



Campanelle

PASTA



Radiatore



Mafalde



Tortellini



Orecchiette



Gemelli



Acini di Pepe



Conchiglie



Cavatelli



Trotole



Ditali



Cavatappi



Ruote



Garganelli



Penne Lisce



Riccioli



Gnocchetti Sardi



Fusilli



Casarecce



Penne



Tortiglioni



Gromiti



Maccheroni



Mezzelune



Farfalle



Ravioli



Cappellotti

"Pasta, a small word for a universe of shapes."

—RACHEL RODDY, A-Z OF PASTA

pasta shapes

Cavatelli, which means “little cave,” is a small, shell-like pasta, originating in the south of Italy. It is one of the pasta shapes that is made through being “dragged”: press a finger into a nugget of dough and drag it along a surface as it curls up. Dragging it over a ridged board will give the cavatelli a ridged texture. **Orecchiette**, which means “little ear,” is a round, cupped pasta that is made in a similar way: drag the dough into a cavatello, then turn it inside-out into an ear-like cup.



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Open any book on pasta or peruse any website, and you will likely encounter the same statistic: Italy is home to around 350 types of pasta, possibly up to 500. It is, of course, an impossible number to deter-

mine. Some pasta is called by different names in different regions; for others, different regions, communities and families will have their own slight variation. Even such distinct pastas as linguine and fettuccine differ in width by a mere two millimetres.

We may quibble about the number, but one thing is undeniable: the sheer variety of pasta and pasta shapes that exist is, quite simply, incredible. Pasta represents a wild and diverse creativity, one that has been influenced by Italian culture: its vigorous regionalism, varied geography and deep family ties.

“Pasta, in Italian families, especially on the weekends, it’s an anchor,” my friend Julia Dawson tells me. “It’s a way for people to come together.” Julia, an Italian Canadian, grew up making pasta and Italian dishes alongside her nonna—including gnocchi. She started a blog, *julia chews the fat* (2012–2017), as a way to dig deeper into her family’s Abruzzo culinary traditions, and in 2017 travelled to Piedmont, Italy, for an MA in gastro-nomic studies, immersing herself in such topics as food culture, food education and sustainable food systems.

Traditionally, Julia tells me, a nonna would make homemade pasta on Sunday for the big Sunday lunch. It was labour intensive and time consuming—work that still falls almost exclusively to women. This work can be a burden, but it can also bring a lot of pride. “There is also the excitement and the anticipation, of even all of that work, to have everyone around that table after,” Julia says. “There’s a lot of pride that goes into knowing how to make something by hand, knowing that you’re the only one in your family who can do it—the pride of being the keeper of that knowledge.”

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FLOURS

Generally speaking, pasta in northern Italy is made using egg and (hard wheat) flour, making a soft dough. In the south, pasta tends to be made from just water and semolina (durum wheat) flour, which has higher gluten content and thus makes a more elastic, stronger, firmer dough—one that lends itself to being shaped. Other pasta exist, as well: in Italy’s Alpine regions, for example, one can find pasta made using buckwheat flour or chestnut flour.

Gnocchi are an ancient pasta—a flour and egg dough to which potato was added after being introduced from South America during the colonial era. “Gnocco” means “tree knot” in the Venetian dialect, an apt description for these small knots of pasta. They are found throughout the northeast, including Abruzzo.



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Fregula are small balls of pasta that are nearly identical to couscous—they originate in Sardinia, in the south, which historically had contact with North Africa and Arab cuisine. To make fregula, semolina flour is dampened with water and rubbed in a circular motion until small balls are formed. These are then toasted.

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What is it about Italy that has led to such numbers and variety of pasta shapes? For one, Italy didn’t even become a unified nation until 1861. Prior to this, Italy’s regions were all independent states, with their own traditions, foods and languages or dialects, and these cultural differences remain incredibly strong today. Italian cuisine has also been influenced by interactions with neighbouring cultures—from Swiss and French influences in the Alps to North African influences in Sicily—not to mention Italy’s place in early global trade routes, which brought Asian spices, and potatoes and aubergine from the New World.

Italy is also geographically diverse, from the mountains in the north to the Mediterranean heat of the south. A diverse geography and climate leads to a diversity of available ingredients—vegetables and herbs, cheeses



and meats—which in turn lend themselves to different pasta and sauces.

Emilia-Romagna in the north, home to parmigiana and cured meats like prosciutto, is known for its heavier dishes, which require a heartier pasta to match. Liguria, also in the north, is known for its pesto, a light and delicate dressing of olive oil and herbs that pairs well with a lighter, more delicate pasta. The south, with its abundant tomatoes, lends itself to pasta shapes that can catch and hold dollops of tomato sauce.

The way a pasta shape holds a sauce is the key factor behind the variety of shapes. Each pasta features a different fold, a different crease, series of grooves, size of tube or tangle of ribbon that will catch a sauce in a particular way. “The shapes were crafted in response to what sauce is going to work best with it, in terms of getting into the nooks and crannies,” Julia says.

But pasta can also only be understood through its origins as peasant food, which is by nature functional and frugal; it is about using what’s accessible and available, and making use of everything. “So if you have sheep on your farm, you’re going to want to use everything that comes from that animal, as best you can,” Julia says. “And the fact that you then make a ricotta ravioli, as opposed to a linguini, in your area, might just be down to that.” Pasta and sauce pairings are less about matching things up, and more about the elements of a dish having evolved together.

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Farfalle is often called bow tie pasta in North America, but in Italy the name means “butterfly.” To make farfalle, pasta dough is cut into rectangles with a fluted pasta cutter, then pinched in the centre to create the butterfly shape. In Emilia-Romagna, farfalle is known as **strichetti**, a local dialect word for “pinch.” Farfalle is one of many pasta shapes inspired by the natural world. **Lumache**, or “snail,” resembles snail shells, and **conchiglie** resembles the “conch” or “seashell” for which it is named.



SHAPE CREATION

An experienced pasta maker with deft fingers can make impressively intricate shapes. But there is only so much the hand can do. The sheer diversity and variety of pasta shapes that we can find today owes much to the extrusion press, which allows for the creation of shapes that could never be formed by the hand. Industrial extrusion presses were also a lifesaver for home cooks: even simple pasta can be a major undertaking by hand. Consider the ubiquitous elbow macaroni: by hand, tube pasta is made by carefully rolling a strand of dough over an iron rod, called a *ferro*, then cut to size. It is a difficult and time-consuming process from which any home cook would prefer to be delivered.



What about the art of pasta making? The phrase makes Julia cringe. “The reason I hesitate to use the word ‘art’ is because there’s ultimately a primordial function to it—to feed, to satiate. I also think my nonna would scoff at calling pasta ‘art,’ which is why I might have a hard time seeing it as such.”

For the older generations, there is no romanticism around making homemade pasta, Julia says. “There is a part of it that’s just, this is what we do: it’s Sunday, we’re getting the family together, we’re making the pasta.” It is simply something that needs doing.

And yet the creativity and craft of pasta making is undeniable as well. “When you start looking at the different shapes, and the care that’s taken—even serving them in beautiful plates, and serving them with a very specific sauce—there is intentionality behind it,” Julia says. “You are doing something that takes it into an aesthetic realm, and doing something creative with it.”

“What’s interesting about anything that’s handmade is that it is this marriage between the functional and the beautiful. We’re doing it to feed ourselves and to feed our families, and to feed our communities—but we’re doing it in a way that also integrates other aspects of our culture.”

The danger today lies in the temptation to fetishize the handmade, something that can obscure the labour involved for women, and likewise our own privilege in pursuing handmade activities at our leisure. “It was hard for a lot of these women, trying to balance it all, and keeping these traditions,” says Julia.

And yet there is also something fundamentally valuable in making food by hand. “Once there is intentionality and this desire to come back to something that’s connected to our bodies and our senses, then we’re doing something that brings us closer to ourselves, brings us closer to culture, brings us closer to our environment, to ingredients,” says Julia. “There’s something about the tactility of what we’re doing that I feel is important. And you can’t do that unless you have your hands in the dough, or you’re getting your hands dirty.”

Homemade food is more likely to be savoured and appreciated. It is more likely to be eaten in moderation, and in the company of others. “That’s a part of it, the value of sharing a meal with other people,” Julia says. “That to me is always connected to health, whether that be mental or physical health.”






Fileja, a rustic tube pasta from Calabria, in the south, is made using a small iron rod called a ferretto. The ferretto is pressed into a thin rope of pasta dough, then rolled into a loose tube. **Busiate** is a similar pasta from Sicily, a tight spiral now made with a ferretto, but originally with a thin reed called a busa, from which it was named. The corkscrew-shaped **fusilli** is a descendent of the busiate, though today it tends to be more tightly formed, and often lacks a hollow centre.

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What's interesting about the handmade, Julia tells me, is that it becomes part of you. Through practice and repetition, a tradition can take on muscle memory, become intuitive.

"When you're learning with another person, in person—not through a recipe online—you're learning, through your senses, what it's supposed to look like, feel like, smell like, and eventually taste like." All those subtle characteristics of a pasta dough—the way it springs back after resting, how it resists when dragged or twisted, the way it's affected by humidity—can only be discerned by feeling it with your own hands, and best when shown by another.

Tradition can be like gluten, strengthening and holding us together; but when not passed down, it can become fragile. "Once those people are gone, there is something that gets lost," Julia says. "I think about gnocchi, and the way you roll and flick, roll and flick, roll and flick. If I hadn't practised that over and over and over again with my grandmother, it wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be the same."

"You make these recipes to invoke or to bring back a person: the ghosts of the people you knew, but also their ancestors. The way a tomato sauce is going to smell—just that smell can bring back a person. That, to me, is magic. And that often only happens with home-made things, where we have that immediate memory. When I'm recreating a recipe, it'll usually be the ones that have a particular resonance to me, because I remember somebody making them, and I want to be with them again." 

@juliachewsthefat



WITH OR WITHOUT

Pasta can be in *brodo*, which means served "in broth," or *sciutto*, "without broth," and eaten instead with a sauce. There is also *fresca*, fresh pasta, and *secca*, dried pasta. When it comes to pasta shapes, there is *lunga*, long pasta; *corta*, short pasta; and *ripiena*, stuffed pasta—as well as *pastine*, very small pasta shapes, generally cooked in broth; *strascinati*, dragged shapes; and the dumpling-like *gnocchi*.



"To me, you go to Italy not to find the superior version of each regional dish but to answer questions: Why this dish? Why here? Why this way?"

—MISSY ROBBINS, PASTA

"Pasta shapes are edible hubs of information: flour and liquid microchips containing huge amounts of data, historical, geographical, political, cultural, personal, practical."

—RACHEL RODDY, A-Z OF PASTA



"Food customs also travel an imperfect road, which is why it shouldn't come as a surprise that there are pieces missing by the time they get to us. But I like to think that all that shifting and travelling allows them to gather substance for new stories and, ultimately, new memories."

—JULIA DAWSON



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