

## **Pasta - Conchigli with Spinach, Gorgonzola and Pine nut stuffing**

I love pasta, its flexibility makes it an absolute must for the store cupboard. A quick and tasty meal can be knocked up in minutes. This recipe uses conchigli, large pasta shells, and another favourite food, cheese. The three cheese, spinach and pine nut filling help to give the dish a real Mediterranean flavour.

### **The Recipe**

Serves 3-5

### **The Pasta Ingredients**

Large conchigli (sea-shell shaped) - allow approx 3-4 shells per portion.

### **Instructions**

Allow 1.5 litres (2 3/4 pints) of water and a tblsp of salt for every 100g (3 1/2oz) of dried pasta. Bring the water to the boil with the salt. Add the pasta and stir well, cover with the lid just to bring it back to the boil. Then cook it without the lid to prevent the water boiling over. Cook until al dente (bite to the tooth). It should be tender but still have a slight resistance.

### **The Filling Ingredients**

500g (1lb) fresh spinach washed and trimmed  
85g (3oz) ricotta  
170g (6oz) gorgonzola cheese, cut into small cubes  
85g (3oz) parmesan cheese, grated  
2 cloves garlic crushed  
1/2 tsp of fresh ground nutmeg  
salt and freshly ground black pepper  
50g (2oz) pine nuts, lightly toasted

### **Instructions**

To make the filling, rinse the spinach and using only the water left clinging onto the leaves, place into a pan, cook for 5 minutes until wilted and tender. Drain and chop the spinach into fine shreds. Combine with all the other ingredients in a bowl and mix together well to form a paste (remember to put aside a little of the parmesan cheese to sprinkle over the stuffed shells). Spoon the filling into the shells and set aside.

### **Alan's tips**

Remember when you're cooking fresh pasta, that it will take only a few minutes to cook and requires 25% less water because it does not expand to the same degree. Despite the recommendations on packet I like to cook my pasta al dente (which means 'to the tooth') so that it's soft on the outside but has a firmer texture on the inside. It's nicer on the palate and holds the sauces better.

When draining pasta, there is no need to completely dry it off. If you keep the pasta slightly moist, it will, in fact, help the sauce to coat it better.

The quickest way to stop the pasta cooking when you take it off the heat is to run it under cold water. This is known as refreshing. It is ideal if you wish to store pasta, for a short while without affecting its quality or becoming overcooked.

## **The Mornay Sauce**

### **Ingredients**

100g (4oz) butter  
100g (4oz) flour  
1 litre (1 3/4) pint of milk  
1/4 tsp nutmeg  
75g (3oz) cheddar cheese, grated  
1 tsp ready-mixed English mustard  
fresh black pepper  
onion clouté - 1/2 onion studded with 2 cloves (optional)

### **Instructions**

For the Mornay sauce, melt butter in a pan. Add the flour and stir well, but do not brown, cook for 1-2 minutes over a gentle heat. Remove from the heat to cool very slightly. Warm the milk in a separate pan being careful not to boil it. Add a ladle of milk to the roux and stir in well. Return the roux to the gentle heat. Stir until the milk has been well incorporated. Continue to add the milk and stir a little at a time. (At this point you can also add the onion clouté if you choose). Add the nutmeg. Simmer the sauce gently and add the cheese and mustard and stir well, until the cheese has melted. Serve immediately or store in a double boiler covered with lightly buttered paper or cling film.

### **Alan's tips**

Avoid lumps in your sauce simply by warming the milk before you add it to the flour gradually. You know the sauce is done when it coats the back of your spoon, without any lumps of course!

## **The Science**

### **Sticky Pasta**

Pasta contains many starch molecules which start to unravel and escape when put into hot water. If starch molecules from two different pieces of pasta get tangled, they'll make those two bits join together. To stop this use loads of water when you cook pasta, and boil it vigorously - that will help stop the pasta bits sticking together. The foam that you see when you boil pasta is formed by starch molecules that have escaped, forming networks, as if trying to thicken the water. Occasional stirring also helps to keep the pasta pieces separate.

### **Salt or Oil?**

Should you add salt or oil to pasta that's cooking? Salt flavours the pasta a little and will increase the temperature that the water boils at by a few degrees, so the pasta will cook faster. So use it if you like, but it's not crucial. If you add oil to the boiling water, it will coat each pasta piece with a thin layer when you pour the pasta out into a colander. The idea is that this stops the pasta pieces from sticking together, but if you used plenty of water in the first place, that shouldn't be a problem really. But if you're keeping the pasta for a while, rather than serving immediately (eg if you're keeping some of the pasta for, say, a pasta salad), the layer of oil helps to keep the pasta bits from sticking together later on.

### **Watery Spinach**

Spinach always seems such a hassle: it takes forever to clean, and you start with buckets of the stuff, and end up with a tiny pathetic pile. What's happened is that, when cooking, the cells in the spinach break open and lose their water, which is why you don't need to add water to cook spinach that's been washed. All this water loss accounts for the seeming huge reduction in volume. It's almost like the opposite of what's happening in the cooking pasta: the spinach is losing its water while the dry pasta is absorbing the water around it. A tip that Alan showed me for preparing spinach, that I now use all the time, is just to throw it all in a sink full of water to clean it. That way, the heavy dirt sinks to the bottom quickly, while the spinach floats. If you use a colander, you can take ages just transferring dirt from one bit of spinach to another.

### **Commercial Pasta**

Commercial pasta is made from durum wheat, which is the hardest wheat you can get. The gluten it forms is incredibly strong, elastic and tough; tough enough to withstand the processes used to make pasta. Usually pasta is made by forcing the dough through small holes (extruding it), producing long strands that can be cut accordingly. With a weak or non-elastic gluten, the strands easily break up during the extrusion process. Tough gluten also holds the pasta shape better when you cook it. If you're making fresh pasta at home, however, you don't have to use durum wheat, just don't expect the pasta to keep its shape perfectly.

### **Cheese**

Cheeses can come in so many different forms, as the ones in this recipe show so well. But cheeses are made in basically the same way, by concentrating milk curds, then ripening them with bacteria and other microbes. Ricotta is a young fresh cheese, so strong flavours haven't had much of a chance to develop, and it still contains lots of water and is very soft. Parmesan on the other hand has been aged for a long time, so it's lost lots of water, leaving behind a high proportion of fat, which makes it hard. And it's very strong, as the flavours have had a chance to develop. There are different ways of using the microbes to ripen cheeses. Moulds can be used at the surface, like with Brie and Camembert. Or starter bacteria can be distributed throughout the cheese, like Cheddar or Parmesan, so the cheese is ripened from within. Or, to get a blue cheese like Gorgonzola, it can be ripened from within by using veins of mould.

### **A Lump Free Sauce**

Mix the butter and flour well to get the flour evenly distributed. Just like when you're cooking pasta, starch molecules escape from the flour on contact with water, and they get all tangled together forming a loose network in the sauce - which is what thickens it. If the flour particles haven't been spread out well in the butter before you add water (there's lots of water in the milk), you'll end up with lumps in your sauce because the starch molecules from adjacent flour bits tangle with each other and lock the bits together. Add the milk really gradually. This is crucial. There's a load of water in the milk and a load of fat in the butter, and fat and water don't mix easily together. So if you add too much milk in one go, all the water molecules will want to hang out together, rather than mix in with the fat. If you add the water (ie milk) gradually there's a chance for the water molecules to be properly distributed and integrated, and you don't get lumps.

### **Olive Oil**

Virgin olive oil comes from the first pressing of the olives. Subsequent pressings extract substances that have a harsh flavour which need to be removed by refining. But virgin olive oil is unrefined. A label of 'Pure' Olive Oil probably means a mixture of first and second pressings. Extra Virgin Olive Oil just means that it came not only from the first pressing of the olives, but that it contains less than 1% oleic acid. Oleic acid is what forms when the fat molecules have been broken down. It's not harmful, it just lowers the temperature at which the oil starts to smoke. If you want to save some money, save your best olive oil for drizzling onto salads and things. Don't use it in cooking, as you lose some of the lovely fragrant flavours.

## **Accompaniment**

### **Roasted Plum Tomato, and Mozzarella Salad**

Serves: 4

#### **Ingredients**

8 large plum tomatoes  
2 cloves garlic, sliced thinly vertically  
2 tblsp olive oil for cooking  
1 tblsp castor sugar  
3 sprigs of fresh thyme salt/pepper  
2 mozzarella cheeses  
2 tblsp virgin olive oil salt/fresh black pepper  
1 tbsp thyme leaves

#### **Instructions**

Cut the tomatoes in half length ways and place into an oven proof dish. Scatter the garlic slithers over the tomatoes. Drizzle over the olive oil. Sprinkle the castor sugar evenly and add the sprigs of fresh thyme. Season with salt and pepper and place into a pre heated oven at 150c 300f or gas mark 2 for 40 minutes. When ready, remove from oven and leave to cool Place tomatoes neatly into a serving bowl/dish or plate interspersed with the mozzarella slices. Drizzle over the virgin olive oil and season. Decorate with roughly torn fresh thyme and pan juices from the tomatoes.