

The Complete Guide to Fresh Pasta

By Chef Mark Grigsby – The IncrEDIBLE Discourse

Pasta in Context – A Living Tradition

Fresh pasta is not just a dish; it's a cultural thread that has woven through civilizations for thousands of years. From Etruscan flour-and-water sheets dried in the sun, to Chinese millet noodles dating back 4,000 years, to the refined tagliatelle and ravioli of the Italian Renaissance — pasta has always been more than food. It's a story of **resources, regionality, and refinement**.

- **Italy** refined durum wheat into semolina and pioneered drying techniques for shelf-stable pasta.
- **Northern Italy** leaned toward fresh, egg-rich doughs (tjarin, tagliatelle, tortellini).
- **Tuscany** produced rustic, hand-rolled shapes like pici and hearty ribbons like pappardelle.
- **China & Asia** offer centuries-old parallels, reinforcing how universal the love for noodles is.

Key Point: Every pasta shape is a **solution to a problem** — how to carry a sauce, how to stretch ingredients, or how to create a specific eating experience.

The Science of Dough – 4 Pillars of Fresh Pasta

1. Flour – The Foundation

- **00 Flour** → finely milled, low protein, silky texture (ideal for tagliatelle, ravioli).
- **Semolina (durum wheat)** → high protein, firm bite, rustic structure (perfect for orecchiette, cavatelli).
- **All-Purpose** → middle ground, versatile but less specialized.

Common Mistakes:

- Using bread flour (too tough).
- Using only AP flour and expecting silky restaurant-style pasta.

Pro Tip: Blend flours to balance tenderness and bite. Example: 200g 00 flour + 100g semolina = strength and silk.

2. Eggs – The Enrichment

- **Egg Yolks** → fat + richness, yielding tender, luxurious dough.
- **Egg Whites** → protein + elasticity, giving strength to hold fillings.

Pro Tip: High-yolk doughs (tjarin) are prized in Piedmont for golden, delicate strands.

Common Mistake: Too many yolks = sticky dough; too many whites = overly firm.

3. Kneading – Building Gluten

- Purpose: Develops the **gluten network** that holds pasta together.
- **Undermixing** = dough cracks when rolled.
- **Overmixing** = tight, resistant dough that's hard to shape.

Rest dough **30–60 minutes** after kneading so gluten can relax.

4. Hydration – The Balancing Act

- Eggs + water = proper hydration.
- Well-hydrated dough rolls smoothly, cooks evenly, and absorbs sauce.
- Too dry = crumbly, cracks in roller.
- Too wet = sticky, clogs roller.

Equipment – What You Really Need

Bare Minimum (Handmade):

- Fork (to incorporate eggs/flour)
- Bench scraper (clean work surface, manage dough)
- Rolling pin + sharp knife

Next Level:

- Pasta machine (hand-crank or stand mixer attachment)
- Pasta cutter for uniform ribbons
- Scale (digital recommended for precision)

Professional Kitchen Essentials:

- Sheet pans for nesting pasta
- Microplane for finishing cheese/zest
- Tongs + ladle for cooking and plating

Pro Tip: Never wash pasta machines with water. Brush clean only — water = rust.

Step-by-Step Recipe –

Fresh Pappardelle

Dough (4–6 portions)

- 300g 00 flour
- 3 large eggs (room temp)
- 1 tsp olive oil
- ½ tsp salt

By Hand:

1. Make a flour well, crack eggs into center, add oil + salt.
2. Slowly whisk eggs with fork, pulling flour in gradually.
3. Knead 8–10 min until smooth + elastic.
4. Wrap, rest 30–60 min.

By Mixer:

1. Add flour + salt to bowl with dough hook.
2. Mix eggs separately, then add.
3. Knead 5–7 min on low-med speed.
4. Adjust hydration as needed.

Rolling + Cutting:

1. Divide rested dough into 4–5 pieces.
 2. Roll through pasta machine, reducing thickness gradually to ~1/16".
 3. Cut into ½-inch ribbons, dust lightly with flour.
 4. Form nests, refrigerate or freeze up to 1 month.
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Wild Mushroom Ragù – Flavor Meets Texture

- **Mushrooms** (cremini absorb, shiitake add earthiness, oyster bring silkiness).
- **Base:** Olive oil + butter (fortified for flavor + higher smoke point).
- **Vegetable soffritto:** onion, garlic, carrot, celery.
- **Deglaze:** Pinot Noir (Burgundy = oaky, Oregon = earthy).
- **Sauce:** Tomato paste, crushed tomatoes, herbs, cream.
- **Finish:** Parmesan, basil, parsley, lemon zest.

Pro Chef Tip: Always sear mushrooms in batches — crowding = boiling.

The 9 Rules of Pasta Cooking

1. Use 4–6 quarts of water per pound.
 2. Salt like the ocean.
 3. Never add oil.
 4. Save pasta water (emulsifier + flavor).
 5. Never rinse (unless for cold pasta).
 6. Finish pasta in sauce for absorption.
 7. Always taste-test for doneness.
 8. Cook pasta last — never let it sit.
 9. Learn the twirl (presentation matters).
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Plating Like a Pro

- **Home Style:** Toss pasta into sauce, serve family-style.
- **Restaurant Style:** Twirl into a nest, top with sauce, garnish in layers:
 1. Cheese
 2. Fresh herbs
 3. Citrus zest

Common Mistake: Garnishing without thought — parsley explosion doesn't equal finesse.

Lessons for the Professional Kitchen

- Avoid tunnel vision: manage the whole brigade, not just your station.
- Task lists + verification = accountability.
- Clear expectations + communication build trust.
- Lead by example — cleanliness, punctuality, respect.
- Organization = efficiency = less chaos.
- Time management: timers, station focus, pushing for improvement.
- Respect + morale = stronger, longer-lasting teams.
- Food safety and adaptability = survival in fast-paced kitchens.
- Develop your cooks: teach, mentor, and pass it forward.

Chef's Truth: Being a great cook is only 10% of being a chef. The rest is management, leadership, and consistency.

Final Takeaway

Fresh pasta is about **balance**:

- Science (flour, eggs, hydration, gluten).
- Craft (kneading, rolling, shaping).
- Soul (history, tradition, plating).

Whether you're a home cook making your first pappardelle or a chef running a brigade, the fundamentals never change: **Respect the process, respect your ingredients, respect your people.**

