

PASTA alla PUTANESCA



I should caution parents who let their children read recipes in the hope they will become renowned chefs that this recipe might be rated PG because of the subject matter.

My second warning deals with my philosophy that recipes are only "suggestions" and that as a burgeoning chef (that refers to my waistline, not my kitchen skills). This recipe needs, nay, demands that you stay very close to the formula lest you get a late-night visit from some Neapolitans with crooked noses.

Pasta Puttanesca has a somewhat sketchy history. We have it on good authority from Alfonso Genzale that it the dish originated with the ladies of the evening in Naples because it was something they could easily toss together between clients. Genzale didn't say what the customers thought of their temporary paramour smelling of garlic and anchovies. Hey, they were all Italian, so no big deal.

Quickly, the story behind our discovery of the Puttanesca sauce. We had ventured into the now-closed Filiberto's Italian Ristorante in the late 1970s in Seattle. How we found them, I don't recall.

My wife, Gale, is Italian on her mother's side (names like Farinacci and Panzera, abound). When we first went to Filiberto's, we met Filiberto in the flesh. A small, swarthy Italian with dark hair and a tendency to imbibe just a tad too much which led to some loud battles in the kitchen - we loved the man. His sister, Filomena, or Mina for short, ran the kitchen, and both Fil and his brother Alfonso served tables.

To make a long story short - I guess it's too late for that - on one of our first visits, Alfonso was our server. Not much over five-feet tall, Alfonso was very shy. We looked at the menu and saw, for the first time, the pasta with a Puttanesca sauce. We knew full well what "puta" meant in Spanish and assumed it meant the same in Italian, but we had to ask, or rather, Gale had to ask, and she did.

Poor Alfonso. He was beside himself with embarrassment trying to explain to Gale, a woman he did not know, what that name meant in Italian. After much blushing and stuttering, he managed to whisper it meant the "ladies of the evening" sauce. We have laughed for many years over that memory.

Puttanesca sauce is made from olive oil, anchovy, capers, tomatoes, Kalamata or oil-cured olives, and hot chilies. The result is a tangy, salty, and spicy hot sauce, and as close to having sex in a restaurant as you can get by eating a plate of pasta.

Spaghetti is often called for, but we like a short pasta like penne, so we aren't wearing sauce when we go back to work. The tomatoes, anchovy, capers, and olives all come from a jar or a can— thus, the ease of a quick meal by our "Italian escorts."

One other comment; we love spices. If a dish for four people calls for two cloves of garlic and I reduce the recipe to two people, there is a good chance I'll keep both cloves of garlic.

For a simple dish, this rises to the level of escargot in this writer's opinion. Here is what you will need to feed two people.

6 - 7 ounces Spaghetti or other pasta
2 tablespoons EVO - extra virgin olive oil
2 Cloves of garlic (crushed)
3 - 4 Anchovy fillets or an equivalent squirt from a tube of anchovy paste.
1-ounce Capers (buy the ones preserved in salt)
3 ounces pitted Kalamata or oil cured olives
1 can of Chopped tomatoes or three Roma tomatoes chopped fine or crushed
1/4 - 1/2 teaspoon of chili flakes - we like it hot
Salt for seasoning - approach with a little caution - the anchovies, olives, and capers all bring some salt
A small handful of flat leaf parsley (chopped - I never do this - it's for looks, not taste in my opinion)

Heat the olive oil over medium-high heat
Add the whole garlic, capers, and olives (don't use olives with pits)
Sauté 3 to 5 minutes
Add tomatoes, hot red pepper, and some oregano for added flavor
Reduce heat to low and cook for 25 - 30 minutes
While the sauce is cooking, cook the pasta al dente
Drain the pasta and return to pot
Never remove the garlic from the sauce (my rule)
Test the saltiness of the sauce and add salt as needed
Add about 1/3 of the sauce to the pasta and mix to coat the pasta
Put the pasta into a serving bowl and top with the remaining sauce

That's it. Oh, It is mandatory that everyone at the table sings one chorus from O Sole Mio before digging in.