Pastas from the Pantry

Stock your cupboard with ingredients to make pasta dinners in a flash

by Tony Rosenfeld, Fine Cooking #81

How to create your own quick pastas

Having a strategically stocked pantry and fridge is a prerequisite to whipping up an impromptu weeknight pasta dinner. So use the lists below to help with shopping (most of the items have a long shelf-life), then return to this page again as inspiration for making up your own quick pasta dish.

You don’t have to choose something from each category—for example, some of the best pasta dishes don’t include any “hefty” ingredient at all. When creating combinations, it’s helpful to think about an ingredient’s predominant flavor note: salty, smoky, citrusy, rich, herby, sharp, tangy, briny, etc. I try to balance different types of flavors to keep things interesting.

If you want some concrete examples to get you started, you can’t go wrong with a simple puttanesca (canned tomatoes, garlic, capers, and anchovies) or an Amatriciana (pancetta, canned tomatoes, and pecorino). Or try classic pairings like peas, pancetta, and porcini mushrooms, or cannellini beans, Parmigiano, and rosemary. Once you get the hang of it, you’ll be coming up with your own favorites in no time.

Add a little heft

If you want your dish to feel a bit more substantial, these ingredients can help fill it out.

Artichokes (jarred or canned) – thinly slice and sauté briefly before adding to the pasta
Canned beans – try cannellini or chickpeas, which have a mild flavor that goes well with pasta.
Canned tuna – drain and crumble
Dried mushrooms – rehydrate, chop, and sauté briefly; use the soaking liquid for the sauce
Roasted red peppers (jarred)
Sun-dried tomatoes – use oil-packed tomatoes, which don’t need to be rehydrated, and slice them thinly

Sauce it up

Add at least one of these liquidy ingredients to create a saucy consistency and a cohesive dish.

Canned tomatoes (diced) – simmer with other ingredients to form a quick, chunky sauce
Chicken broth – add to any sautéed ingredients, reduce, then mix with pasta for a brothier dish
Extra-virgin olive oil – use for sautéing and for drizzling before serving
Heavy cream – stir into a sauce, then reduce until thickened slightly
Pasta cooking water – if the dish seems dry as it’s coming together, add a little reserved hot pasta water to help bind and moisten everything

Use cheese for richness

Grate, slice, or crumble these cheeses and toss with the hot pasta.

Feta
Goat cheese
Grana Padano
Parmigiano-Reggiano
Pecorino
Ricotta salata

For recipes using these ingredients see Fine Cooking #81 (October/November 2006)

Finish with punch

These can enliven the dish by adding a fresh, briny, acidic, or hot note, or even a bit of crunchy texture.

Anchovies – mash and add to sauce
Capers – use raw or fry until crisp
Crushed red pepper flakes
Fresh breadcrumbs – toss with olive oil and sauté until toasted
Fresh herbs
Frozen peas
Lemon – zest, juice, or both
Pine nuts – toast until golden
Pitted olives – Kalamatas or Gaetas
Prosciutto – add thin strips at the end
Vinegar – sherry, red-wine, or balsamic

Start with a flavor foundation

Cut and cook these ingredients, then toss into the finished pasta.

Bacon – cook until crisp, then crumble
Garlic – chop or mince and sauté until golden and fragrant
Onions – slice and cook until caramelized
Pancetta – cube and cook until crisp
Stock up for quick pasta dishes on demand

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<th>Pastas</th>
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<td>Long strands (spaghetti, fettuccine, linguine, capellini)</td>
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Produce

- Garlic
- Onions
- Lemons
- Fresh herbs
- Frozen peas

Dairy & Cheese

- Feta
- Goat cheese
- Grana Padano
- Parmigiano-Reggiano
- Pecorino
- Ricotta salata
- Heavy cream

Meat & Deli

- Bacon
- Pancetta
- Prosciutto

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