

Cacio e pepe Italy's beloved three-ingredient pasta dish

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With only three simple ingredients, *cacio e pepe* is a rich pasta dish that's hard not to love. And when you do get that **elusive** texture, it becomes the ideal **comfort food**.

Cacio e pepe is a dish of only three ingredients, two of which are evident at first glance to anyone familiar with Roman dialect. *Cacio* is Romanesco for sheep's milk cheese. Along with pepe, or black pepper, the cheese – ideally Pecorino – unites with pasta (and a **hefty** dose of **starchy** cooking water) to form a rich, creamy sauce that is as delicious as it is difficult to perfect.

According to legend, the dish first appeared centuries ago among **shepherds** spending the spring and summer months in the **grazing** meadows of the Apennine Mountains, which traverse the Italian peninsula. While keeping watch over their flocks, shepherds would **tap into** personal stores of dried pasta and pepper; cheap, easy to transport and resistant to **spoilage**, these two ingredients were combined with the cheese (made from milk of the **herders'** flocks) to make a delicious, simple dish that kept them warm on cold evenings.

"Black pepper directly stimulates the heat receptors and helped the shepherds to protect themselves from the cold," explained Alessandra Argiolas, marketing manager for Sardinian Pecorino producers Argiolas Formaggi. "And the pasta guaranteed a lot of energy."

But according to Angelo Carotenuto, a native Roman and owner and manager of LivItaly Tours, *cacio e pepe*'s origin may be a bit less romantic. Carotenuto and local guide Dario Bartoli recently took to the internet with a LivTalk, "sort of like a TedTalk gone late-night show" as described by Carotenuto, to profile this and other local pasta dishes.

According to them, dishes like *cacio e pepe*, *carbonara* (a rich sauce made with a combination of beaten egg and dry-cured *guanciale* or pork cheek) and *amatriciana* (made with *guanciale*, tomato and Pecorino cheese) likely got their start, not in the mountains, but in the mines and factories that once surrounded the Lazio region encompassing Rome, near where **low-income** families once lived.

Dried cheese, dried *guanciale* and dried pasta were filling, cheap and didn't spoil easily: perfect for a simple, inexpensive meal. And while the first two ingredients would likely have been used locally for "literally centuries," according to Carotenuto, the invention of these dishes, now perceived as Roman classics, probably dates to the 1800s, when pasta became popular in the Italian capital.

"You're looking at the unification of Italy, so the ability to transfer flavours and recipes easily," he explained, noting that before unification, the poor would have been getting their carbohydrates from bread and *polenta*, rather than from pasta, which, Carotenuto explains, is said to have arrived in Italy through the Venetian ports.

However *cacio e pepe* was invented, one thing is for sure: it has captured many hearts around the world, including that of the late, great Anthony Bourdain. In one episode of *No Reservations*, Bourdain went so far as to say the dish "could be the greatest thing in the history of the world" – and refused to disclose his favourite *cacio e pepe* restaurant in Rome.

Cacio e pepe has journeyed far from its humble roots. It has been topped with shaved truffle at London's Fucina; it has been an **off-menu** "secret" offering for VIPs at Washington DC's Rose's Luxury; and it has been prepared in a wheel of Pecorino and served in a tableside spectacle at New York City's aptly named Cacio e Pepe restaurant. Closer to home in Rome, the dish has gone upscale, appearing on the three-Michelin-starred menu at La Pergola.

But despite its international acclaim and elevated status, at its **core**, *cacio e pepe* remains a **stalwartly** simple dish.

Like many Italian classics, the secret to its success is the purity of its ingredients. To deviate from its three-part formula is to risk angering a local.

"We're pretty strict about how these things should taste," said Carotenuto.

For starters, the pasta. Most make *cacio e pepe* with spaghetti, though the true traditional recipe calls for *tonnarelli*, a similar local noodle with a bit more chew thanks to the addition of egg.

"That's what I would order if I was in a restaurant," explained Elizabeth Minchilli, culinary tour guide and author of *Eating Rome: Living the Good Life in the Eternal City*. "If I was at home and couldn't get that, I would probably go with spaghetti."

Either way, a long noodle is crucial to achieving the perfect texture.

“You really want to coat every strand with the cheese, and the fat from the cheese, and the starch from the water,” said Minchilli. “It just makes **stirring** really fast easier.”

The next ingredient, *pepe* or black peppercorn, should be freshly crushed to release all of its aromas. Many chefs, including Filippo and Giovanni Rinaldi of London’s Mammafarina pasta pop-ups, “bloom” the pepper in the pan by toasting it slightly, making it even more flavourful.

And then, of course, there’s *cacio*, or as the Rinaldis call it, “her majesty, *Pecorino!*”

“*Pecorino* is very important because of the flavour and **sapidity** that this cheese brings to the dish,” they said, noting that either *Pecorino Romano* or *Pecorino Sardo* (from Sardinia) can be used.

While the Rinaldis say that, “it should be forbidden to make *cacio e pepe* without *Pecorino*”, some do deviate a bit from this norm by adding another, more familiar cheese: Parmesan.

From a historical perspective, it’s an unusual choice, explained Argiolas.

“*Cacio e pepe* is a recipe of the Roman tradition,” she said, noting that already in 48BC, Virgil was describing the nutritional properties of the local sheep’s milk cheese. Parmesan, which hails not from Rome but from Emilia Romagna, is milder, nuttier and sweeter – the root of an Alfredo sauce, which Carotenuto calls “*cacio e pepe* for the American sweet tooth”.

But despite tradition, Americans are not the only ones to sub subtler Parmesan for in-your-face *Pecorino*.

Massimo Bottura popularised an all-Parmesan version in 2012, after the Emilia Romagna region was hit by a devastating earthquake. And other cooks, like Minchilli, will cut an especially strong piece of *Pecorino* with a bit of Parmesan, to **mellow** it.

“It’s not blasphemous to add some Parmesan cheese to the *Pecorino*,” said Carotenuto. “*Pecorino* is a very strong, salty cheese. The starchy water kind of slows that taste down, so in my opinion, you don’t need Parmesan cheese. But you certainly can, especially if you’re giving it to children.”

“If all you have is a good-quality Parmigiano,” echoed Minchilli, “the *cacio e pepe* police are not going to come and arrest you!”

“It’s pretty typical of an Italian dish where, behind this simplicity, hides a fairly complex technicity”

The ingredients for *cacio e pepe* may be simple, but the technique requires a bit of finesse to perfect, according to Simone Zanoni, chef of Le George Restaurant in Paris.

The technique, in this case, is to unite the starchy pasta cooking water with very finely grated cheese to create a rich sauce with no added cream.

“If you tell someone who lives in Rome that you put cream in *cacio e pepe*...” Zanoni **chuckled**, “he’ll jump on your head!”

Instead, one must patiently and slowly incorporate the starchy water reserved from cooking the pasta with the cheese and the pasta itself until a smooth emulsion forms.

“Everything has to be the right temperature when you add it together, otherwise you get this sort of plate of noodles with a **clotted** piece of cheese at the bottom,” said Minchilli. “And it’s just not what you’re dreaming of.”

When you do get that elusive texture, *cacio e pepe* becomes the ideal comfort food.

“*Cacio e pepe* is a challenge, but also a dish that’s hard not to love,” said Meryl Feinstein, founder of the Pasta Social Club in Austin, Texas. “It feels like an accomplishment – for me included – when that glossy, emulsified sauce emerges. Plus, it’s made with few ingredients, and many you likely already have in your kitchen, so it fits in well with the need for pantry-friendly recipes.”

The flavour profile of *cacio e pepe* has **spawned** dozens of **iterations**, from *gnocchi* to *risotto* to *lasagne*.

There are versions that make life easier, like Rachael Ray’s ricotta-based *cacio e pepe* mac and cheese. There are versions that make it even more **over-the-top**, like David Chang’s recipe with house-fermented *ceci* (chickpeas) in place of *cacio* at Momofuku Nishi; or the “taco” of *cacio e pepe* pasta served in a **crispy** chicken cutlet at New York’s Noble Kitchen. Paris-based chef Taku Sekine of Paris’ Dersou and Cheval d’Or recently posted a *cacio e pepe* pizza on his Instagram feed, noting that it’s easy to make at home, as “the ingredients are often there”.

“You can make it whenever the spirit moves you, just like *cacio e pepe*,” he said. “Of course... you need to make the pizza **dough**.”

For Zanoni, however, merely combining *Pecorino* and pepper does not *cacio e pepe* make.

“We wouldn’t call *cacio e pepe* pizza ‘*cacio e pepe*...’ we’d call it ‘a pizza with cheese and pepper,’” he said. “There’s a vision of tradition that’s completely different, and abroad it has taken on a completely different vision than what we have in Italy.”

One thing is for sure: *cacio e pepe* has captured the attention of home cooks around the world, especially given current confinement protocols.

“It’s funny to see how pasta, which abroad has always been perceived as this easy-to-make dish, is changing,” said Zanoni, who often gets requests for a gourmet version of *cacio e pepe* from his one-Michelin-star kitchen in Paris. “People are starting to give it a gastronomic identity.”

And whether you’re going crazy with new-**angled** versions or **sticking to** the classic, it’s a comfort food dish that tastes great.

“With confinement, we’re coming back to old issues: that we couldn’t always access fresh products, and so we had things that we could keep around for a long time,” said Zanoni. “What better than a hunk of Pecorino, spaghetti and a bit of pepper?”

Simone Zanoni’s Spaghetti Cacio e Pepe

Ingredients:

200g high-quality, artisanal spaghetti (Zanoni uses Neapolitan spaghetti)

4-7g wild black peppercorns (adjust to taste, depending on the assertiveness of the pepper)

160g Pecorino Romano, plus two pieces Pecorino **rind**

3l water seasoned with 15g of **kosher** salt

Instructions:

Prepare your *mise en place* (the French word for having all your ingredients prepped and measured) in advance. Crush the peppercorns with a mortar and pestle. (If you do not have a mortar and pestle, use the bottom of a saucepan to crush them on a chopping board.) Grate the Pecorino with a Microplane (grater). Bring the water to a boil, season with the salt, and add the spaghetti. Stir gently at the beginning to keep the pasta from sticking to the bottom of the pot.

Meanwhile, toast $\frac{3}{4}$ of the pepper in a pan over low heat until aromatic, about 1 minute. Be careful not to burn the pepper. Remove the pan from the heat, and gently add 2 to 3 **ladlefuls** of starchy pasta water to the pepper. Bring to a boil. Add the cheese crusts and **simmer**.

When the spaghetti is half-cooked (after about six minutes), transfer it to the pan with the peppercorns and starchy pasta water, reserving the remaining cooking water. Transfer another ladleful of water to the pan. After a few more minutes, remove the Pecorino rinds, and place them in a non-stick pan over medium heat to toast on both sides. When nicely toasted, remove and set aside.

Meanwhile, continue cooking the spaghetti until two minutes before *al dente* (cooked “to the tooth” with a slight bite). Turn off the heat and allow the pasta to rest; there should be a bit of cooking water left in the pan.

After about a minute off the heat, begin adding the grated cheese to the pasta from above, shaking the pan all the while to coat evenly. Add cooking water as needed to help the sauce **bind**; the sauce will thicken as the pasta sets.

Serve the pasta in a warmed dish. Top with the remaining pepper and a little bit of freshly grated Pecorino. Finely slice the toasted Pecorino rinds and sprinkle on top.

GLOSSARY

elusive /ɪˈluːsɪv/ = difficult to find, catch, or achieve.

comfort food /ˈkʌmfət fuːd/ = food that provides consolation or a feeling of well-being,

hefty /ˈhefti/ = large in amount.

starchy /ˈstɑːtʃi/ = containing starch (*amido*)

shepherd /ˈʃepəd/ = a person who tends and rears sheep.

grazing /ˈɡreɪzɪŋ/ = grassland suitable for pasturage.

tap into = To access some large, abundant, or powerful resource.

Spoilage /ˈspɔɪlɪdʒ/ = the deterioration of food and other perishable goods.

Herder /ˈhɜːdə/ = a person who looks after a herd of livestock

low-income = relating or belonging to people who earn low wages.

off-menu = if something (i.e. a dish of some kind) is "off the menu" it means it is not available, or has been removed from sale.

core /kɔː/ = the tough central part of various fruits, containing the seeds - the part of something that is central to its existence or character.

Stalwartly /'stɔːlwət, 'stɒlwət/ = in a loyal, reliable, and hard-working manner .

Stir /stəː/ = move a spoon or other implement round in (a liquid or other substance) in order to mix it thoroughly.

Sapidity = the taste experience when a savoury condiment is taken into the mouth.

Mellow 'mɛləʊ/ = pleasantly smooth or soft

Chuckle /'tʃʌk(ə)l/ = laugh quietly or inwardly.

Clot klɒt/ = solidify, set, thicken, coagulate

Spawn /spɔːn/ = (of a fish, frog, mollusc, crustacean, etc.) release or deposit eggs. – produce

Iterations ɪtə'reɪʃ(ə)n/ = the repetition of a process.

over-the-top = to an excessive or exaggerated degree.

Crispy /'krɪspi/ = (of food) having a firm, dry, and brittle surface or texture.

Dough /dəʊ/ = a thick, malleable mixture of flour and liquid, used for baking into bread or pastry.

new-fangled /njuː'fæŋg(ə)ld/ = (derogatory) different from what one is used to; objectionably new.

sticking to = continue or confine oneself to doing or using (a particular thing) - adhere to (a commitment, belief, or rule).

rind /rɪnd/ = the tough outer skin of certain fruit, especially citrus fruit.

Kosher /'kɒʃə/ = genuine and legitimate - (of food, or premises in which food is sold, cooked, or eaten) satisfying the requirements of Jewish law.

Ladleful = A sufficient quantity to fill a ladle /'leɪd(ə)l/ = a large long-handled spoon with a cup-shaped bowl, used for serving soup or sauce.

Simmer /'sɪmə/ = (of water or food that is being heated) stay just below boiling point while bubbling gently

Bind /baɪnd/ = tie or fasten (something) tightly together. - stick together or cause to stick together in a single mass.