

Recipe

Foolproof 'Cacio e Pepe' Pasta Sauce

Ingredients:

- 1 hunk of fresh Pecorino Romano¹ (about 1 cup)
- 3-4 tablespoons of whole black pepper corns
- 1 box of bucatini or tonnarelli pasta—cooked al dente

Pre-Prep Directions:

- Grate your hunk of fresh pecorino cheese into a bowl. **Cacio-e-Pepe** can turn out lumpy when the cheese is too aged or too dry (aka pre-grated). So, it's highly encouraged to grate your hunk of cheese right before you cook up this sauce. That ensures more moisture stays in the cheese—creating a more evenly-melted result.
- Be sure to grate the cheese as fine as possible. Large shredded pieces of cheese won't melt smoothly.

Pecorino Paste Directions

- Pour your grated cheese into either a food processor or blender.
- Add in 2 tablespoons of cold water and turn on the blender. Keep adding in 1 tablespoon of cold water (at a time) while the blender is running. The goal: create a creamy, thick paste out of the cheese/water blend.
- Keep blending until a frosting-like paste forms. Typically, it'll take 5-7 tablespoons of cold water to create a no-lump, smooth mix.

Black Peppercorn Broth & Pasta Cooking Directions

- Pre-heat a non-stick skillet over medium heat for 90 seconds. Toast the whole black peppercorns in the pan until aromatic—about 2-3 minutes.

¹ While it's true that you can normally swap out Parmigiano Reggiano for Pecorino in many Italian recipes, *cacio e pepe* **needs** pecorino—not parmigiano or parmesan. Why? Parmesan is usually aged longer than Pecorino, making the cheese harder to melt. Pecorino also has a sharper bite to it, which compliments the spiciness of the black pepper.



- Use a mortar-and-pestle or food processor to crack the peppercorns. You want the pepper to be crushed and somewhat chunky—not a fine dust, like the pre-ground kind. If you're using a food processor, pulse the peppercorns a few seconds at a time.
- Bring a pot of salted water to a rolling boil (aka lots of bubbles and steam). Cook your pasta until *al dente*. You want your pasta steaming-hot for this, so **DO NOT** run it under cold water once done.
- Scoop 1 ¼ cups of the starchy, hot pasta water out of the spaghetti pot—about 5 minutes before your bucatini or tonnarelli finish cooking.
- Pour the starchy, steaming water into a small saucepan. Stir in one half of the crushed/toasted peppercorns and bring it to a low boil over medium-high heat. As the water and peppercorns boil, a spicy broth will form. Set aside the other half of the peppercorns for when you sauce the pasta.

Saucing Your Cacio-e-Pepe Directions

- Drain / transfer your steaming-hot pasta to a large mixing bowl.
- Add three-quarters of your pecorino paste to the hot noodles, tossing with tongs to combine. You want the cheesy paste to coat the noodles. The heat from the hot pasta and broth will eventually melt the cheese.
- Use a ladle to pour in the steaming-hot peppercorn broth. Start with just one ladleful of liquid.
- Toss. Stir. Toss. Stir. Toss. Stir.
- Continue mixing the noodles, cheese-paste, and peppercorn broth to further loosen the sauce.
- Sprinkle the sauce-coated pasta with the dry half of your crushed peppercorns. Toss with tongs to distribute the cracked peppercorns throughout the pasta. Dust with a bit of extra grated Pecorino Romano and serve immediately in a pre-warmed bowl.
- **Cacio-e-Pepe's** creamy texture is fleeting. Be careful. Once the cheese starts to cool down, it will congeal and re-solidify. So, eat it up fast while hot and creamy!

Chef Chris Atwood's Notes:

Cacio e pepe is Italian cooking at its simplest. In Roman dialect ("romanesco"), "cacio" means cheese and "pepe" means pepper. It's just three ingredients: 1) pecorino cheese, 2) black peppercorns, and 3) pasta.





And yet, that seeming simplicity masks a tricky-to-perfect sauce. Overheat it and the cheese clumps together. Undercook it and the cheese won't melt. Wait too long to eat it and the melted cheese will have already re-congealed.

What's the secret to a foolproof cacio-e-pepe? Like many things with cooking, it's a mix of: timing, getting your hands on the right ingredients, and technique. Pro tips: grate your pecorino each time you make this; seek out pecorino that hasn't been aged longer than 1-3 months (sometimes, it's marketed as "pecorino fresco"); toast/crack whole peppercorns instead of using pre-ground pepper. And, whatever you do, do not use parmigiano or parmesan—it won't melt like pecorino and isn't used in Rome or its surrounding region of Lazio to make this dish.

