



THE LOVE ITALY GUIDE N. 001

Fresh Pasta

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Fresh pasta and dried pasta are not two grades of the same thing - they are two different traditions. Fresh egg pasta belongs to the wheat-and-egg kitchens of the north, above all Emilia-Romagna, where cooks roll dough thin enough to read a newspaper through, while the dried semolina pasta of the south was built to be stored, shipped, and boiled months later. Knowing which is which changes how you order, how you cook, and what you expect on the plate. This is Guide 001 in The Love Italy Guide series.

Fresh Is Not Simply "Better" Than Dried

One of the most useful things to understand is that fresh pasta (*pasta fresca*) and dried pasta (*pasta secca*) are suited to different jobs, and neither outranks the other. Classic fresh egg pasta from the north is made with soft wheat flour and eggs, giving a tender, porous surface that clings to butter and cream-based or meat sauces. Dried pasta is traditionally made from durum wheat semolina and water alone, extruded and dried,

which produces the firm bite and sturdy shapes that carry olive-oil, tomato, and seafood sauces well. A ragù alla bolognese is traditionally served over fresh tagliatelle, not spaghetti - and in Bologna that distinction is taken seriously.

What Actually Goes Into the Dough

The northern egg-pasta formula is often given as roughly 100 grams of flour to one egg per person, using type "00" soft wheat flour, though many cooks blend in some semolina for extra structure. The dough is kneaded until smooth, rested so the gluten relaxes, then rolled and cut. Not all fresh pasta contains egg, though: further south, shapes like orecchiette in Puglia and pici in Tuscany are made from just durum wheat flour and water, shaped by hand. So "fresh" describes when it is made and cooked, not a fixed recipe.

The Region Behind the Reputation

Emilia-Romagna, and Bologna in particular, is the heartland most associated with fresh egg pasta, and the tradition of the sfoglina - a woman who hand-rolls the sheet of dough, the sfoglia, with a long wooden pin - is still practised and taught there. In 2023 the hand-making of tortellini and tagliatelle in the Bologna area was placed on Italy's inventory of intangible cultural heritage. Tagliatelle, tortellini, tortelloni, lasagne, and passatelli all come out of this same regional culture of rolled and filled egg pasta.

How It Cooks Differently

Fresh pasta behaves nothing like dried at the stove. Because it already contains moisture, it cooks in a matter of a few minutes - sometimes as little as two or three - rather than the eight to twelve typical of dried shapes, and it can go from underdone to overdone quickly, so it needs watching. It is also more delicate, which is why filled fresh shapes are often simmered gently rather than kept at a hard rolling boil. Fresh pasta is best eaten soon after it is made or kept only briefly, whereas dried pasta is a pantry staple that stores for a very long time.

The Famous Width Rule

Traditional shapes come with genuinely specific dimensions. The Bologna chamber of commerce famously lodged a gold reference model of the ideal tagliatella, and the commonly cited figure is that a cooked strand should be about 8 millimetres wide. Tortellini are traditionally small, navel-shaped parcels - legend links their form to Venus - while the larger tortelloni are usually filled with ricotta and spinach rather than meat. These are not fussy details for their own sake: the shape, thickness, and filling are all matched to the sauce and the occasion.

Myths Worth Retiring

Myth: Fresh pasta is always higher quality than dried. Fact: good dried semolina pasta is a respected product in its own right, and many classic dishes are designed specifically for its firm bite. Italian kitchens keep both and choose by the sauce.

Myth: All fresh pasta contains egg. Fact: egg pasta is a northern signature, but plenty of fresh pasta - orecchiette, pici, and others - is made from just durum wheat and water.

Myth: Fettuccine Alfredo is a traditional Italian classic. Fact: the dish traces to a Rome restaurateur in the early 20th century and became far more famous abroad than in Italy, where fresh pasta with butter and Parmigiano is simply a plain, homely preparation without the name.

Frequently Asked Questions

Is fresh pasta better than dried?

Neither is better - they suit different sauces. We reach for fresh egg pasta with butter, cream, and rich meat ragùs, and for dried pasta with olive-oil, tomato, and seafood sauces that want a firmer bite.

How long does fresh pasta take to cook?

Usually just a few minutes, often two to four, because it already holds moisture. It is worth tasting early and often, as it moves from underdone to overdone far faster than dried pasta.

Where in Italy is fresh egg pasta most associated?

Emilia-Romagna, and especially Bologna, is the region most tied to hand-rolled egg pasta such as tagliatelle and tortellini, kept alive by the tradition of the sfoglina who rolls the dough by hand.