A BRIEF HISTORY OF PASTA

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THE ITALIAN FOOD THAT SHAPED THE WORLD

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INTRODUCTION

Anyone who cooks up a dish of pasta, anywhere in the world, can't help thinking of Italian cuisine. Even if they live on another continent and the food has been in their diet for generations, it makes no difference: the *Bel Paese* is a touchstone by default.

Yet pasta does not just belong to Italy: in the Western world alone, there's Moroccan couscous, Spanish fideuà (a paella made with short, thin noodles instead of rice), and all kinds of filled pasta – German maultaschen, Russian pelmeni, Ukrainian varenyky, the uszka and pierogi of Eastern Europe and so on – which have nothing to do with the Italian tradition and developed on their own.

If you think about it, it's a little strange that a single country in the heart of the Mediterranean developed a culture with hundreds of pasta dishes, up and down the peninsula, that characterise its cuisine more than anything else. In the end, pasta is just one way of eating a dough of water and flour: bake it, and it's a pie, flatbread or pizza; dip it in boiling oil, and it's a fritter (plain or

filled), but boil it in water, and you've entered the vast world of pasta.

Definitions are not set in stone, however, and that is why, for the first few centuries of its existence, pasta was not considered a culinary category unto itself (see, for instance, the chapter on lasagne). The circumstances of its birth are also rather hazy, and although we know that Sicily was a centre of production for dried pasta as early as the twelfth century, the thread of its origins gets lost somewhere back in Classical Greece and the Near East.

Seen from the outside, Italy is one nation united under pasta: families cook it almost every day at home, and very few restaurants fail to offer at least one kind on the menu. There are famous recipes that can be found everywhere and have become true national symbols, like spaghetti with tomato sauce, but most have an extremely local connotation. You can probably find a good carbonara in Milan, or excellent trenette with pesto in Rome, but these dishes are still closely associated with the place where they were invented. If we look a little closer, we will notice that every place has its own speciality, and that the next town over has a different way of cooking what is *more or less* the same dish. Italian cuisine is built from a myriad of recipes forming an intricate mosaic, whose tiles aren't easy to make out; the differences are sometimes minimal, and may even hinge on individual family traditions.

It's a bit like looking at an Impressionist painting: seen from afar, it seems clear enough, but as you get closer the

overall picture splits apart and the brushstrokes become an indistinguishable blur.

Since pasta is a food so deeply tied to identity, it becomes a factor distinguishing those who cook it, or rather 'know how to cook it', from those who don't; in short, the classic dividing line of 'Us and Them', which more or less falls along national boundaries. When Italians go abroad, they can't help being amazed by how pasta is eaten in other countries, and two common errors in particular draw the fiercest criticism. The first is cooking it too long, that is, not al dente: that characteristic consistency where the core is still firm to the bite. A dish of spaghetti or macaroni that is too soft is thought of as a mortal sin, and in Italy would justify sending the food back to the kitchen, although that rarely happens.

The other mistake that 'They' often make is serving pasta as a side to meat. Those noodles nestled alongside a bit of roast, or maybe a beef stew? To an Italian, they're completely incomprehensible, because pasta is a *primo piatto*, a first course, and meat is a *secondo*, and never the twain shall meet.

What many fierce Italian champions of orthodoxy do not realise is that these two ways of serving pasta were once quite common even back home, and it was from here that they spread abroad over a century ago. 'Overcooked' pasta – you'll find various examples in the last chapter – was standard in northern Italy until the early twentieth century; the fashion of cooking it al dente sprang up in the South, and took a long time to work its way up the peninsula and become the national standard. Just a few generations ago, it was normal for a Neapolitan to cook

pasta differently compared to someone in Milan.

The habit of using it as a side dish was also quite common. From the Renaissance up to the late nineteenth century, one finds many cookbooks that suggest covering boiled meat, especially poultry such as duck or capon, with macaroni or filled pasta. In Italy, this custom almost completely disappeared over the course of the twentieth century, as pasta carved out its own place on the menu, both at home and in public settings.

Essentially, when Italians criticise this sort of thing, they are revealing the cultural divide that separates them not only from foreigners, but from their own ancient culinary roots.

In countries such as Germany, Britain, France or the United States, pasta was brought by Italian immigrants. Initially considered an interloper at the national table, it took quite a while to be assimilated into those cuisines. And as we know, immigrant communities tend to be protective of their traditions, which they rightfully consider a fundamental part of their identity. So this – along with the fact that contact with their homeland was only sporadic – may be why their cooking preserved some older habits, continuing down a path that Italy diverged from. In much the same way that a language cut off from its country of origin tends to evolve separately, holding on to some archaic patterns of speech.

This led to hybridised cuisines that have every right to exist, but almost never reflect contemporary Italian usage.

For instance, Italian American cooking, with its spaghetti and meatballs, chicken Alfredo or macaroni and cheese: recipes that all evolved out of traditional Italian ones, but are now only distantly related to those original delicacies and have no real counterpart in Italy. The famous macaroni dish so common in the US and UK actually echoes the oldest way of eating pasta – topped with cheese alone – but remains a speciality of the English-speaking world, and you'd never find it on a restaurant menu in my country.

Pasta becomes entangled with cultural identity not just in relation to foreigners, but even – and one might say above all – when Italians are talking to other Italians. Endless arguments over the 'authentic' recipe for a given speciality are par for the course. This maniacal attachment to our foods usually causes considerable amusement among non-Italians, who can't see why, say, the very notion of breaking spaghetti in half to fit it in the pot, or of adding a spoonful of tomato sauce to carbonara, should be such hot-button issues.

In Italy, there have always been foods associated with a given region, and examples can be found all the way back to the Middle Ages, although they are often individual products rather than actual dishes.

Even in those days certain foods had a special relationship with their place of origin, but there was nothing resembling the fanatical attachment to tradition that we see today. The fierce battle against real or imagined

threats to our national cuisine is a rather recent phenomenon. And the particularly inflexible attitude of the people I call 'food purists' in this book took shape around the beginning of the 1960s, during Italy's frenzied industrialisation. If you read the newspapers of the time, they convey a clear sense that Italian culinary traditions were in jeopardy: according to commentators, an incredible legacy was at risk of disappearing for good.

The model they were looking to was France, which had been keenly aware of its national culinary heritage for some time and was working to protect certain skills, terroirs, and products through research and publications.

So the years that followed brought a concerted effort to record and preserve Italian foodways, but the link to thousand-year-old traditions that gourmets are always invoking was still missing from the picture. And the quest for (or rather, invention of) the ancient roots of Italian cuisine unleashed a debate that is not only still open, but has taken on gigantic proportions.

The stories we hear today about the origins of a dish almost never reveal the true circumstances surrounding its birth. They do, however, shed light on the values that people are trying to preserve by holding on to tradition. In these narratives, the past is utterly transfigured and constantly rewritten, painting imaginative pictures of a rural world where peasants lived off the fruits of the earth, or else of sumptuous courts in an era when it was Italy that taught the rest of Europe how to eat. These two scenarios suggest a powerful longing for vanished roots, and the hope of recovering them through traditional cooking.

In the end, my true motivation for writing this book has been to bring a little clarity to the discussion, because legends can teach us quite a bit, but should not be confused with historical fact.

Alongside ancient cuisine, I have another longstanding passion: historical fencing. These two interests may seem to have little in common, but are both spurred by a desire to learn more about everyday life in the past, since such details have fascinated me since childhood. In that field, too, one comes across many clichés and fanciful reconstructions. So along with other scholars and enthusiasts, I began to focus on analysing primary sources such as fencing treatises and manuals. It is an approach that has proven to be of fundamental importance for launching a serious study of the ancient martial arts and their practical applications.

When it comes to food history, my research has concentrated on cookbooks as a primary source of information, but in order to interpret them correctly it has been necessary to explore many other fields, such as access to ingredients, production techniques, transport, food prices and every other aspect of the ancient diet.

These studies have revealed that many popular beliefs about the origin and evolution of classic Italian dishes, particularly pasta specialities, are flat-out wrong. When I began to publish my first findings, *Gambero Rosso* magazine invited me on to their masthead to write articles about food history and recipes for ancient dishes. This

is how I found my calling, so to speak, and I still write a newspaper column for *Il Sole 24 Ore* titled 'Indovina chi sviene a cena' ('Guess Who's Succumbing to Dinner'), where I tell curious, little-known anecdotes about food – like the ones that turn up throughout this book.

Writing about food in Italy is often complicated enough as it is, but proposing variations on traditional recipes could be thought of as an extreme sport in this country. It's far safer to wave around a sharp sword than to serve friends a carbonara made with cream.

But to be honest, Italians are not the only people deeply attached to their own culinary specialities. To cite just one recent example: in January 2021, when the Spanish chef David Muñoz – who can boast three Michelin stars – dared to offer his own take on Spanish paella, calling it 'Madrid Paella', all hell broke loose on the internet. His recipe was even called a 'sacrilege'.

Nor are the neighbours to be outdone. The battle to defend French cuisine began long ago and shows no sign of slowing: in other headlines from 2021, the Confederation of French Bakers nominated the baguette for inclusion in the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. Such appeals to the UN are nothing new in Italy, either, where the art of Neapolitan pizza-making was granted ICH status in 2017.

As a rule, in Italy, cooking is a phenomenon that flows out of the kitchen into every aspect of conviviality and social life. Food is an opportunity to strengthen family

ties and friendships, the consummate binding agent. And this is true of pasta in particular, because it can be easily prepared in large amounts to share with others, at relatively little expense. If it's homemade pasta, which fortunately still exists in many parts of Italy, the whole family is often summoned to take part in the preparation of some beloved dish, especially for special occasions. It is not uncommon for everyone to gather around a big table to make the lasagne, tortellini, orecchiette or ravioli that will become part of a festive meal. And on such occasions, the fun starts long before everyone sits down to dinner, as friends and relatives all pitch in to concoct complex dishes. These customs reveal a deep love of cooking that I would like to convey to my readers abroad, hoping that the stories and recipes in this book will inspire them to visit Italy and, fork in hand, sample its vast spectrum of regional specialities.

Foreigners are often surprised to learn that over dinner, Italians like to discuss what they're eating, what they've eaten, and what they plan to eat or cook in the future. Of course that's not *entirely* true: sometimes we just make small talk, or chat about literature, music, philosophy, history and so on.

But only if the food is mediocre.

1.

Fettuccine Alfredo

A history of Italian pasta can only start here, with the legendary fettuccine Alfredo. A very simple dish, with just three ingredients, that has been wildly successful: it turns up in over 800 American cookbooks published from 1933 to the present.

So why will your Italian friends tell you they've never heard of the stuff?

It's not their fault. Alfredo is by no means a household name in our country, which is why those of us who *have* heard of it put it in the same category as spaghetti and meatballs – which we've only ever seen in *Lady and the Tramp* – or carbonara with bacon, garlic, mushrooms and cream: some shoddy imitation of an Italian dish, seemingly unrelated to our traditional cuisine.

This goes to show that fame has a way of ruining old friendships. Because although the average Italian may not know it, the 'original' fettuccine Alfredo goes back centuries, and is actually the most ancient pasta dish in our tradition. But I'll get to that later.

Nowadays, in the United States, fettuccine Alfredo has become a dish of tagliatelle in a cream and cheese sauce, sometimes seasoned with garlic and parsley. It may be served in this simple version, or gussied up with other ingredients – the most common being chicken or prawns. But the most extreme form is the Alfredo sauce found in American supermarkets, either in packets – to be mixed with water and butter – or in jars, ready to pour on your pasta (or pizza, as some labels suggest). It comes in dozens of brands, including organic and vegan options. In the better ones the main ingredient is cream, which is sometimes outweighed by products like modified cornstarch, maltodextrin, partially hydrogenated soybean oil and other such delicacies.

At first glance, this seems like a classic example of a carefully constructed, Italian-sounding fake, a dish that has reached the height of popularity in the US (and other countries) without ever setting foot in the *Bel Paese*. A marketing ploy by some cunning multinational corporation intent on pleasing palates used to creamy, mouth-filling sauces, with no link to real Italian cuisine.

And it's true enough that at some point, that's more or less the direction the dish took. Yet its early history is surprising, because it takes us to the heart of Italy at the dawn of the twentieth century, when a cook discovered – or rather, rediscovered – a fabulous dish that uses a few simple ingredients to magical effect. Believe it or not, in those days Rome had not yet developed the pasta recipes we all know and love. Amatriciana was just starting to appear in a few eateries; cacio e pepe – which we'll discuss later in this chapter – was not yet considered a

local speciality; and carbonara and gricia had yet to be invented.

Back then, the most famous pasta dish in the Eternal City was – you guessed it – fettuccine Alfredo.

The *majestic* fettuccine al doppio burro

Alfredo di Lelio, inventor of the fettuccine that bears his name, was born in Rome in 1883 and got his start at the family restaurant in Piazza Rosa, which later vanished to make room for the shopping arcade now known as Galleria Sordi. He was still a child when he began helping out at the family business run by his mother, Angelina. The establishment was rather anonymous, one of the many restaurants dotting the capital, and that's how it would have stayed had it not been for the arrival of Armando, Alfredo's eldest son. This was in 1908. After giving birth, the mother, Ines, was so weak that Alfredo strove to come up with a food that would be nourishing yet easy to digest, to help get his wife back on her feet.

So here's what he did: 'he personally prepared some fettuccine, using a semolina dough, and mixed it with very fresh butter and parmesan cheese. Then he said a prayer to St Anne (patron saint of new mothers) and served it to Ines, saying, "if it's not to your taste, I'll eat it!"'[1]

It was to her taste, all right.

So much so that she suggested putting the dish straight on the menu of their little trattoria. A simple recipe, with butter and parmesan perfectly blended to create a velvety sauce enveloping the fettuccine. What was so

special about it, as opposed to just dumping butter on noodles? The quality and freshness of the ingredients, of course, but above all the method of emulsification used by Alfredo, whose skilled hands imparted an extraordinary texture to the sauce.

Two years later, his parents' restaurant, where fettuccine Alfredo first saw the light of day, disappeared as the city underwent all kinds of transformations. But in 1914 Alfredo managed to open a new restaurant – also in Rome, but this time in the very central Via della Scrofa – which he named after himself. Just how the fame of his dish travelled so far outside the Italian capital and rippled across the Atlantic is still a mystery. To be sure, some part was played by the fact that foreigners were enthralled by the histrionics of the owner, and that his fettuccine perfectly suited American tastes in pasta.

One of the first American references to the dish turns up in the 1922 novel *Babbitt*, by Sinclair Lewis, which was quite popular in its day. At one point in the story, the protagonist meets an upper-class American lady who confesses her infatuation with Rome. But the object of her affection is not the city's paintings, music or antiquities: rather, it's the 'little trattoria on the Via della Scrofa where you get the best fettuccine in the world'.[2]

This was just the beginning.

A few years later, in 1927, the restaurant was reviewed in the *Saturday Evening Post* by George Rector – a food expert, prolific essayist and host of a CBS radio show – whose long article launches into an admiring description of 'Maestro' Alfredo di Lelio's handiwork. It starts, obviously, with a recipe for the fettuccine, which calls for a

kilo of flour, five egg yolks, a glass of water and a pinch of salt. But the real key, according to Rector, is the next step: when it is served, or rather *how* it is served. Coming to the table himself, Alfredo brandishes a large spoon and fork, sprinkles parmesan on the fettuccine, and 'turns it over and over. Now, that's simple enough, but, as Eva Tanguay* used to say about her dancing, it's not what he does but the way he does it.' The secret to his fettuccine is finally revealed, and the author can barely contain his enthusiasm for Alfredo's artistry, as we read in his priceless closing words: 'The recipe for the making is very simple. But so is the formula for painting a Rembrandt. Just get oils, canvas and brush, and go to it.'[3]

By this point it's not only clear that the dish was exquisite, but that Alfredo was a master at winning over his guests by showcasing the preparation of his speciality. What normally would have been done in the kitchen was now paraded before a roomful of diners anxious to see ordinary pasta transformed into Alfredo's 'majestic fettuccine with double butter sauce',[4] as it was advertised in the papers of the day.

But it was only in 1927 that this Roman speciality got its true consecration, an investiture presided over – and how could it be otherwise, given the theatrical flair that went into the dish – by two Hollywood stars: Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks. Actually, the pair had already eaten at Alfredo's in 1920, while on their honeymoon. Seven years later they came back, bearing an unexpected gift with enormous publicity potential: a

* Eva Tanguay was a famous singer and dancer known as the 'Queen of Vaudeville'.

gold fork and spoon engraved with the dedication 'To Alfredo the King of the noodles'. It's hard to convey the colossal popularity of these two silent film idols by comparing them to celebrities of our era. Douglas Fairbanks was known as 'the king of Hollywood' and starred in the first adaptation of *Zorro*, as well as a famous *Robin Hood* that set box office records for 1922, and *The Black Pirate*, one of the first all-colour films in history. As if that weren't enough, he was one of the thirty-six founding members of the Academy that created the Oscars in 1929. Mary Pickford was one of the best known and best paid actors in silent film, famous for playing cheerful teens with golden ringlets. Dubbed 'America's sweetheart', she teamed up with her husband and with figures like D. W. Griffith and Charlie Chaplin to found United Artists, an independent production company that still exists today. Their wedding not only marked the union of two demigods, but created what at the time was probably the most famous couple in the Western world.

No amount of advertising could have equalled this endorsement from the Fairbanks, and Alfredo milked it for all it was worth without changing a comma in his recipe. Famous figures visiting Rome from all around the world made an obligatory stopover in Via della Scrofa, where the owner, always smiling under his prodigious handlebar moustache, would prepare the famous dish for them directly at the table.

In 1943, at the darkest point in the city's history, Alfredo sold his historic restaurant and all the photos of stars on the walls. But as soon as the war ended he opened a new place in Piazza Augusto Imperatore, calling

it Il Vero Alfredo ('The Real Alfredo'). Both restaurants cashed in on Alfredo's distinguished name and there was a fierce rivalry between them, but it doesn't really matter which was the true hub of the *dolce vita* in those years. By then the dish was already on the road to fame, travelling far beyond the city walls.

Given that the recipe was so closely identified with its inventor, fears of straying into plagiarism may have hindered its spread in Italy, where it never achieved the popularity of classic Roman dishes like amatriciana, carbonara, or cacio e pepe. There could be other reasons, too: the fact that Italians tend to think of pasta with butter as 'hospital fare', or the impossibility of making variations on a sauce with just two ingredients, or the choice of parmesan rather than pecorino, which made it harder to think of the recipe as a Roman speciality. Whatever the reason, back in its homeland, fettuccine Alfredo remained a phenomenon almost wholly confined to those two restaurants in the capital.

Starting in the 1940s, however, some cookbooks did offer sporadic instructions on how to make the famous fettuccine at home. They never mentioned Alfredo, only the amount of butter, which seemed to keep growing. The 'Tagliatelle al burro'[5] (tagliatelle with butter) in *Tesoretto della cucina italiana* in 1948 thus became 'Tagliatelle doppio burro'[6] (with double butter) in *Annabella in cucina* in 1964; it then reached the 'triplo burro' level and stayed there, in the versions proposed by Luigi Carnacina

in 1961,[7] Vincenzo Buonassisi in 1979,[8] and finally Luigi Veronelli in 1985.[9] But let's have a look at Carnacina's, as an example:

> *Fettuccine (tagliatelle) with triple butter*
>
> [For 6 people]. 420 gr homemade fettuccine (make a dough using 9 eggs for each kg of durum wheat flour and a little semolina). About 200 gr of pure cream butter, set in cold water for a few hours to soften. 200 gr of parmesan (from the centre of a semi-aged wheel, grated at the last minute). Cook the fettuccine in lightly salted boiling water, drain it al dente, transfer it to a warm china bowl, sprinkle immediately with grated parmesan and with the butter in small pieces, mix well and serve very hot.

The promise of 'triple butter' in the name is fulfilled by the 200g of butter used here for just over 400g of tagliatelle, a proportion that rises to 250g for 400g of pasta in Veronelli's version.

The appeal of the recipe definitely lay in its simplicity and in the ease of preparation, since it was well within the capabilities of anyone who could turn on a cooker.

At first, Americans tried to reproduce the original version of the dish, as we can see from a 'Fettuccine all'Alfredo'[10] that is perfectly identical to the Italian fettuccine with double butter. It turns up in *Cook as the Romans Do* (1961) by Myra Waldo – one of America's most prolific cookbook authors, and a great fan of European cuisine. But other versions that began to catch

on around this time in the United States were much more 'democratic', in the sense that they tried to ensure a good outcome even for cooks with very few real skills.

And so some versions appeared that added quite a bit of cream, sometimes along with egg yolks, and ingredients like garlic and parsley that had never been in the Roman recipe.

This American take on Alfredo sauce began to be popularised not only through cookbooks, but through other, more ubiquitous channels, like the box of 'Fettuccine Egg Noodles' that the Pennsylvania Dutch brand began to market in 1966, which had a recipe on the back calling for cream and Swiss cheese (in addition to the classic butter and parmesan).[11]

Its definitive success in the United States, however, came with industrialisation and mass distribution, as companies began producing packets or jars of ready-made sauces that could be poured directly on pasta, adding other toppings at whim. As is almost always true of processed foods, quality took a back seat to practicality, and even a recipe as seemingly simple as pasta, butter and cheese had to bow to the laws of the supermarket shelf.

The same approach was taken by the Olive Garden restaurants, specialising in Italian American dishes. Their menu introduced a cream, butter and cheese-based fettuccine Alfredo to which other toppings could be added, creating the variants we mentioned earlier: 'Chicken Alfredo', 'Seafood Alfredo', or 'Shrimp Alfredo'. The chain now has over 800 locations across North America, and has played a key role in shaping the image of Italian American food since the 1980s.

One need only take a look at the leading American recipe sites to see that not much has changed even today, although in recent years Americans have developed a much keener awareness that quality ingredients do indeed matter. Influenced in part by thousands of cooking blogs and TV shows, a segment of the population has raised their standards for food and become willing to devote more time, energy and attention to what they eat. Encouraged by this trend, some chefs have been trying to reintroduce the original recipe for fettuccine Alfredo in the United States.[12]

Il cacio sui maccheroni

But let's stop for a minute and go back a step. A step that, as we are about to see, spans several centuries.

For now, let's set aside the ritual of preparing fettuccine at the table, the famous guests and the golden utensils from Pickford and Fairbanks. What's left? A dish of noodles, butter and parmesan. A pasta dish that may look at first like nothing special, but is the only one with a history going back over half a millennium.

Since the Middle Ages, there have been at least two other general approaches to cooking pasta in Italy: it could be baked in the oven, or boiled and served in broth (or milk). But what Italians now call *pastasciutta*, 'dry pasta' – which does not necessarily mean *dried* pasta, but pasta

that has been boiled, drained and topped with something – has always been sprinkled with cheese.

First of all, let's do away with a fairly common misconception. One shouldn't imagine that pasta dishes were as common as they are today, or that pastasciutta was the primary form. Actually, the opposite is true: for centuries pasta played only a tiny part of the role it fills in contemporary Italian cuisine.

If we look at the earliest references to pastasciutta, cheese was not considered an extra ingredient, but the one irreplaceable topping. *Cacio sui maccheroni* ('cheese on macaroni', now an expression meaning 'just the thing' or 'the perfect match') was an obvious pairing even to the medieval mind, and a famous example turns up in Boccaccio's *Decameron*, written in the mid-fourteenth century. In the third tale of the eighth day, Bruno and Buffalmacco are trying, as usual, to pull a prank on the gullible Calandrino, with Maso's help. To attract the attention of their chosen victim, Maso starts making up fanciful stories about an imaginary land, Bengodi (usually translated as Cockaigne), where Boccaccio imagines macaroni and ravioli being rolled down a mountain of parmesan, so that they arrive at the bottom perfectly coated in cheese and ready to eat: 'there was also a mountain made wholly of grated Parmesan cheese, on which dwelt people who did nothing but make macaroni and ravioli, and cook them in capon broth, and then throw them down for anyone to catch as many as they could'.[13]

Boccaccio's Bengodi is just one version of the 'Land of Cockaigne', the literary trope of an ideal place where people can gorge themselves on food and indulge their

every whim, with no work and no effort. If in a land where anything was possible, macaroni and ravioli were covered only in cheese, we can deduce that this was one of very few ways in which it was conceivable to eat them.

In about the same era, we find the earliest examples of recipes confirming this state of affairs, such as the *Libro de la cocina*, which has a wonderful recipe for lasagne.

We'll look at the full history of lasagne in another chapter, but for now let's just say that it was initially served as simple rectangles of pasta boiled in broth and layered with grated cheese.

> *Lasagne*
>
> Take good white flour; temper it with warm water, and make a firm dough; then roll it out thin; leave it to dry; it should be cooked in broth from a capon, or from other rich meat; then put it in the dish with rich grated cheese, in layers, as you see fit.[14]

One should note that at the time, no one even envisioned adding butter, which began to be used on pasta only in the fifteenth century.

The first thorough description of this new method is found in the *Libro de Arte Coquinaria* by Maestro Martino de Rubeis (or de Rossi).[15] Universally celebrated as the 'prince of cooks',[16] he wrote what are considered to be the most important recipe books of his era, with an approach to the culinary arts that is much more precise and systematic than medieval authors, and fully integrated with the humanist culture of his time. Here the

author suggests only grated cheese and spices as a condiment for 'Ravioli in tempo di carne' and 'Vermicelli', while he calls for adding butter to 'Maccaroni siciliani' and 'Maccaroni romaneschi'.

> *To make Roman macaroni*
>
> Take some good flour and add water and make pasta a little thicker than for lasagne, and having rolled it around a stick, slip out the stick and cut the pasta to the width of your little finger, so it is like ribbons or laces, and let it cook in rich broth or in water depending on the season, and the rich broth or water must be boiling when you put it in. And if you cook it in water, put in fresh butter, and a little salt, and when it is done put it in dishes with good cheese and butter and sweet spices.[17]

If it weren't for the fact that Maestro Martino's pasta is eggless and calls for the addition of spices, this dish would sound exactly like the one that Alfredo di Lelio whipped up almost five centuries later. And interestingly, both were from the area of Rome.

During the Renaissance, that golden age of Italian cuisine, pastasciutta continued to be associated only with butter and cheese, but the addition of sugar and spices (especially cinnamon) was increasingly common – at least for the lucky few who could afford them, but we'll discuss that later on.

The centuries that followed saw no significant changes, and even at the dawn of the nineteenth century, although major innovations were on the horizon, the basic idea remained the same.

In 1803, Vincenzo Agnoletti managed to condense three ways of serving pastasciutta, which in that era were still the only standard ones, into a single recipe.

The basic condiment for 'macaroni' – which at the time was a generic term for pasta – was still butter and parmesan, to which one could add pepper and cinnamon, cream and béchamel, or the liquid from stewed meat (a very important innovation, as we will see in later chapters).

Several ways of cooking macaroni in the Italian style

Entrée, and Terrine [baked dish]. In a pot, melt a large piece of butter, put in macaroni cooked in salted water and well drained, stir it a bit over the fire, and add grated parmesan (and if you like, a hint of pepper, or ground cinnamon); then pour it on to the plate, sprinkle over more grated parmesan and melted butter; and serve it quickly piping hot. You can also serve macaroni in another way, that is, after mixing it as above, you can put a little coulis [reduced broth], or liquid from a stew, or from beef braised with cloves, and serve it with plenty of cheese and butter as before. Or instead of the coulis or gravy, you can put in cream, or béchamel, and serve it as described above. You can also, after dressing the macaroni in any of the ways described, put it in a dish, or terrine; bake it until

slightly browned in a rather hot oven, and serve it straight away.[18]

Although there are dozens of recipes describing pasta with butter, it is hard to know exactly what the resulting dish was like, due to the lack of specific instructions about the quantities to use.

A very rare description of pasta in the eighteenth century comes to us from none other than Giacomo Casanova, in the account of his daring escape from the Carcere dei Piombi in Venice.

As you may know, in 1755 this famous adventurer was thrown into prison, from which he escaped by using a sharpened iron bar to chip out a hole. When it was almost ready, his plans were almost dashed by a change of cells. But Casanova managed to communicate with the friar in the cell above his, bringing him in on the scheme. In order to pull it off, he needed to smuggle the bar to the monk, and the only person who could be turned into an unwitting go-between was Lorenzo, the prison guard. So Casanova decided to hide the tool in the spine of a bible, but the ends were left visible. He therefore decided to send it to the friar with a large dish of buttered pasta sitting on top. His bizarre stratagem was that the dish – so full of butter that it threatened to slop over on to the cover of the book underneath – would distract the guard and keep him from noticing the protruding bar.

On St. Michael's Day Lorenzo appeared very early in the morning with a great kettle in which the macaroni were boiling; I at once put the butter on a portable stove

> to melt it and I got my two dishes ready, sprinkling them with Parmesan cheese, which he had brought me all grated. I took the pierced spoon and I began to fill them, adding butter and cheese with each spoonful and not stopping until the big dish meant for the monk could hold no more. The macaroni were swimming in butter, which came up to the very edge of the dish [. . .] holding it on the palms of my hands with the spine toward Lorenzo I told him to put out his arms and spread his fingers, and I admonished him to carry it with the greatest care and slowly so that the butter would not spill out of the dish and run over the Bible.[19]

Of course, this situation was unusual to say the least, and can't be taken as a general rule. Yet the idea that Casanova could fill the dish with macaroni that were literally floating in fat, without the guard being surprised, suggests that this must have seemed relatively normal at the time.

Pasta and spices

Let's head back to Rome for a minute. When talking about Rome, and pasta with cheese, one can't help being reminded of that close cousin of Alfredo's: cacio e pepe – another extraordinary dish that is now firmly established on the list of the city's specialities, along with carbonara, amatriciana and gricia.

It is not hard to see that fettuccine Alfredo and cacio e pepe share the same roots, both deriving from those medieval pastas that were served with cheese alone. The

difference, however, is that cacio e pepe has preserved the memory of a key addition used to give it extra depth and flavour: spices.

All through the Middle Ages and at least until the end of the seventeenth century, these powdered seasonings were a precious ingredient, and as such, were priced out of most people's reach.

This may seem like a side note to history. But in point of fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the spice trade played a pivotal role in building the splendour of Venice – whose merchant fleets were the first in the Old World to trade with the East – and then in encouraging European expansion to the coasts of South Asia and the Americas.

In 1498, when the Portuguese fleet of Vasco da Gama reached Kozhikode (Calicut), India after circumnavigating Africa, they were met by some incredulous Tunisians who asked what they were doing in such a distant port. Their answer was telling: 'We are looking for Christians and spices.' No Christians were on hand, but pepper was truly abundant. From the late fifteenth century on, all the great European explorers shared the mission of finding an alternative route to the Indies, which were the source of many exotic goods, but above all of spices that could not be grown back home. The journey across Asia by land via caravan routes was long and dangerous, and merchandise went through many changes of hand, with vast price hikes each time. Once new types of vessels were developed that made ocean voyages possible, many expeditions set off in the hope of finding safe new passages that would permit a steady flow of spices and other precious goods at less expense. Christopher Columbus himself headed west

across the Atlantic in search of another way to reach the same lands (and goods) as the Portuguese. In short, if the history of the Americas was changed forever, it was due in part to these exquisite seasonings.

In the centuries that followed, as they became easier to obtain, spices began to lose value – symbolically as well as economically. In just a few hundred years, with the aid of new plantations, what had once been a product worth its weight in gold became relatively affordable, and thus lost its role as a precious status symbol reserved for the elite.

By the nineteenth century the price of pepper had definitively plummeted, and it could be found even in the humblest kitchens. Among many other signs of this devaluation, a particularly interesting one can be found in the observations of a young doctor who was treating peasants with pellagra in the countryside around Radicofani, a small town in the Val d'Orcia, near Siena, around 1830. These people on the bottom rungs of the social ladder could not afford bread or even pasta, so they survived almost entirely on polenta, which they seasoned with 'cheese and pepper' – that is, 'cacio e pepe'.[20]

This ancient topping, which by then had become a humble one, could be adapted to dishes ranging from soups to pasta, and was used all the time in everyday life, even though it didn't show up in cookbooks. It was a 'non-recipe' that we can imagine was very widespread, and hard to associate with any one place.

Even in the early twentieth century, in the years leading up to the Great War, cacio e pepe was never numbered among Rome's traditional dishes. This can be seen from

the failure to mention it in the first three cookbooks that attempted to catalogue the regional specialities of the peninsula.[21] Only in the 1930s did the Touring Club's *Guida gastronomica d'Italia* finally list 'Spaghetti cacio e pepe: that is, generously dusted with pepper and pecorino'[22] as a Roman speciality. From then on, this recipe too began to take on a new life as a hallmark of the city's cuisine.

A sprinkling of parmesan

To sum up this historical overview, one might say that Italians basically ate pasta with Alfredo sauce for hundreds of years. Pasta with butter and cheese was not *a* pasta dish, it was *the* pasta dish.

But then, if it was so common, why did anyone make such a fuss over the fettuccine in Via della Scrofa? And above all, why did no one, until just over two centuries ago, realise that you could top a dish of pasta with all kinds of other things?

The introduction of pasta sauces dates more or less to the end of the eighteenth century: a shift that brought about a true revolution in Italian cooking, transforming a rather monotonous dish into a category of food that now includes hundreds of specialities.

The first steps in this direction came when a few spoonfuls of meat juices or gravy began to be added to cheese pasta. This was followed by a rapid acceleration in which all kinds of new recipes carved out a place for themselves, like the spaghetti with tomato sauce or tagliatelle with clam sauce that were described by Ippolito Cavalcanti as

early as 1837.[23] Nowadays we are so used to serving pasta with sauces of every ilk, traditional or creative, that it seems 'natural' to use it as a neutral base to be flavoured at whim.

Although that's not quite true, because even today many pairings are considered unacceptable to Italian tastes, and aside from a few wild experiments, no one would dream of serving spaghetti with mayonnaise or chocolate. But looking back, it seems as if Italians, for hundreds of years, ate only what they now call 'pasta in bianco': the standard dish of children, invalids, or anyone who had overindulged the night before.

Yet strange as it may seem, even simple cheese pasta had its rules – or preferences, anyway – especially when it came to the choice of cheese.

The earliest recipes tend to specify a kind called piacentino or lodigiano, which must have been quite similar to modern-day parmesan or grana padano. It's not any old cheese, or even any generic aged cheese, but rather a specific product, whose modern incarnation still tops the list of cheeses to be grated on pasta.

Thanks to the Italian doctor Pantaleone da Confienza and his *Summa lacticiniorum* of 1477, we have a consummately detailed description of what this cheese was like in the late Middle Ages. Having gathered together all the information at his disposal about dairy products, both in Italy and abroad, the author spoke very highly of the kind from Piacenza.

> The cheeses of Piacenza are called parmesan by some because similar ones are made in Parma, not much different in quality. The same is true in the area of Milan, Pavia, Novara and Vercelli [. . .] but to be honest, piacentino cheeses are far superior to the rest. The wheels are big, and wide, and sometimes weigh a hundred pounds or more, but normally fifty pounds or thereabouts. [. . .] As for quality, they are pleasantly flavourful, especially those made in the spring and properly aged, that is, for about three or four years, depending on their size, because, as mentioned above, the largest ones will keep longer [. . .] These cheeses are made from cow's milk, so they are fatty. They are also creamy, even though a considerable amount of butter has been extracted from the milk.[24]

According to the *Summa*, piacentino cheeses weighed on average about 15–16 kg, but could even exceed 30 (the lowest weight limit for modern wheels). Like the cheese grated on pasta today, they were made with semi-skimmed milk, and the finest were aged for three or four years.

All told, they must have been not unlike the big wheels of parmesan or grana that Italians are now used to seeing, aside from differences due to the breeds of cattle and the way they were raised and fed.

Pantaleone da Confienza was the first to write an entire treatise on cheese, which still had the reputation it had borne for most of the Middle Ages: a humble foodstuff, suited at best to people who got by on a rustic diet.

After a gradual evolution, in the fifteenth century it was starting to find a place on other tables, even those of

the aristocracy.[25] The author himself spoke out against this centuries-old prejudice:

> No argument can persuade me to accept the idea that all cheeses are contemptible, as some authors say [. . .] personally, I have seen kings, like the most Christian Louis of France, and innumerable dukes, counts, marchesses, barons, soldiers, nobles, merchants, and simple folk of both sexes, who willingly partake of cheese.[26]

The cultural elite was beginning to realise that cheese was a food worthy of attention, which could sometimes be truly outstanding. Their doctors, however, would not completely approve of it for at least two more centuries, since its characteristics were deemed unwholesome by the medical theories of the time.

Nonetheless, cheese truly caught on in every diet when it came to be paired with pasta, which was instead – again, from the perspective of the time – considered to have various benefits, at least two of which are difficult to imagine today.

The first is that it was a food considered acceptable for 'fast days', that is, the dates on the liturgical calendar when Christians were obliged to abstain from meat.[27]

There were actually two kinds of fast-day regimes: the first, more common, called for avoiding meat on certain days of the week and at certain other times of year, for instance on Christmas Eve; the second was 'strict' or 'Lenten' fasting, because it was usually for the forty days before Easter, when the ban extended to include almost

all foods of animal origin, including milk, dairy and eggs. In both diets one could, however, consume seafood and some amphibians (such as frogs). These dietary rules followed a specific calendar that had already appeared between the first and second century of the Christian era, and had a major impact on what people ate: in any given year, there might be up to 150 or 160 fast days. In the eighteenth century, Lenten fasting began to become more elastic in various ways, allowing previously forbidden foods such as butter, and eventually blurred into the more ordinary fast-day diet. Nonetheless, in the late nineteenth century one still finds cookbooks geared towards accommodating a centuries-old diet that we would now call dairy-free pescatarian.[28]

Many have correctly pointed out that one of the reasons for the success of dried pasta in Italy is the fact that it was a food permitted year-round, even on the strictest fast days, since it is completely plant-based. Likewise, dietary rules played a role in the popularity of the cheese and vegetable fillings so common in stuffed pastas, or the traditional sauces based on vegetables and seafood (which was always allowed), or what is still the country's best-known dish, spaghetti with tomato sauce.

A second factor was exclusively aesthetic, but still quite important.

In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, there was a particular fondness for foods that were white or golden in colour, since these two hues, in food, denoted luxury and wealth. While yellow could be obtained by adding spices – first and foremost, saffron – white could only come from carefully selected ingredients. There are many references

in cookbooks to this chromatic aspect, and one of the most famous ancient dishes is of course 'blancmange', identified by its colour rather than its ingredients, which could vary quite a bit.

Yet in the Middle Ages and Renaissance there were dozens of sauces used to flavour foods, mainly meat, which from a modern perspective could easily have been paired with pasta to create new dishes. So why was pasta topped only with cheese for almost half a millennium, adding spices or sugar at most?

At this point I ought to underscore an important principle: the development of taste is a cultural phenomenon. It is not based solely on the availability of ingredients and whether they are already in use, or at any rate, those things are not enough to yield a new recipe. The tongue and the mind are closely connected and culturally mediated by the society we live in, which teaches us to distinguish between good and bad, right and wrong.[29]

Freedom of action is as limited in gastronomy as it is in other fields of human knowledge. To make a parallel with painting, any artist with a paintbrush, in any era, could theoretically have painted like Michelangelo, Gauguin or Pollock. But that's just not how things work. There are barriers that progressively fall, giving rise to new creations, new schools of thought and habit, in cooking as well as in art.

Although pasta is now served in all kinds of ways, an almost 'genetic' memory of old customs has survived.

Here's an example. Whether or not cheese will actually improve the taste, the act of sprinkling on some parmesan – or ricotta salata, or pecorino, etc. – before digging in is a constant in almost all Italian pasta recipes, from north to south. It's simply that instead of first coating the pasta in cheese and then (much later) putting on sauce, as people used to do, the order has now been reversed. Yet it's the same ancient ritual, which we unwittingly perform every time we greet a steaming bowl of pasta by reaching for the cheese.