Chapter 8

Why Pasta Matters

If there's one thing I'd like to be remembered for, it's popularizing Tuscan food in America. If there's a second thing, it would be improving the quality of pasta in American restaurants.

I love pasta. For me, it summarizes and epitomizes much of what I've always responded to about Tuscan food, specifically its intersection of history, economy, and flavor. As with most deeply felt food connections, though, my affection for pasta exists somewhere beyond my ability to fully explain it. I can't put words to why I fell in love with Jessie when I first saw her, and I can't exactly put words to why I have had a love affair with pasta that's gone on for more than half a century.

But I'll try: with all of its regions and all of their differences, pasta is the thing that all of Italy has in common, which is what led Giuseppe Garibaldi to say, in 1860, "It will be maccheroni, I swear to you, that will unite Italy." Pasta is, in my opinion, the most complete food ever invented by mankind: Just as Americans have endless varieties of sandwiches (the original, burgers, wraps, and so on) that put meat, vegetables, and starch in a neat, pick-able package, we Italians have pasta which often combines the same elements into something moist, substantial, and delicious.

The amazing thing is that most pastas, including the most beloved ones, are intrinsically simple. Think about pasta carbonara: to my mind, it's a perfect, complete dish and one that I never tire of. I also never tire of making it: the fact that the egg and cheese are cooked by the heat of the pasta itself is just beautiful to me.

When I arrived in New York, if I wanted a well-made pasta I had to make it myself. Most of what I saw in restaurants were limp noodles in a soupy sauce. Recipes had been misinterpreted and reinvented so many times they became like the story in a game of telephone that, by the time you get to the last person, bears little resemblance to the original. For example, to many Americans, even some wonderful chefs, Bolognese sauce means a meat sauce to be served over pasta. But a true Bolognese isn't really a sauce: it's meat that's cooked with tomato and wine, then enriched with milk and cream, but only enough to facilitate its coating the pasta.

Part of the beauty of a Bolognese, and of many pasta recipes is that once you know how to cook, you don't need a detailed recipe, just the gist of the steps. Don't believe me? Try this: Procure some ground pork, ground veal or mortadella, and ground beef. (Don't worry if you make too much because you can refrigerate or freeze it.) Heat some olive oil in a wide, deep, heavy pan and add some minced onions, carrots, and celery. (This mixture is called a *soffritto*.) Season it with salt, pepper, and ground nutmeg. Brown the meat really well, breaking it up with a wooden kitchen spoon, or even better a fork. Sprinkle the meat with some red wine, just enough to moisten it. Then add some crushed canned tomatoes and tomato paste, but only enough to coat the meat. Stir the meat and tomato products together until they are indistinguishable. If the meat seems dry, you can add a little chicken stock or veal stock. Next add equal amounts of cream and milk, cook just enough for them to thicken, then cover the pan and braise the meat in the oven until smooth, dark, and creamy. After about an hour, toss the meat with cooked pasta and, if it seems a little dry, add some of the pasta's cooking liquid (we'll

talk about this in a moment) to bind the sauce and make it just wet enough to coat the pasta.

The Bolognese that these steps produce is rich and meaty and when I serve it to customers, many of them think it's my interpretation of a Bolognese, but the truth is that this is as classic as you can get; the other sauces that Americans have been eating for years, those crimson red, cream-less sauces are something else entirely, an Americanized version which they call meat sauce that seems more like a crumbled up burger stirred into a tomato sauce, with no seasoning or intensity.

This is why I ended up cooking the pasta at Sapore di Mare, because there was so much *un*teaching to be done, so much wrong knowledge to remove from cooks before I could impart the right way.

So, if you can try to free your mind for a moment, to forget all you think you know about pasta-making, if you are willing to reboot your pasta hard drive, then allow me to share some thoughts about how to cook and think about pasta:

The first thing you need to understand about pasta is that it's a dish of uniformity; it's not the application of a liquid or a semi-liquid to a solid. To some degree, the pasta and its sauce are supposed to be indistinguishable from one another; it should be impossible to tell where one ends and the other begins. This sounds like a simple concept, but it's not. As with any seemingly simple cooking, anything that only involves a few ingredients and a straightforward technique, the success or failure rests in the cook's senses, his keen eye, a sense of smell that's canine in its sensitivity, and hands that think for themselves. In other words, the only way to be a good pasta cook is by cooking and eating a lot of pasta.

Things are better than they used to be when it comes to pasta in the USA, but there's still much that isn't understood, even by some of the best chefs. The most important phrase in pasta cooking, when it comes to dried pasta anyway, is surely *al dente*, which means "to the tooth." We say that properly cooked pasta is still toothsome; not chewy, but offering some resistance to the teeth. This leads to much undercooked pasta being served, but even pasta that's properly *al dente* often fails the crucial test of being fused with its sauce. The reason is that pasta should only be partially cooked when it's drained of its cooking liquid, then it will finish cooking *in its sauce*, soaking it up as it reaches doneness.

So, when I teach somebody how to make pasta, the first thing we focus on is how to cook the pasta itself. You need to begin with a lot of water, enough that the pasta will tumble when it boils so that it gets evenly cooked; you want each piece or strand to move about freely. The water should also be well salted because you want to actually taste the pasta, both its flavor and some of the salt.

Pasta that's cooked al dente will have a pinpoint of chalk-white rawness at the center and there's nothing wrong with removing a strand from the boiling water and biting or cutting into it to check for this. Before draining the pasta in a colander, it's a good idea to scoop up some of its cooking liquid in case the dish needs correcting at the last second; that liquid can thin a thick sauce, and the starch it's taken on helps bind the dish. Once the pasta is drained, it should be added to the pan in which the sauce has been prepared, or reheated. The pan should be wide and deep enough to allow you to toss the pasta with the sauce, over and over, until the pasta has taken on some sauce and the remaining sauce generously coats the pasta.

There are two marks of a perfect pasta: one is that a pasta should stand up on the plate. What I mean by that is that when you take your tongs and transfer a serving of pasta from the pan to a plate, the pasta shouldn't collapse into a stringy puddle; instead, the mound should maintain its shape and height, even when one starts to eat it. The other mark of a well-made pasta is that when the pasta is gone, the plate is empty, save for perhaps a thin coating of sauce, just enough to be mopped up with a piece of bread, called *scarpetta*, which means "heel" because the hunk of bread resembles the heel of a shoe.

(These two defining tests, by the way, led to many arguments between me and my customers in the early days of Il Cantinori and Sapore di Mare. There were innumerable times when a customer would send his or her pasta back to the kitchen because they deemed it "raw," or because it didn't have enough "sauce." Sometimes, in the heat of service, I'd get pretty angry and sarcastic about it, like the time a waiter brought a *spaghetti alla rustica* into the kitchen and told me the customer had said that it wasn't "*saltati*" enough, *saltati* being the word for "jump" or "sauté." I put the plate on the floor, hopped back and forth over it three times, then picked it up and handed it back to the waiter: "Now it's *saltati* enough," I said. "Take it back." But I usually brought the plate back to the table myself and did my best to explain the situation, namely that this was the right way to make pasta and that I wasn't able to make it any other way. Some people were curious and grateful; others not so much. But I simply wasn't willing to serve pasta the wrong way in my own restaurant.)

Those are the basics of pasta-making, but there are many decisions that go into any pasta. The most varied one is what type of pasta goes with what sauce, which is of course a very complicated question because there's often no single correct answer. I look

at the question in a rather abstract way: it's like choosing a suit; the right suit will show of the beauty of a man's body and also the elegance of the suit. In the same way, there's a conversation that goes on between pasta and sauce. They should complement each other in a way that, in hindsight, makes their coupling seem inevitable.

Once again, examples are the only way to illustrate this: one of my signature dishes since the days of Il Cantinoi has been *rigatoni alla buttera*, made with hot and sweet sausage, peas, and a touch of cream and tomato. It's a rich sauce, and the rigatoni offsets its intensity with the size of the pasta and also with that big, gaping tube of space in its center. Pasta carbonara only works with thick strands or tubular pasta like spaghetti, buccatini, or fettuccine. I usually opt for fettuccine because it's both long and flat, so there's more surface area for the sauce. The caramelized onion and pureed tomato in *spaghetti alla rustica* might be overwhelming with short, thick pasta; instead a long noodle is required to ensure balance.

Another age-old debate is when to use fresh pasta and when to use dried. In many ways, it hasn't been resolved, but there's a predisposition that many American food critics have against dried pasta. I think many critics and perhaps many diners believe that true fine dining, if it includes pasta at all, means fresh pasta because to them dried pasta connotes a bulk item. Years ago, a prominent food writer wrote an article in which he had dinner at my restaurant Coco Pazzo, then went to a supermarket and figured out how much the individual ingredients cost. He then wrote an article about the huge gap between what we charged and what you could make the dish for at home. I took great offense at this because I wasn't in the food preparation business; I was in the fine dining business and I put enormous value on the ability of me and my cooks to make some of

the most authentic pasta in New York City. It wasn't just the ingredients people were paying for: it was the know-how that went into the dish and the setting in which they ate it.

That debate aside, my general feeling is that fresh pasta is best for rich, creamy, smooth sauces, and for tomato-based and seafood sauces dried is the way to go. The one pasta that should be avoided at all costs is cappellini or angel hair pasta. Though it's used in many seafood dishes here in the U.S., in Italy, it's only called on for one dish, *cappellini en brodo*, or cappellini in broth. That's what it was created for and that's the only way we use it.

But all of this information is only somewhat useful. You can only be told so much about making pasta. If you want to understand and master it, you need to immerse yourself in it until you've absorbed it and it's become a part of you, like that perfect, elusive coming together of pasta and sauce.