (chapter 2), with a splash of cooking water.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Quick tomato sauce

25 minutes | 2 portions | the first sauce to learn

A tin of tomatoes, some garlic and oil: the sauce that most Italian cooks make a hundred times a year. Fifteen minutes of simmering turns tinned tomatoes from sharp and watery into sweet and thick.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	dried spaghetti or penne (75 g per portion)
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
1 tbsp	olive oil
2	garlic cloves, thinly sliced
1 pinch	sugar
½ tsp	salt
4	basil leaves, torn

1. Warm the oil in a medium frying pan over a **low** heat. Add the garlic and cook for 30 seconds, until fragrant but not coloured.
2. Pour in the tomatoes, add the sugar and salt and bring to a simmer. Cook, uncovered, stirring now and then, for **15 minutes**, pressing the lumps with a spoon, until the sauce has thickened and no watery liquid pools round the edge.
3. Meanwhile, boil the pasta in salted water for the packet time minus 1 minute. Scoop out a mugful of the cooking water and drain.
4. Tip the pasta into the sauce with 3 tablespoons of the cooking water. Toss over a medium heat for **1 minute**, until the sauce clings to the pasta. Stir in the basil.

> **HOW MUCH SAUCE?**
>
> About 150 ml (a large ladleful) per 75 g portion of pasta. A good sauce coats the pasta; it doesn't swim in a puddle.

LEVEL 2 · SLOW

Slow tomato and basil sauce

1 hour | 4 portions of sauce (freezes well) | bigger flavour, same effort

Cooking the vegetables first and the tomatoes for longer gives a sweeter, rounder, deeper sauce. It makes a batch, so freeze the extra portions.

INGREDIENTS (4 PORTIONS)

1	small onion, finely chopped
1	carrot, grated
1	celery stick, finely chopped
2	garlic cloves, sliced
2 tbsp	olive oil
800 g	tinned whole plum tomatoes (2 tins)
1	bay leaf
1 pinch	sugar
1 tsp	salt
1	handful of basil leaves

1. Heat the oil in a large pan over a medium-low heat. Add the onion, carrot and celery with a pinch of salt and cook gently for **10 minutes**, until soft but not coloured. Add the garlic for the last minute.
2. Tip in the tomatoes and crush them against the side of the pan with a wooden spoon or by hand. Add the bay leaf, sugar and the rest of the salt.
3. Simmer gently, **partly covered**, for **40 minutes**, stirring now and then, until thick and glossy.
4. Remove the bay leaf, add the basil and, if you want a smooth sauce, blend with a stick blender. Taste and adjust the salt.
5. To serve, toss with freshly cooked pasta as in the quick sauce (about 150 ml of sauce per 75 g of pasta). Cool the rest quickly, divide into portions and freeze.

FREEZING SAUCE

Cool the sauce quickly (stand the pan in a sink of cold water), divide it into freezer tubs or bags, and put it in the freezer within about 2 hours. Label with the date. It keeps for 3 months. Thaw overnight in the fridge and reheat until steaming hot, or simmer it from frozen in a pan with a splash of water.

LEVEL 2 · SPICY

Arrabbiata

25 minutes | 2 portions | "angry" sauce

Quick tomato sauce with more garlic and a good kick of chilli. The only skill is judging the heat: chilli gets hotter as it cooks.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	dried penne (75 g per portion)
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
1 tbsp	olive oil
3	garlic cloves, sliced
½ tsp	dried chilli flakes (or 1 fresh red chilli, chopped)
1 pinch	sugar
½ tsp	salt
1 tbsp	chopped flat-leaf parsley

1. Warm the oil over a low heat, then add the garlic and chilli and cook for **30 seconds**. Don't let the garlic brown.
2. Add the tomatoes, sugar and salt, bring to a simmer and cook for **15 minutes** until thick.
3. Boil the penne, drain (saving some water) and toss in the sauce with 3 tablespoons of the cooking water for 1 minute. Scatter with parsley.

LEVEL 3 · BOLD

Puttanesca

30 minutes | 2 portions | salty, punchy, from the cupboard

A sauce of strong flavours: anchovies, capers and olives. The anchovies melt away into the sauce and leave savoury depth, not fishiness. Everything is salty, so you rarely need to add any salt.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	dried spaghetti (75 g per portion)
1 tbsp	olive oil
2	garlic cloves, sliced
4	anchovy fillets in oil (optional), chopped
1 tbsp	capers, rinsed
40 g	pitted black olives, halved
½ tsp	dried chilli flakes
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
1 tbsp	chopped flat-leaf parsley

1. Warm the oil over a low heat. Add the garlic and anchovies and stir for **1 minute**, until the anchovies dissolve. (Skip them if you prefer: see the tip.)
2. Add the capers, olives and chilli, then the tomatoes. Simmer, uncovered, for **15 minutes** until thick.
3. Boil the spaghetti, drain, and toss in the sauce with 3 tablespoons of the cooking water for 1 minute. Taste before you add any salt, then scatter with parsley.

> **NO ANCHOVIES?**
>
> Leave them out and add 1 extra tablespoon of capers and a teaspoon of the brine from the jar of olives for the missing savoury depth. It's a different dish but still very good.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Tinned or fresh tomatoes

Is fresh really better?

1. Make the quick sauce twice: once with a tin of tomatoes and once with 400 g of ripe fresh tomatoes, roughly chopped (peel them first if you like by scoring a cross in the base, covering with boiling water for 30 seconds and peeling).
2. Simmer the fresh version for 20 to 25 minutes until it breaks down.
3. Taste both, plain and tossed with pasta.

Look for: In summer, ripe tomatoes can be wonderful. Out of season, they are watery and bland. Is the fresh version better, or is the tin more reliable?

EXPERIMENT

10, 20 and 40 minutes

See what simmering actually does.

1. Make the slow sauce (or a double quantity of the quick one). Spoon out a small portion at 10 minutes, another at 20 minutes and a third at 40 minutes.
2. Taste each warm, and compare how thick and how sweet they are.

Look for: The 10-minute sauce is thin and sharp, the 40-minute sauce is thick, sweet and rounded. Is the extra half hour worth it on a weeknight?

EXPERIMENT

With or without the vegetables

What do the onion and carrot add?

1. Make half the slow sauce recipe, with the onion, carrot and celery, and make the quick sauce (no vegetables) for comparison. Use the same tomatoes and the same simmering time.
2. Taste them side by side.

Look for: The vegetables add sweetness and body, and soften the acidity. If you prefer a clean tomato taste, the quick sauce wins.

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Quick tomato sauce				
Slow tomato and basil				
Arrabbiata				
Puttanesca				
Tinned vs fresh				
10, 20 and 40 minutes				
With vs without vegetables				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Sauce tastes sharp or acidic	Not cooked long enough, or acidic tomatoes	Simmer longer; add a pinch of sugar or some grated carrot

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Sauce is watery and pools on the plate	Not reduced enough	Simmer uncovered until a spoon leaves a trail
Sauce is bland	Not enough salt, or tomatoes poor quality	Add salt, a splash of olive oil and a little tomato purée
Bitter taste	Burnt garlic, or too much tomato purée	Cook garlic only until fragrant, and start again if it browned
Sauce too thick	Over-reduced, or it stood	Loosen with pasta cooking water
Splattering sauce	Simmering too hard	Lower the heat; use a splatter guard or a partly covered pan

FOOD SAFETY: SAUCES

Cool leftover sauce quickly, keep it in the fridge for no more than 2 days, or freeze it. Reheat until steaming hot. Hot tomato sauce spits and burns, so stir from the side of the pan and keep your sleeves clear of the hob. Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can make a tomato sauce from a tin in 15 minutes.
- ☐ I know how to balance acidity, sweetness and salt.
- ☐ I can tell when a sauce is thick enough.
- ☐ I can make a big batch and freeze it safely.
- ☐ I can finish pasta in a sauce so it clings.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 4 is Oil and Garlic Sauces: finishing pasta in the pan with its starchy cooking water, from aglio e olio to courgette and lemon.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 4 · Oil and Garlic Sauces

SKILL GOAL

Make a creamy sauce from oil and starchy pasta water, and finish the pasta in the pan.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Many of the best pasta sauces are made while the pasta cooks, in a frying pan, from a handful of ingredients. They depend on a technique, not a recipe: **finishing the pasta in the sauce pan** with some of its starchy cooking water.

STEP	WHAT TO DO	WHY
Start the sauce while the pasta cooks	Warm the oil, garlic and flavourings gently	The sauce is ready when the pasta is
Take the pasta out 1 to 2 minutes early	Lift with tongs, or drain and keep some water	It finishes cooking in the sauce and soaks up the flavour
Add starchy pasta water	3 to 6 tablespoons, a splash at a time	Starch and water bind the oil into a creamy coating
Toss or stir vigorously	1 to 2 minutes, over a medium heat	Shaking and stirring forms the emulsion
Add the delicate bits off the heat	Herbs, cheese, lemon juice	They stay fresh and don't clump or split

If the sauce is oily and slippery, it needs more water and more tossing. If it is dry and sticky, it needs a little more water. If it is soupy, cook it for another 30 seconds, tossing, to let the water evaporate.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Aglio e olio (garlic and oil)

15 minutes | 1 portion | the best test of your technique

Garlic, oil, chilli and pasta water make a creamy sauce with nothing creamy in it. The oil and starchy water are whisked together by tossing, which is called an **emulsion**. If you can make this, you can finish any pasta in the pan.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried spaghetti
2 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil
2	garlic cloves, very thinly sliced
¼ tsp	dried chilli flakes
1 tbsp	chopped flat-leaf parsley
1 pinch	black pepper

1. Put the spaghetti in a large pan of boiling salted water, for the packet time minus 2 minutes.
2. While it cooks, put the oil and sliced garlic in a wide frying pan over a **low** heat. Warm gently for **3 to 4 minutes**, until the garlic is just pale gold and fragrant. Stir in the chilli. If the garlic browns, pour in a splash of pasta water straight away to stop it.
3. Lift the spaghetti straight from its water with tongs into the frying pan (a little water comes with it, which is what you want). Add **4 tablespoons of the pasta water**.
4. Over a medium heat, toss and stir vigorously for **1 to 2 minutes**, adding a tablespoon of water at a time if it looks dry, until the sauce turns slightly creamy and clings to every strand.
5. Take off the heat, add the parsley and pepper, and eat at once.

> **THE GOLDEN RULE**
>
> Garlic should be golden at most. Brown garlic is bitter, and in this sauce there is nothing to hide it.

LEVEL 2 · VEGETABLE

Broccoli and chilli pasta

20 minutes | 1 portion | cooks in one pot

The broccoli cooks in the same water as the pasta, then is crushed into the sauce, so the vegetable becomes part of it.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried orecchiette or penne
150 g	broccoli, cut into small florets
1 tbsp	olive oil
1	garlic clove, sliced
¼ tsp	dried chilli flakes
2	anchovy fillets (optional)
15 g	parmesan, grated
1 tsp	lemon juice

1. Boil the pasta in salted water. Add the broccoli for the **last 4 minutes**.
2. Meanwhile, warm the oil with the garlic, chilli and anchovies (if using) in a wide frying pan over a low heat for 2 minutes, until the anchovies melt.
3. Scoop out a mugful of water, then drain the pasta and broccoli together and tip them into the frying pan with 4 tablespoons of the cooking water.
4. Toss over a medium heat for 1 to 2 minutes, crushing the broccoli with the back of a spoon so it breaks into the sauce. Off the heat, add the parmesan and lemon juice.

LEVEL 2 · FRESH

Courgette and lemon pasta

25 minutes | 1 portion | light and summery

Courgettes are watery. The trick is to fry them in a hot pan so they brown and sweeten, instead of steaming into mush.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried linguine or spaghetti
1	medium courgette (about 150 g), halved lengthways and thinly sliced
1 tbsp	olive oil
1 tsp	butter
1	garlic clove, sliced
½	lemon, zest and 1 tsp juice
20 g	parmesan, grated
1 tbsp	chopped mint or basil

1. Boil the linguine in salted water for the packet time minus 1 minute.
2. Heat the oil and butter in a wide frying pan over a medium-high heat. Add the courgette in a single layer and fry for **6 to 8 minutes** without moving it too much, until golden at the edges. Add the garlic for the last 30 seconds.
3. Scoop out a mugful of pasta water, then drain. Add the pasta to the courgettes with 4 tablespoons of the water, the lemon zest and juice.
4. Toss for 1 minute. Off the heat, stir in the parmesan and herbs.

LEVEL 3 · EARTHY

Mushroom and thyme pasta

25 minutes | 1 portion | savoury and satisfying

Like courgettes, mushrooms hold a lot of water. Brown them hard first, and don't add salt until they have coloured, which draws the water out too soon.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried tagliatelle or fettuccine (a nest)
150 g	mushrooms, sliced
1 tbsp	olive oil
1 tsp	butter
1	garlic clove, finely chopped
2	thyme sprigs, leaves only
1 tbsp	chopped parsley
15 g	parmesan, grated
1 tsp	lemon juice

1. Boil the tagliatelle in salted water for the packet time minus 1 minute.
2. Heat the oil in a wide frying pan over a high heat. Add the mushrooms in a single layer and leave them alone for **3 minutes**, then stir and cook for another **3 to 4 minutes**, until deep golden. Add the butter, garlic and thyme for the last minute.
3. Scoop out a mugful of water, drain the pasta and add it to the mushrooms with 4 tablespoons of the water.
4. Toss for 1 to 2 minutes until glossy. Off the heat, add the parsley, parmesan and lemon juice.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Sauce in the pan, or poured on top

Does finishing the pasta in the pan matter?

1. Make aglio e olio twice. In the first, finish the pasta in the pan with pasta water as in the recipe. In the second, drain the pasta, put it on a plate and spoon the garlic oil over the top.
2. Eat both straight away.

Look for: In the first, the oil clings to every strand and tastes creamy. In the second, the oil slides off to the bottom of the plate. This is the whole lesson of this chapter.

EXPERIMENT

How much pasta water

Learn to judge the emulsion.

1. Make aglio e olio three times, adding 0, 3 and 8 tablespoons of pasta water in the final toss.
2. Compare the look and taste of each.

Look for: With none, the pasta is oily and dry. With 3 tablespoons it is just right. With 8 it may be watery. The right amount depends on the pan.

EXPERIMENT

Garlic: sliced, crushed or whole

Which garlic suits this sauce?

1. Make aglio e olio with garlic sliced thinly, crushed and whole (lightly smashed, taken out of the oil before serving).
2. Taste each, thinking about how strong the garlic is, and how much of it burned.

Look for: Crushed garlic is the strongest and burns the fastest. Sliced is the usual choice. Whole is the mildest and sweetest.

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Aglio e olio				
Broccoli and chilli				
Courgette and lemon				
Mushroom and thyme				
Pan vs poured on top				
0, 3 and 8 tbsp of water				
Garlic: sliced, crushed, whole				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Oily and slippery	Not enough pasta water, or not tossed	Add water, a spoonful at a time, and toss harder
Dry and clumpy	Too little water or too long on the heat	Add a splash of water and toss
Watery	Too much water	Cook, tossing, for another 30 seconds
Bitter garlic	Garlic browned	Start again; keep the heat low and add a splash of water if it colours
Courgettes or mushrooms soggy	Pan too crowded or too cool	Use a bigger pan, a higher heat and cook in batches
Bland	Water not salted, or no acid	Salt the pasta water; finish with lemon juice or parmesan

FOOD SAFETY: HOT OIL

A pan of hot oil and garlic can spit and catch fire if left unattended. Keep the heat low, never walk away, and keep a lid nearby to smother the pan if the oil smokes. These sauces are best eaten at once: Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can warm garlic in oil without burning it.
- ☐ I can build a creamy sauce from oil and pasta water.
- ☐ I know why the pasta goes into the pan early.
- ☐ I can brown vegetables so they don't go soggy.
- ☐ I can tell when the sauce is the right thickness.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 5 is Cream, Cheese and Egg Sauces: cacio e pepe, lemon and parmesan cream, carbonara and spinach and ricotta, without splitting or scrambling.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 5 · Cream, Cheese and Egg Sauces

SKILL GOAL

Make smooth cheese, cream and egg sauces that don't clump, split or scramble.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Cheese and egg sauces fail for one reason: **too much heat**. Cheese proteins tighten and squeeze out their fat if they get too hot, so the sauce turns into a stringy lump sitting in oil. Egg proteins set solid and scramble. Both sauces rely on a handful of tricks to keep the heat just right.

TRICK	HOW	WHY
Add cheese or egg off the heat	Take the pan off before adding it	The pasta's own heat is enough, and it can't overshoot
Grate finely	Use the small holes, or buy freshly grated	Fine shreds melt before they overheat
Use starchy pasta water	A tablespoon at a time while tossing	Starch and water bind the fat into a smooth sauce, and cool the pan slightly
Let the steam calm down	Wait 20 to 30 seconds before adding egg	A pan that is too hot scrambles the egg
Toss constantly	Keep everything moving	Prevents hot spots where egg or cheese catches

If a sauce starts to split or scramble, take it off the heat at once and add a splash of cold water and keep stirring. It often comes back.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Cacio e pepe (cheese and pepper)

15 minutes | 1 portion | three ingredients and a technique

"Cheese and pepper" is the simplest cheese sauce there is, and the best lesson in why cheese clumps. Cheese melts into a smooth sauce when it is moderately warm and wet, and goes stringy and lumpy when it is too hot or too dry.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried spaghetti or tonnarelli
40 g	pecorino romano (or parmesan), very finely grated
¾ tsp	coarsely ground black pepper
1 pinch	salt (for the pasta water)

1. Boil the pasta in a small amount of salted water (about 600 ml), which leaves the water extra starchy. Cook for the packet time minus 2 minutes.
2. While it cooks, toast the pepper in a dry frying pan over a medium heat for **30 seconds** until fragrant. Add **4 tablespoons** of the pasta water and let it bubble, then turn the heat off.
3. Put the grated cheese in a bowl with 2 tablespoons of the pasta water and stir to a thick, creamy paste.
4. Lift the pasta into the pepper pan and toss for 30 seconds. Take the pan **off the heat** and let it cool for 20 seconds.
5. Add the cheese paste and toss vigorously, adding pasta water a tablespoon at a time, until you have a glossy creamy sauce. Serve at once.

> **FINELY GRATED, AND OFF THE HEAT**
>
> Grate the cheese as finely as you can (use the small holes), or buy it freshly grated. Pre-grated tubs have anti-caking powder that stops it melting smoothly. And always add cheese off the heat.

LEVEL 2 · CREAM

Lemon and parmesan cream pasta

20 minutes | 1 portion | a treat, with a lighter option

A cream sauce is easier than a cheese sauce because the fat in the cream protects it from splitting. The lemon cuts the richness.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried tagliatelle or linguine
60 ml	single cream or half-fat crème fraîche
½	lemon, zest and 1 tsp juice
25 g	parmesan, finely grated
1 tsp	butter
50 g	frozen peas (optional)
1 pinch	black pepper

1. Boil the pasta in salted water, adding the peas (if using) for the last 3 minutes. Scoop out a mugful of water, then drain.
2. In a wide pan over a low heat, warm the butter, cream and lemon zest for **1 minute**. Don't let it boil.
3. Add the pasta and 3 tablespoons of the cooking water and toss for 30 seconds. Take the pan off the heat and add the parmesan, lemon juice and pepper. Toss until creamy.

> **A LIGHTER WAY**
>
> Half-fat crème fraîche, or even 2 tablespoons of ricotta loosened with pasta water, works instead of single cream. Both are less rich and less likely to split if the sauce gets hot.

LEVEL 3 · THE CLASSIC

Carbonara

20 minutes | 1 portion | no cream, just egg

A real carbonara has no cream. The sauce is egg and cheese, thickened by the heat of the pasta. Once you can make this without scrambling the egg, you can make any egg-based sauce.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried spaghetti
40 g	smoked pancetta or lean bacon, diced
1	Lion-marked medium egg
20 g	pecorino or parmesan, finely grated
1 tsp	olive oil
½ tsp	coarsely ground black pepper

1. Beat the egg in a bowl with the cheese and pepper until smooth. Have a mug ready for the pasta water.
2. Heat the oil in a wide frying pan over a medium heat and cook the pancetta for **5 to 6 minutes**, until golden and crisp. Take off the heat.
3. Boil the spaghetti in salted water for the packet time minus 1 minute. Scoop out a mugful of the water, then drain.
4. Add the spaghetti to the pancetta pan, off the heat. Toss, then **wait 30 seconds** for the steam to calm down.
5. Pour in the egg mixture and add **3 tablespoons of the pasta water**. Toss quickly and constantly for 30 to 60 seconds, until the egg thickens into a creamy sauce that coats the pasta. Add more water if it is thick. Eat at once.

> **THE EGG**
>
> The egg is not cooked in a pan: it is warmed by the hot pasta to a thick, creamy sauce. **Use Lion-marked eggs**, which the Food Standards Agency says are safe to eat raw or lightly cooked,

> including for pregnant women, babies and older people. Keep the egg in the fridge until the last minute. Other eggs are not covered by that advice.

LEVEL 2 · HEALTHY

Spinach and ricotta pasta

20 minutes | 1 portion | mostly vegetables

Ricotta gives a soft, creamy sauce without cream, and spinach wilts in seconds in the heat of the pasta.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried rigatoni or penne
100 g	baby spinach
80 g	ricotta
15 g	parmesan, grated
1 tsp	olive oil
1	garlic clove, finely chopped
1 pinch	nutmeg
½	lemon, zest only

1. Boil the pasta in salted water. Scoop out a mugful of the water before you drain.
2. Warm the oil in a wide pan over a low heat and soften the garlic for 30 seconds. Add the spinach and a splash of pasta water and stir until wilted (about 1 minute).
3. Add the drained pasta, ricotta, nutmeg, lemon zest and 3 tablespoons of the pasta water. Toss over a low heat for 1 minute until creamy.
4. Off the heat, stir in the parmesan.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Cheese on or off the heat

See why you take the pan off the stove.

1. Make cacio e pepe twice. In the first, add the cheese paste with the pan over a low heat. In the second, take the pan off the heat first, as in the recipe.
2. Compare how smooth each sauce is.

Look for: On the heat the cheese tends to clump into strings, off the heat it blends into a smooth sauce. This applies to every cheese sauce.

EXPERIMENT

Carbonara: wait or pour at once

How hot is too hot for the egg?

1. Make carbonara twice. In one, pour in the egg straight from the hot pan. In the other, wait 30 seconds, as in the recipe.
2. Look at the sauce and taste.

Look for: The egg poured into a very hot pan scrambles into little curds. Waiting gives a smooth sauce. Now you know what too hot looks like.

EXPERIMENT

Full-fat or lighter cream

Does the lighter option work?

1. Make the lemon cream pasta twice, once with single cream and once with half-fat crème fraîche (or ricotta loosened with water).
2. Taste both, noting the richness and how smooth each is.

Look for: The lighter version has a fresher, tangier taste. Which would you pick for a weeknight?

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Cacio e pepe				
Lemon and parmesan cream				
Carbonara				
Spinach and ricotta				
Cheese on vs off the heat				
Carbonara: wait or pour				
Full-fat vs lighter				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Cheese clumps into strings	Pan too hot, cheese too coarse, or too little water	Take off the heat, add pasta water, grate finer next time
Scrambled egg in carbonara	Pan too hot when the egg went in	Wait 30 seconds off the heat; toss fast; add cold water to rescue it
Sauce thin and watery	Too much pasta water	Toss over a very low heat for 20 seconds, or add a little cheese
Sauce too thick and sticky	Too little water	Add pasta water a tablespoon at a time
Too salty	Salty cheese plus salty pancetta	Use less salt in the pasta water, and taste before adding more
Grainy ricotta sauce	Ricotta heated too much	Add it off the heat and loosen with water

FOOD SAFETY: EGG AND CREAM SAUCES

Use Lion-marked eggs for carbonara, as explained above. These sauces are best eaten at once and don't reheat well: eggs and cheese turn grainy. Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the

cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can make a smooth cheese sauce without it clumping.
- ☐ I know why sauces with cheese or egg go off the heat.
- ☐ I can make carbonara without scrambling the egg.
- ☐ I can use pasta water to adjust a sauce.
- ☐ I know a lighter swap for a cream sauce.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 6 is Meat and Fish Sauces: quick tuna and prawn sauces, sausage and fennel, and a slow beef ragù without wine.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 6 · Meat and Fish Sauces

SKILL GOAL

Make quick and slow meat and fish sauces, and know when to brown, simmer or just warm through.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Meat and fish sauces split into two families. **Quick sauces** (tuna, prawns, fresh sausage) are tomato or oil sauces with a protein added; the protein needs minutes, not hours. **Slow sauces** (ragù) are cooked long and low, so tougher cuts turn tender and flavours deepen.

SAUCE	TIME	KEY TECHNIQUE
Tuna and tomato	25 minutes	Tinned tuna just needs warming
Garlic prawns	20 minutes	Cook the prawns for 2 to 3 minutes only, and add them last
Sausage and fennel	35 minutes	Brown the sausage meat well; spoon off excess fat
Beef ragù	2.5 hours	Brown properly, simmer low, stir now and then

- **Brown the meat in batches.** Browning (the Maillard reaction) is where much of the flavour comes from. Overcrowd the pan and the meat steams and turns grey.
- **Chop the vegetables small.** In a ragù they melt into the sauce and give sweetness and body.
- **Simmer, don't boil.** A few lazy bubbles; fast boiling toughens meat.
- **Choose the pasta to suit.** A thick ragù sits best on wide, flat ribbons (tagliatelle) or tubes (rigatoni).

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Tuna and tomato pasta

25 minutes | 2 portions | from the cupboard

A store-cupboard supper: a tomato sauce with tinned tuna flaked in at the end. The tuna is already cooked, so it only needs warming.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	dried spaghetti (75 g per portion)
1 tbsp	olive oil
2	garlic cloves, sliced
¼ tsp	dried chilli flakes
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
145 g	tin tuna in olive oil or spring water, drained
1 tbsp	capers, rinsed
1 tbsp	chopped flat-leaf parsley
½	lemon, zest only

1. Warm the oil over a low heat and add the garlic and chilli for 30 seconds. Add the tomatoes and capers and simmer for **15 minutes** until thick.
2. Boil the spaghetti in salted water, scoop out a mugful of water and drain.
3. Flake the tuna into the sauce and warm through for **1 minute**, without stirring too hard so it keeps some texture. Toss with the pasta and 3 tablespoons of the water. Add parsley and lemon zest.

LEVEL 2 · QUICK

Garlic prawn pasta

20 minutes | 1 portion | a treat in 20 minutes

Prawns need only 2 or 3 minutes. Overcooked, they turn rubbery, so have the pasta ready and add them last.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried linguine
120 g	raw peeled king prawns
1 tbsp	olive oil
2	garlic cloves, sliced
¼ tsp	dried chilli flakes
1 tsp	butter
6	cherry tomatoes, halved (optional)
½	lemon, zest and a squeeze of juice
1 tbsp	chopped parsley

1. Boil the linguine in salted water for the packet time minus 1 minute. Scoop out a mugful of the water, then drain.
2. Heat the oil in a wide frying pan over a medium heat. Add the garlic and chilli for 30 seconds, then the tomatoes (if using) for 2 minutes.
3. Add the prawns and cook, turning, for **2 to 3 minutes**, until pink all over and opaque in the middle. Add the butter.
4. Add the pasta and 3 tablespoons of the cooking water and toss for 1 minute. Finish with the lemon zest and juice and the parsley.

> **SHELLFISH AND ALLERGIES**
>
> Shellfish allergies can be serious. If you are cooking for guests, ask first. Swap the prawns for chunks of firm white fish or a tin of tuna if you need to.

LEVEL 2 · HEARTY

Sausage and fennel pasta

35 minutes | 2 portions | uses the sausage fat for flavour

Sausage meat is already seasoned, so it flavours a whole sauce. Fennel is the classic partner. Pork sausages are the traditional choice, but good chicken sausages work too.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	dried rigatoni or penne (75 g per portion)
3	good pork sausages (about 200 g), skins removed
1 tsp	olive oil
1	small onion, finely chopped
1	garlic clove, sliced
½ tsp	fennel seeds, lightly crushed
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
1 tbsp	chopped parsley
15 g	parmesan, grated

1. Heat the oil in a frying pan. Break the sausage meat into small chunks and fry over a medium-high heat for **6 to 8 minutes**, until browned. Spoon off any excess fat.
2. Add the onion, garlic and fennel and cook for 5 minutes. Add the tomatoes and simmer for **15 minutes**.
3. Boil the pasta, drain (keeping some water) and toss in the sauce with 3 tablespoons of the water. Check a piece of sausage: it must be cooked through with no pink. Top with parsley and parmesan.

LEVEL 3 · SLOW

Slow beef ragù (no wine)

2 hours 30 minutes | 6 portions of sauce (freezes well) | the weekend project

A ragù is a sauce built by patience: browned meat, a finely chopped vegetable base (*soffritto*), tomato and a long, gentle simmer. Milk is traditional in Bologna; it tenderises the meat and mellows the tomato. No wine is needed.

INGREDIENTS (6 PORTIONS)

500 g	lean beef mince (5 to 10% fat)
1 tbsp	olive oil
1	onion, very finely chopped
1	carrot, finely diced
1	celery stick, finely diced
2	garlic cloves, crushed
2 tbsp	tomato purée
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
200 ml	hot reduced-salt beef stock
100 ml	whole milk
1	bay leaf
1 tsp	salt
1 pinch	nutmeg

1. Heat half the oil in a large, heavy pan over a high heat. Brown the mince in **two batches**, breaking it up, for 6 to 8 minutes per batch, until deeply browned, not grey. Take out and set aside.
2. Add the remaining oil, onion, carrot and celery and cook over a medium heat for **10 minutes**, until soft. Add the garlic and tomato purée for 2 minutes.
3. Return the meat. Pour in the milk, add the nutmeg, and simmer until it has mostly been absorbed (about 5 minutes).

4. Add the tomatoes, stock, bay leaf and salt. Bring to a simmer, then cook on the **lowest heat, partly covered, for 2 hours**, stirring every 20 minutes and adding a splash of water if it gets dry.
5. Skim any fat from the surface, remove the bay leaf and taste. To serve, toss about 150 ml of ragù with each 75 g portion of freshly cooked pasta (tagliatelle or rigatoni) and a splash of water. Cool and freeze the rest.

> **MINCE AND STORAGE**
>
> Mince must be cooked until browned all through with no pink, and the finished sauce must be steaming hot. Cool the sauce quickly in shallow tubs (not one big pot), refrigerate within 1 to 2 hours and use within 2 days, or freeze for up to 3 months. Reheat until steaming hot.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Ragù at 1, 2 and 3 hours

See what the long simmer really does.

1. Make the ragù. Take a spoonful out at 1 hour, 2 hours and 3 hours (top up with a splash of water if needed).
2. Taste each on a small portion of pasta.

Look for: At 1 hour the meat is still a bit chewy and the tomato sharp, at 2 hours it is tender and sweet, and at 3 hours it is very soft and rich. Is the extra time worth it?

EXPERIMENT

Milk or no milk

Does the traditional milk do anything?

1. Make half quantities of ragù twice, with and without the milk, and simmer for the same time.
2. Taste them side by side.

Look for: The milk version is rounder and less acidic. The no-milk version tastes more of tomato. Which do you prefer?

EXPERIMENT

Browned or just stewed

Why brown the meat first?

1. Make two small batches of ragù. Brown the mince well in one, and stir it into the pan raw and cook with the vegetables in the other.
2. Compare colour, taste and texture.

Look for: The browned meat gives a darker, deeper, more savoury sauce. The unbrowned version is paler, with a flatter taste.

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Tuna and tomato				
Garlic prawns				
Sausage and fennel				
Beef ragù				
Ragù at 1, 2 and 3 hours				

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Milk vs no milk				
Browned vs unbrowned				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Prawns rubbery	Cooked too long	Cook for 2 to 3 minutes and take off as soon as they are pink
Meat grey, sauce flat	Pan overcrowded, or not hot enough	Brown in batches over a high heat
Ragù greasy	Fatty mince or sausage	Spoon off fat; use lean mince
Ragù tastes sharp	Not cooked long enough	Simmer longer; add a splash of milk
Ragù stuck or burnt	Heat too high, too little liquid	Lowest heat; stir; add a splash of water
Tuna sauce dry and fishy	Tuna stirred too hard, or too much	Flake it in gently at the end; add lemon

FOOD SAFETY: MEAT AND FISH SAUCES

Cook mince and sausage until browned all through, with no pink. Cook prawns until pink and opaque. Cool big batches of sauce quickly in shallow containers, refrigerate within 1 to 2 hours, and freeze what you won't eat within 2 days. Reheat until steaming hot. Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can brown mince properly in batches.
- ☐ I can make a ragù and tell when it has simmered long enough.
- ☐ I can cook prawns so they stay tender.
- ☐ I can make a quick sauce from a tin of tuna.
- ☐ I can cool and freeze a big batch of sauce safely.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 7 is Baked Pasta: macaroni cheese, a tomato and mozzarella bake, lasagne and stuffed shells.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 7 · Baked Pasta

SKILL GOAL

Bake pasta so it comes out moist, saucy and golden, using white sauce, tomato sauce and ragù.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Baked pasta is the dish you make when you want to cook ahead, or to feed a crowd. The pasta, sauce and cheese are assembled in a dish and baked until the top turns golden and the sauce thickens. Three rules separate the great from the dry and stodgy.

1. **Undercook the pasta.** Boil it 2 to 3 minutes less than the packet says. It will soak up sauce and finish cooking in the oven.
2. **Make the sauce wetter than usual.** A sauce that looks right on the hob will be dry after baking.
3. **Cover, then uncover.** Foil traps steam so the pasta cooks without drying; removing it for the last part gives a golden top.

SAUCE	HOW THICK BEFORE BAKING	WHY
White (cheese) sauce	Pourable, like single cream	It thickens as the cheese and pasta absorb it
Tomato sauce	Loose, with a splash of pasta water added	The pasta keeps drinking it
Ragù for lasagne	Sloppy, not stiff	The dried sheets need the moisture

All baked pasta needs a short rest after baking so that it settles and can be served.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Macaroni cheese

45 minutes | 2 portions | the white sauce lesson

Macaroni cheese is pasta in a cheese sauce, baked until golden. The cheese sauce is built on a white sauce (*béchamel*): fat and flour cooked into a paste, then thinned with milk.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	dried macaroni
25 g	butter
25 g	plain flour
400 ml	milk
100 g	mature cheddar, grated
20 g	parmesan, grated
1 tsp	English or Dijon mustard
1 pinch	nutmeg
¼ tsp	salt
2 tbsp	dried breadcrumbs
1	tomato, sliced, for the top (optional)

1. Heat the oven to 180°C fan (200°C conventional, gas 6). Boil the macaroni in salted water for **2 minutes less than the packet time**. It will finish cooking in the oven. Drain.
2. **Make the white sauce:** melt the butter in a medium pan over a low-medium heat, stir in the flour and cook for 1 minute, stirring, without browning. Take off the heat.
3. Add the milk **a splash at a time**, whisking until smooth after each addition. Return to the heat and cook, stirring, for **5 to 8 minutes**, until it coats the back of a spoon and loses any floury taste.
4. Off the heat, stir in the cheddar, mustard, nutmeg and salt until melted. Mix in the macaroni.
5. Tip into a baking dish. Scatter over the parmesan and breadcrumbs (and the tomato slices). Bake for **20 to 25 minutes**, until golden and bubbling at the edges.

LUMPY WHITE SAUCE?

Add the milk slowly, whisk constantly, and don't let the flour paste go too hot. A sauce that has gone lumpy can usually be rescued by whisking hard or pushing it through a sieve. Lighter swap: replace some of the pasta with steamed cauliflower or leeks, and use a stronger cheese so you need less.

LEVEL 2 · EASY BAKE

Baked pasta with tomato and mozzarella

45 minutes | 3 portions | a good use for a frozen batch of sauce

Pasta, a tomato sauce and cheese. Here the work is in the proportions: baked pasta needs a looser, wetter sauce than a normal pasta dish, because the pasta keeps absorbing it in the oven.

INGREDIENTS (3 PORTIONS)

225 g	dried penne or rigatoni (75 g per portion)
450 ml	tomato sauce from chapter 3 (the slow sauce, or a double batch of the quick one)
125 g	mozzarella, torn
20 g	parmesan, grated
6	basil leaves, torn
1 tbsp	olive oil

1. Heat the oven to 180°C fan (200°C conventional, gas 6). Boil the pasta in salted water for the packet time **minus 3 minutes**. Scoop out a mugful of the water and drain.
2. Mix the pasta with the tomato sauce, half the mozzarella, the basil and about 100 ml of the pasta water. The mixture should look quite wet.
3. Tip into a baking dish and top with the rest of the mozzarella and the parmesan. Drizzle with the oil.
4. Cover with foil and bake for **20 minutes**. Remove the foil and bake for another **10 minutes**, until bubbling and golden. Rest for 5 minutes.

LEVEL 3 · THE BIG ONE

Lasagne

1 hour 30 minutes, plus resting | 6 portions | layers of ragù, white sauce and pasta

Three components you now know how to make: a ragù (chapter 6), a white sauce (this chapter) and pasta. The skill is the assembly, and the sauces must be wetter than you expect, because dried lasagne sheets drink as they bake.

INGREDIENTS (6 PORTIONS)

700 ml	slow beef ragù (chapter 6, the whole batch of 6 portions is about 900 ml; use 700 to 900 ml)
35 g	butter
35 g	plain flour
500 ml	milk
1 pinch	nutmeg
250 g	no-pre-cook dried lasagne sheets
50 g	parmesan, grated
100 g	mozzarella, torn
100 ml	water, to loosen the ragù if thick

1. Heat the oven to 180°C fan (200°C conventional, gas 6). Make the white sauce as for the macaroni cheese with the butter, flour and milk, cooking for 6 to 8 minutes. Add the nutmeg.
2. If the ragù is thick, loosen it with up to 100 ml of water: it should be sloppy, not stiff.
3. In a deep dish (about 20 × 30 cm), spread a thin layer of ragù. Cover with a layer of lasagne sheets, then a layer of ragù, then a layer of white sauce and a sprinkling of parmesan. Repeat to make **three layers**, ending with white sauce.
4. Scatter over the mozzarella and the rest of the parmesan.
5. Cover with foil and bake for **30 minutes**. Remove the foil and bake for **15 to 20 minutes** more, until golden, bubbling and steaming hot in the middle (a knife pushed into the centre comes out hot).
6. **Rest for 15 minutes** before cutting, so the layers set.

MAKE IT AHEAD

Assemble the lasagne the day before, cover and refrigerate it, and add 10 minutes to the foil-covered baking time. Or freeze it (assembled and unbaked, wrapped well) for up to 3 months and bake it from frozen with an extra 30 minutes under foil.

LEVEL 3 · STUFFED

Stuffed shells

1 hour | 3 portions (12 shells) | vegetarian

Big pasta shells are filled with a creamy spinach and ricotta mixture and baked in tomato sauce. The pasta must be firm enough to hold the filling.

INGREDIENTS (3 PORTIONS)

12	jumbo pasta shells (about 100 g)
250 g	ricotta
100 g	cooked spinach, squeezed dry
30 g	parmesan, grated
1	egg yolk
1 pinch	nutmeg
½	lemon, zest only
300 ml	tomato sauce from chapter 3
50 g	mozzarella, torn

1. Heat the oven to 180°C fan (200°C conventional, gas 6). Boil the shells in salted water for the packet time **minus 3 minutes** and drain on a tray in a single layer (don't pile them up, or they stick and tear).
2. Mix the ricotta, spinach, parmesan, egg yolk, nutmeg, lemon zest and a pinch of salt in a bowl.
3. Spread half the tomato sauce over the base of a baking dish. Fill each shell with a heaped tablespoon of the mixture and arrange them in the dish, open side up.
4. Spoon the remaining sauce over and around the shells, and top with the mozzarella. Cover with foil and bake for **20 minutes**, then uncover and bake for **5 to 10 minutes** until bubbling.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Thick sauce or loose sauce

Test the 'wetter than you think' rule.

1. Make two small baked pasta dishes using the same ingredients. In one, mix the pasta with sauce straight from the pan. In the other, loosen the sauce with 4 tablespoons of water.
2. Bake both the same way and compare.

Look for: The dish with the thick sauce is dry and stodgy, the loose one is moist and saucy. Remember the difference when you're making lasagne.

EXPERIMENT

Covered or uncovered

What does the foil do?

1. Bake two small dishes of the tomato and mozzarella pasta. Bake one uncovered for the whole time, and the other under foil for the first 20 minutes, as in the recipe.

Look for: The uncovered dish browns quickly but its top pasta pieces are hard and dry. The covered one is evenly moist, with a golden top from the last 10 minutes.

EXPERIMENT

Resting before cutting

Does a rest matter?

1. When the lasagne comes out of the oven, cut a small corner at once, another after 10 minutes and a third after 15 to 20 minutes.
2. Look at how the piece holds together and how much liquid runs out.

Look for: The piece cut at once runs everywhere, and the rested piece holds its layers. Now you know why patience is part of the recipe.

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Macaroni cheese				
Tomato and mozzarella bake				
Lasagne				
Stuffed shells				
Thick vs loose sauce				
Covered vs uncovered				
Rested vs not				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Dry, stodgy bake	Sauce too thick, or pasta overcooked	Loosen the sauce; boil pasta less next time
Pasta crunchy on top	Not covered, or too little sauce	Cover with foil; make sure pasta is buried in sauce
Watery bake	Too much liquid, or not rested	Reduce the sauce slightly and rest 15 minutes
Lumpy white sauce	Milk added too fast, or flour too hot	Add the milk slowly and whisk; sieve the sauce to rescue it
Cheese sauce split and oily	Boiled after adding the cheese	Add the cheese off the heat and don't boil it
Pale topping	Oven too cool, or not uncovered	Uncover for the last 10 minutes; grill for 2 minutes at the end

FOOD SAFETY: BAKED PASTA

Bake until steaming hot all the way through. Cool leftovers quickly (cut into portions so they cool faster), refrigerate within about an hour and eat within 24 hours, or freeze. Reheat until steaming hot. Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an**

hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through. Hot dishes are heavy and the sauce can scald: use oven gloves.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I know to undercook pasta that will be baked.
- ☐ I can make a smooth white sauce and add cheese to it.
- ☐ I can assemble lasagne in layers.
- ☐ I know why baked pasta needs foil and a rest.
- ☐ I can make an unbaked dish ahead and freeze it.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 8 is Pasta Beyond the Plate: minestrone, pasta e ceci, a pesto pasta salad and a frittata from leftover pasta.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 8 · Pasta Beyond the Plate

SKILL GOAL

Use pasta in soups, salads and leftover dishes, and avoid the mushy-pasta trap.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Pasta isn't only a plate of pasta and sauce. Small shapes go into soups, where they thicken the broth, and cooked pasta makes the base for salads and for new dishes from leftovers. This chapter is about the flexibility of what you have already learned.

USE	PASTA SHAPE	HOW TO COOK IT
Soup	Ditalini, small macaroni, orzo, broken spaghetti	Add to the simmering soup for the last 8 to 10 minutes
Pasta salad	Fusilli, farfalle, penne	Cook fully, rinse, cool, dress
Leftover dishes	Anything plain or in a light sauce	Bind with egg, or reheat with a splash of water

- **Pasta cooked in a soup** releases starch and thickens it, but it keeps swelling, so leftovers get mushy.
- **For salads** dress the pasta while it is warm with oil and acid so it absorbs flavour, or after it is fully cooled if the dressing is creamy.
- **For leftovers**, always check the age and storage first.

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Minestrone with pasta

50 minutes | 4 portions | a vegetable soup that fills you up

A soup that can use whatever vegetables are in the drawer. The pasta goes in near the end, so it doesn't turn to mush.

INGREDIENTS (4 PORTIONS)

1 tbsp	olive oil
1	onion, diced
1	carrot, diced
1	celery stick, diced
2	garlic cloves, sliced
1	courgette, diced
100 g	green beans, cut into 2 cm pieces
400 g	tin chopped tomatoes
1 litre	hot reduced-salt vegetable stock
400 g	tin cannellini beans, drained and rinsed
60 g	small pasta (ditalini or short macaroni)
1	handful of basil leaves
20 g	parmesan, grated, to serve

1. Heat the oil in a large pan over a medium heat. Cook the onion, carrot and celery for **8 minutes**, until soft. Add the garlic for 1 minute.
2. Add the courgette, green beans, tomatoes and stock. Bring to the boil, then simmer for **20 minutes**.
3. Add the cannellini beans and pasta and simmer for the pasta cooking time (about 8 to 10 minutes), stirring now and then to stop the pasta sticking. Add a splash of water if the soup is too thick.
4. Stir in the basil and serve with the parmesan.

SOUP WITH PASTA IN IT DOESN'T KEEP WELL

Pasta keeps soaking up the liquid and goes soft and swollen in a leftover soup. If you want to freeze or store some, take the portions out **before** adding the pasta, and cook small pasta separately for each bowl.

LEVEL 2 · THICK AND RUSTIC

Pasta e ceci (pasta and chickpeas)

30 minutes | 2 portions | a cheap Roman classic

Half soup, half pasta dish. Part of the chickpeas are mashed to thicken it, and the pasta cooks right in the pot, so its starch makes the broth creamy.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

1 tbsp	olive oil
1	garlic clove, sliced
1	rosemary sprig
1 tbsp	tomato purée
400 g	tin chickpeas, with their liquid
400 ml	hot reduced-salt stock or water
60 g	small pasta (ditalini or tubetti)
1 tsp	extra-virgin olive oil, to finish
1 pinch	dried chilli flakes (optional)

1. Warm the oil with the garlic and rosemary in a medium pan over a low heat for 2 minutes. Stir in the tomato purée for 1 minute.
2. Add the chickpeas and their liquid and the stock. Bring to a simmer and cook for **10 minutes**. Take out the rosemary. Mash about a third of the chickpeas against the side of the pan.
3. Add the pasta and cook for **8 to 10 minutes**, until tender, stirring often. The mixture should be thick but spoonable: add water if it gets stiff.
4. Serve with a drizzle of olive oil and a pinch of chilli.

LEVEL 2 · SUMMER

Pesto pasta salad with beans and tomatoes

25 minutes | 1 portion | can be eaten warm or cold

Jarred pesto is thick, so it needs loosening to coat the pasta evenly. A spoonful of the pasta's cooking water does that.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried fusilli
80 g	green beans, trimmed and halved
2 tbsp	green pesto from a jar
6	cherry tomatoes, halved
30 g	mozzarella pearls
1 handful	rocket
1 tsp	lemon juice

1. Boil the pasta in salted water. Add the green beans for the **last 3 minutes**. Scoop out 4 tablespoons of the cooking water, then drain.
2. Mix the pesto with the cooking water in a bowl until it forms a loose sauce. Add the pasta and beans and toss.
3. For a warm salad, add the tomatoes, mozzarella, rocket and lemon juice and serve at once. For a cold one, let the pasta cool completely first (spread it on a plate), then add the rest.

LEVEL 3 · USE IT UP

Frittata di pasta (a pasta omelette)

25 minutes | 2 portions | turns leftovers into a new meal

Cold leftover pasta is bound with egg into a thick omelette. A good way to use leftover plain or tomato pasta, as long as it is fresh enough.

INGREDIENTS (2 PORTIONS)

150 g	cold cooked pasta (about 75 g dry), from the fridge and less than 24 hours old
4	Lion-marked medium eggs
30 g	parmesan, grated
1 tbsp	chopped parsley
50 g	peas (frozen is fine)
1 tbsp	olive oil
½	small onion, finely chopped

1. Beat the eggs with the parmesan, parsley and pepper. Heat the grill to high.
2. Heat the oil in a medium non-stick, ovenproof frying pan (about 20 cm) over a medium heat. Soften the onion for 3 minutes. Add the pasta and peas and stir for 2 minutes until hot through.
3. Pour in the egg mixture, turn the heat to low and cook for **5 to 6 minutes**, until the edges are set and the base is golden.
4. Put the pan under the grill for **2 to 3 minutes**, until the top is set and lightly golden. The eggs must be fully set with no liquid left. Slide onto a board and cut into wedges.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Pasta cooked in the soup, or separately

What happens to the broth?

1. Make half a batch of minestrone. Cook the pasta for one bowl directly in the soup. Cook the pasta for another bowl separately in salted water and add it to the hot soup in the bowl.
2. Compare how cloudy and thick the broth is, and how the pasta tastes.

Look for: The pasta cooked in the soup makes it thicker and starchy, with more flavour in the pasta. The pasta cooked separately gives a clearer broth and better texture, especially if the soup is stored.

EXPERIMENT

Dressed warm or dressed cold

When should a pasta salad meet its dressing?

1. Make the pesto salad twice. Dress one batch of pasta while warm, and the other after it has cooled completely.
2. Taste both after an hour.

Look for: The warm pasta absorbs more of the pesto and tastes more strongly of it. The cooled pasta keeps a fresher, lighter taste. Which suits you?

EXPERIMENT

Leftover pasta reheated three ways

What's the best way to bring leftovers back?

1. Take three small portions of plain cold pasta (less than 24 hours old). Microwave one with a splash of water, covered. Warm one in a frying pan with a splash of water and the lid on. Fry one in a little oil until crisp at the edges.
2. Make sure each is steaming hot all the way through, then taste.

Look for: The microwave is quickest but can be gummy, the covered pan is better, and the fried version is crisp. Reheat only once.

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Minestrone				
Pasta e ceci				
Pesto pasta salad				
Frittata di pasta				
Pasta in soup vs separate				
Dressed warm vs cold				
Leftovers reheated three ways				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Pasta mushy in soup	Added too early or left to stand	Add near the end; cook it separately for leftovers
Soup too thick the next day	Pasta absorbed the broth	Loosen with hot stock or water
Pasta salad dry	Pasta absorbed the dressing	Add a little more oil and lemon just before serving
Frittata falls apart	Not enough egg, or flipped too soon	Let it set before moving; finish under the grill
Frittata runny in the middle	Under-cooked	Cook longer; the eggs must be fully set
Reheated pasta gluey	Reheated dry	Add a splash of water and cover

FOOD SAFETY: SOUPS, SALADS AND LEFTOVERS

Cool big pots of soup quickly (stand the pan in a sink of cold water, divide into shallow tubs) and refrigerate within an hour or two. Pasta salad in a lunchbox needs an ice pack. The frittata uses Lion eggs, and must be set all the way through. Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can make a soup with pasta that isn't mushy.
- ☐ I can make a pasta salad with the right dressing.
- ☐ I can use leftover pasta safely in a frittata.
- ☐ I know how long leftover pasta keeps.
- ☐ I can reheat pasta without it turning gluey.

NEXT CHAPTER

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1, chapter 9 is Putting It Together: a freezer sauce day, a week of pasta meals and a pasta supper for four.

Cooking Skills: Pasta 1

Chapter 9 · Putting It Together

SKILL GOAL

Batch-cook and freeze sauces safely, plan a week of pasta meals, and serve a supper for guests.

Shopping list for this chapter

The basics

Pasta is one of the best foods to plan around: it is cheap, quick and keeps in the cupboard, and the sauces freeze beautifully. The last chapter is about using that: cooking in batches, planning a week, and putting on a supper for guests.

HABIT	WHY
Make a big pan of sauce, freeze it in portions	A homemade sauce on a weeknight takes 10 minutes
Portion at about 150 ml per serving	You thaw only what you need
Cool quickly in shallow containers	A big hot pot stays warm in the middle for hours
Label with the contents and date	You'll never remember what the frozen block is
Thaw in the fridge, reheat once until steaming hot	Safe, and the texture is better
Cook fresh pasta each time	Cooked pasta keeps worse than sauce

Try it

LEVEL 1 · START HERE

Sauce day: ragù and tomato sauce for the freezer

2 hours 45 minutes, mostly unattended | 6 portions of ragù and 4 of tomato sauce | an afternoon that feeds you for weeks

Two sauces cooked side by side on the hob while you do something else. The skill here is organising: keeping both pans simmering gently, and cooling, portioning and labelling the results safely.

INGREDIENTS (10 PORTIONS)

500 g	lean beef mince
2	onions
2	carrots
2	celery sticks
4	garlic cloves
3 tbsp	olive oil
2 tbsp	tomato purée
1.2 kg	tinned tomatoes (3 × 400 g: 1 for the ragù, 2 whole plum for the tomato sauce)
200 ml	hot reduced-salt beef stock
100 ml	whole milk
2	bay leaves
2 tsp	salt, in total
1 pinch	sugar and nutmeg
1	handful of basil

1. Start the ragù first, as in chapter 6 (brown the mince in two batches; soften half of the onions, carrots, celery and garlic; add the purée, milk, 400 g of tomatoes, stock, one bay leaf and 1 tsp of salt). Simmer on the lowest heat, partly covered, for 2 hours.

2. While the ragù simmers, start the slow tomato sauce in a second pan, as in chapter 3: soften the rest of the onion, carrot, celery and garlic in the remaining oil for 10 minutes, add the 2 tins of plum tomatoes, bay leaf, sugar and the remaining salt, and simmer partly covered for 40 minutes. Add the basil.
3. Cool both quickly: pour them into shallow containers (no more than 5 cm deep) and stand in a sink of cold water, or leave in a cool place until no longer steaming. **Refrigerate within 1 to 2 hours** of cooking.
4. Divide into portions: **about 150 ml of sauce per 75 g pasta serving**. Label each with the contents and date ("Ragù 18 Oct") and freeze flat in bags, or in tubs. Use within 3 months. Keep 2 portions in the fridge for the next two days.
5. To use: thaw overnight in the fridge (or gently from frozen in a pan with a splash of water), reheat until steaming hot, and toss with freshly cooked pasta and a splash of the cooking water. Don't re-freeze thawed sauce.

LEVEL 2 · IMPROVISE

Clear-the-fridge pasta

20 minutes | 1 portion | your own recipe

Once you know the pattern, you don't need a recipe. The table below shows the formula.

INGREDIENTS (1 PORTION)

75 g	dried pasta (any shape)
1 tbsp	olive oil
1	garlic clove, sliced
100 g	vegetables, small pieces (courgette, peppers, mushrooms, broccoli, spinach)
80 g	cooked protein (tuna, chicken, cooked sausage, prawns, beans, chickpeas)
150 ml	sauce from the freezer, or 4 tablespoons pasta water plus 20 g cheese
1 tbsp	herbs, lemon or parmesan, to finish

1. Boil the pasta in salted water. Meanwhile, soften the garlic in the oil, then add the vegetables (hard ones first) and cook until just tender.
2. Add the cooked protein and the sauce (or, for an oil-based dish, use 4 tablespoons of pasta water) and heat through until steaming hot.
3. Add the drained pasta with a splash of cooking water, toss for 1 minute, and finish with the herbs, lemon or cheese. Write down what you made for your house recipes.

THE PASTA FORMULA

CHOOSE	IDEAS	WHEN IT GOES IN
Pasta	Any shape, 75 g per portion	Into boiling salted water, taste early
Fat and flavour	Olive oil, garlic, chilli, anchovy, butter	First, gently
Vegetables	Courgette, mushrooms, broccoli, peppers, peas, spinach	Hard first, soft last
Protein	Tuna, chicken, sausage, prawns, beans, egg	Raw early, cooked late

CHOOSE	IDEAS	WHEN IT GOES IN
Sauce	Frozen tomato sauce or ragù, or pasta water	With the protein
Finish	Parmesan, lemon, herbs, a drizzle of oil	Off the heat

A week of pasta meals

Seven dinners built mostly from the sauces in this course. Eat the fresh sauces first and use the frozen ones mid-week.

DAY	MEAL	SAUCE
Monday	Spaghetti with quick tomato sauce and a green salad	Quick tomato sauce (fresh)
Tuesday	Aglio e olio with broccoli	Oil and garlic (fresh)
Wednesday	Rigatoni with ragù from the freezer	Frozen ragù, reheated once
Thursday	Tuna and tomato pasta	Store-cupboard
Friday	Spinach and ricotta pasta	Fresh, 15 minutes
Saturday	Baked pasta with tomato and mozzarella	Frozen tomato sauce, thawed
Sunday	Minestrone with pasta, or pasta e ceci	Soup

A pasta supper for four

A starter of courgette and lemon pasta, lasagne with a salad as the main course, and fruit and yoghurt to finish. The lasagne is made ahead so that you're free when the guests arrive.

COURSE 1 · STARTER

Courgette and lemon pasta, starter portions

25 minutes | 4 small portions | last-minute but quick

The courgette and lemon pasta from chapter 4, scaled for four small starter portions. Do this on the hob while the lasagne rests.

INGREDIENTS (4 PORTIONS)

200 g	dried pasta for the starter (50 g each for 4 small portions)
2	courgettes, halved lengthways and sliced
2 tbsp	olive oil
2 tsp	butter
2	garlic cloves, sliced
1	lemon, zest and 2 tsp juice
40 g	parmesan, grated
2 tbsp	chopped mint or basil

1. Fry the courgettes in the oil and butter in a wide pan in two batches for 6 to 8 minutes each, until golden. Add the garlic for the last 30 seconds.
2. Boil the pasta for the packet time minus 1 minute; scoop out a mugful of water and drain.
3. Toss the pasta with the courgettes, the lemon zest and juice, and 6 tablespoons of the cooking water over a medium heat. Off the heat, stir in the parmesan and herbs.

COURSE 2 · MAIN

Lasagne with salad and fruit

15 minutes of your time | 4 portions (plus leftovers) | made ahead

Cook the lasagne the day before or assemble it ahead and bake it just before the guests arrive. A simple lemony salad cuts the richness, and fruit with yoghurt ends the meal lightly.

INGREDIENTS (4 PORTIONS)

1	lasagne, assembled earlier from chapter 7 (6 portions: enough for four with leftovers)
150 g	mixed salad leaves
1 tbsp	extra-virgin olive oil
2 tsp	lemon juice
1 pinch	salt and pepper
300 g	fresh berries and natural yoghurt, for pudding

1. Bake and rest the lasagne as in chapter 7. Keep it covered in the oven (switched off, door shut) while you serve the starter.
2. Dress the salad leaves with the oil, lemon juice and seasoning just before serving.
3. Serve the lasagne with the salad. Finish with berries and a spoonful of natural yoghurt.

Timetable (dinner at about 7:30 pm)

TIME	WHAT TO DO
2 days before	Make sauce day (ragù and tomato sauce) and freeze portions, or make the ragù only.
Day before	Defrost the ragù in the fridge. Make the white sauce and assemble the lasagne. Cover and refrigerate.
5:30 pm	Take the lasagne out of the fridge. Heat the oven to 180°C fan.

TIME	WHAT TO DO
6:00 pm	Put the lasagne in, covered with foil, for 40 minutes (a chilled lasagne needs 10 minutes longer than a fresh one).
6:40 pm	Uncover and bake for 15 to 20 minutes, until golden, bubbling and steaming hot in the middle.
7:00 pm	Take the lasagne out to rest for 15 minutes. Slice the courgettes for the starter.
7:10 pm	Cook the courgettes, boil the pasta, toss and serve the starter.
7:30 pm	Cut the lasagne and serve with the dressed salad.
8:15 pm	Serve berries and yoghurt. Refrigerate any leftover lasagne within an hour.

Experiments

EXPERIMENT

Frozen or fresh sauce

Is a frozen sauce as good?

1. Make a quick tomato sauce and a slow tomato sauce. Eat half of each fresh and freeze the rest.
2. A week later, thaw them in the fridge, reheat until steaming hot, and eat with pasta.

Look for: Frozen tomato sauces usually keep very well. Ragù can be even better the next day. Is there any difference you can taste?

EXPERIMENT

Your signature sauce

Design a sauce you'd make again.

1. Choose a base from chapters 3 to 6, then change one thing (a different herb, spice, vegetable or cheese).
2. Make it, taste it, change one more thing.
3. Write the final version in your house recipes.

Look for: A signature sauce usually has one surprising ingredient. What is yours?

EXPERIMENT

A timed supper

Do a practice run of the supper for four.

1. Cook one starter portion, one slice of lasagne and a salad, following the timetable, and time each step.
2. Write down what ran late.

Look for: Which jobs took longer than you thought? Adjust the timetable before you cook for real.

Your skills

SKILL	CHAPTER	I CAN DO IT
Choose a shape and portion pasta	1	☐
Cook pasta properly and use the cooking water	2	☐
Make a tomato sauce from a tin	3	☐
Make a creamy sauce from oil and pasta water	4	☐
Make cheese, cream and egg sauces without splitting	5	☐
Make a ragù and quick protein sauces	6	☐
Bake pasta and make a white sauce	7	☐

SKILL	CHAPTER	I CAN DO IT
Use pasta in soups, salads and leftovers	8	☐
Batch-cook and freeze sauces safely	9	☐

Tasting notes

WHAT I TRIED	METHOD OR AMOUNT	WHAT I SAW	WHAT I THOUGHT	WILL I DO IT AGAIN?
Sauce day				
Clear-the-fridge pasta				
Courgette and lemon starter				
Lasagne for four				
Frozen vs fresh sauce				
My signature sauce				
Timed supper				

My house recipes

MY HOUSE RECIPE	PASTA AND SAUCE	FLAVOURS AND EXTRAS	HOW LONG	NOTES
My everyday pasta				
My quick supper				
My signature sauce				
My baked pasta				
My supper for guests				

Troubleshooting

PROBLEM	LIKELY CAUSE	WHAT TO DO
Frozen sauce watery after thawing	Water separated on freezing	Simmer for a few minutes to thicken
Freezer burn on sauce	Not sealed well	Squeeze the air from the bag; use rigid tubs; use within 3 months
Sauce day takes all afternoon	Too many jobs at once	Make one sauce on one day, and plan the timing
Starter and main clash on the hob	Everything needs the hob	Make the main ahead and bake it, then use the hob for the starter
Lasagne cold in the middle	Baked from fridge cold without extra time	Add 10 minutes; check the centre with a knife
Pasta overcooked at a dinner party	Left standing	Drain only when you're ready to serve and finish it in the sauce

FOOD SAFETY: FREEZING AND BATCH COOKING

Cool big batches quickly in shallow containers and refrigerate within 1 to 2 hours. Freeze sauces within 24 hours and use within 3 months. Thaw in the fridge, never on the worktop, and reheat until steaming hot, once only. Cooked pasta is a starchy food, and like rice it can grow bacteria if it is left warm. There is no pasta-specific official guidance, so this course uses the cautious rule: **cool it quickly (within about an hour), put it in the fridge, and eat it within 24 hours**; freeze it if you won't. Reheat until steaming hot all the way through.

CHECKPOINT: CAN YOU DO THIS NOW?

- ☐ I can make, cool, portion and freeze a batch of sauce safely.
- ☐ I can make a pasta dish from whatever is in the fridge.
- ☐ I can plan a week of pasta meals.
- ☐ I can time a supper for guests so it all arrives together.
- ☐ I have written down my house recipes.

NEXT CHAPTER

That's the end of Cooking Skills: Pasta 1. A possible Pasta 2 could cover fresh pasta by hand, filled pasta, gnocchi and lasagne from scratch. The next course in the series is up to you.