

DISTINCTIVE

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Taste

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Pasta: So Much Depends On The Chew

By Marilyn Myers

Though you'd hardly know it now, pasta hasn't always been on the tip of the collective American tongue. In fact, when Rice-A-Roni debuted as a packaged side dish on the grocery shelves in 1958, the operative — and easier to sell — word was rice. Tagging along behind came the cut up vermicelli — a macaroni product by another name and the other half of this mix.

But that was long before the marathon carbo loading of the distance runner, long before the American dietary community insisted that the complex carbohydrates in pasta were our food friends, not our foes.

Pass the Pasta

Now we can't seem to get enough of the strings and shapes that make up the extended pasta family. The National Pasta Association reports that Americans consumed over 18 pounds of pasta per person in 1990, a significant increase over the national average of 13 pounds per person in 1981. If that trend continues, annual consumption will increase to 30 pounds per person by the turn of the century.

And we're not talking simply spaghetti or macaroni and cheese either, though a BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS survey indicates that spaghetti and elbows are still the most popular pastas over all regions of the country, with lasagna and shells following closely behind.

Indeed, Americans are getting more venturesome when choosing pasta, even if orzo, that tiny barley shape, continues to remain a mystery to most of the country. Some 150 different shapes are regularly made in the States, and that doesn't count the similar number made to private label specifications that are variations in length or thickness of classic shapes.

Fun Shapes

Part of this diversification in shape is directed at the younger market. Alphabets, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and dinosaurs are all designed to make eating pasta an entertaining experience for kids. Bow ties,



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mostaccioli and rotelle, on the other hand, are more sophisticated shapes for the adult market, shapes that hold up well in a variety of social settings.

The shape boom, however, is only part of the growth in the pasta industry. A potentially bigger point of expansion comes with the value-added product — pasta with something already done to it. And, says Julia Kinnaird of the National Pasta Association, pasta is finding its way into more and more items. "You can find pasta in every aisle of the grocery store," says Kinnaird, "and that includes the deli case, pasta salad side dishes, frozen food entrees, soups and microwavable lunch buckets."

Pasta That Holds its Shape

But pre-cooked microwavable pasta hasn't been the growth industry some anticipated. Kinnaird thinks that's because pasta is already perceived as a convenience product. The microwave pasta also has less bite and doesn't hold its shape as well as the traditional product. And the ability to hold its shape is one of the touchstones of good pasta. "If you cook it and let it sit a couple of hours, it should still hold its shape," says John Miller of Miller Milling in Huron, Ohio. His other test of good pasta is that the water should be clear after you cook it.

Both of Miller's tests are functions of using hard durum wheat semolina when making good pasta. Durum wheat, about 85 percent of which is grown in North Dakota, is an extremely hard wheat with a high gluten and protein content. It is the only wheat used in making semolina, an ingredient used in virtually all types of pasta. John Rice, a North Dakota durum farmer, says, "It competes well with the grasshoppers and weeds we have in North Dakota. It's a wheat that seems to thrive on hard growing conditions — little water and hot days and cool nights."

And because of the qualities of this wheat, the starch and protein in the inner core can be held in a matrix when the hulled kernel is ground into semolina instead of flaking into a powdery flour. The gritty semolina particles, closely resembling fine sand, are perfect for extruding; and the high gluten content keeps the long strands from stretching while drying.

Semolina is what the Italians have traditionally used in making their pasta, and now they even import

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Recipes/Continued from inside

Hearty oatmeal cranberry muffins

Hearty oatmeal cranberry muffins and hot spiced cranberry and apple tea are great for warming up chilly autumn mornings.

- 1 cup plain muffin mix
- 2 cups oatmeal
- 1/2 cup brown sugar
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon
- 1 egg
- 1/4 cup oil
- 1/2 cup milk
- 1/2 cup OCEAN SPRAY® Jellied Cranberry Sauce

Preheat oven to 375°. Lightly grease a 6-cup muffin tin. Combine muffin mix, oatmeal, brown sugar and cinnamon in a medium mixing bowl. Set aside.

Combine egg, oil, and milk in a small mixing bowl. Add to dry ingredients and mix just until the dry ingredients are moistened.

Fill each muffin cup 1/3 of the way with batter. Spoon a rounded teaspoonful of cranberry sauce into the center of each cup. Top with enough batter to cover sauce.

Bake for 22 minutes or until golden brown. Cool slightly and remove from pan.

Makes 6 muffins.

Hot spiced cranberry and apple tea

- 12-ounce bag (3 cups) OCEAN SPRAY® fresh cranberries
- 1 quart unsweetened apple juice
- 1/3 to 1/2 cup sugar
- 5 whole cardamom seeds
- Zest of 1/2 orange cut in a long spiral

Combine the cranberries and apple juice in a saucepan. Heat to boiling; when berries begin to pop, cover and simmer over low heat for 10 minutes. Strain into a bowl through a fine sieve or a sieve lined with a double thickness of dampened cheesecloth. (Press the pulp with the back of a spoon.)

Add the sugar gradually, starting with 1/3 cup and tasting to see if you need more. (The natural sweetness of the apple juice is a factor here.) Return to the saucepan; add the cardamom and orange zest. Heat slowly to a boil; cover and steep for 10 minutes. Ladle into mugs.

YIELD: 5 8-ounce servings, or about 5 cups.

* The spiced tea recipe is from *THE BARTENDER'S GUIDE TO ALCOHOL-FREE DRINKS* by Marie Simmons, cookbook author, freelance writer and member of the OCEAN SPRAY FOOD & BEVERAGE FORUM. The book can be ordered by calling 1-800-253-6476.



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some of it from the United States. Still, Italian-made pasta seems to be the standard by which pasta is judged. Says Luke Morano of Philadelphia Macaroni Company, "Some people view Italian pasta with the mysticism of the motherland." But Morano and other American pasta manufacturers contend semolina pasta made here is every bit as good, if not better. It has an excellent amber color, it's clean of specks of bran, it holds its shape when cooked (leaving little floury residue behind in the water), and it has a good chew.

"Thin-walled pasta isn't acceptable to a real pasta lover. But if you overcook any pasta, it's going to be soft," says Morano, "thicker-walled pasta gets a better bite." And chew is, after all, what it's all about.

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