

Pasta e Ceci

Pasta and chickpeas is a homey Italian standard. Our tweaks added depth but not fuss.

BY ANDREW JANJIGIAN

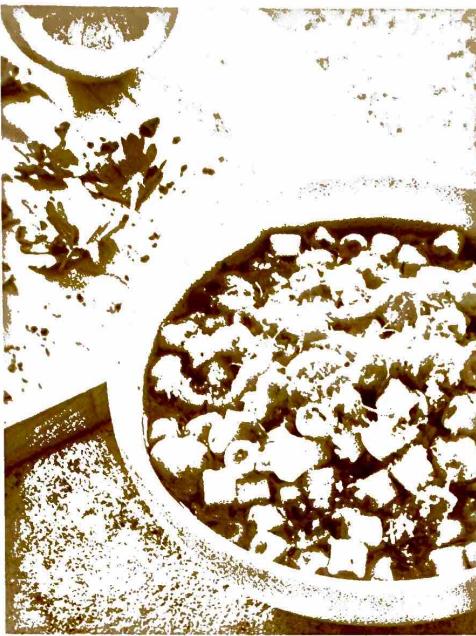
Pasta e ceci—pasta and chickpeas—have been paired up in Italian cuisine for centuries. The combination is cheap, simple, and pantry-ready, and the dish itself—a sibling of *pasta e fagioli*—is hearty, flavorful, and fast to make. It's one of those one-pot meals that home cooks turn to over and over again.

Just about every Italian household has a version, which explains why published recipes range dramatically—from brothy soups to hearty stews and even lightly sauced pastas. Simple aromatics like onion, celery, carrot, and garlic are common but not compulsory, as are additions like pancetta, tomato, rosemary, and parsley. In fact, the only constants are the namesake ingredients—and even those can vary. It's common to see both dried and canned chickpeas, as well as fresh and dried pasta of various shapes. Using up broken strands of spaghetti or linguine befits the dish's frugal nature, but short pastas match particularly well with the chickpeas.

Preparing a handful of recipes helped me develop my own ideal: a loose stew that's thick with creamy beans and stubby pasta but is also savory enough to balance the starchy components. And it had to be on the table in well under an hour.

A quick version meant I'd be using canned chickpeas, but it wasn't a sacrifice. We've found that many canned chickpeas are uniform and well seasoned. I started by sautéing a sofrito—minced onion, carrot, celery, and garlic—in olive oil. I then stirred in a couple of cups of water (cleaner-tasting than either chicken or vegetable broth) and two 15-ounce cans of chickpeas along with their liquid (we've found that the starchy, seasoned liquid adds body and flavor). I also added 8 ounces of ditalini, a popular choice for their chickpea-like size. The mixture simmered for about 10 minutes, by which point the pasta was tender and had released some starch that thickened the stew.

I liked that the pasta and chickpeas were chunky and distinct (some recipes puree some or all of the chickpeas), but I did want to soften up the beans a bit more. So rather than adding them along with the pasta, I gave them a 10-minute head start. The extra simmering time changed their texture from snappy to creamy, and because they broke down



This dish takes just 30 minutes from pantry to table.

a bit, they added even more body to the cooking liquid.

With the consistency of the stew just right, I circled back to its flavor—which, despite the sofrito, was lackluster. My instinct was to add some diced pancetta, which I'd seen in a few recipes. It

lent the stew meaty depth, but it also added chewy bits that marred the overall creamy texture. The solution was to grind the pork to a paste in the food processor and then incorporate it into the sofrito. While I had the appliance out, I saved myself some knife work and blitzed the vegetables, too.

Tomatoes and a minced anchovy, both packed with umami-enhancing glutamates, were good additions as well. I also opted for a small can of whole tomatoes, chopped coarsely. The final tweaks—minced rosemary and a dash of red pepper flakes added to the sofrito, plus last-minute additions of parsley and lemon juice—provided bite and brightness.

I topped my bowl with grated Parmesan and a drizzle of oil and tucked into a savory, rib-sticking stew that I'd thrown together in about 30 minutes.

PASTA E CECE (PASTA WITH CHICKPEAS)

SERVES 4 TO 6

Another short pasta, such as orzo, can be substituted for the ditalini, but make sure to substitute by weight and not by volume.

- 2 ounces pancetta, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 small carrot, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 1 small celery rib, cut into 1/2-inch pieces
- 4 garlic cloves, peeled
- 1 onion, halved and cut into 1-inch pieces
- 1 (14-ounce) can whole peeled tomatoes, drained
- 1/4 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for serving
- 1 anchovy fillet, rinsed, patted dry, and minced
- 1/4 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh rosemary
- 2 (15-ounce) cans chickpeas (do not drain)
- 2 cups water
- Salt and pepper
- 8 ounces (1 1/2 cups) ditalini
- 1 tablespoon lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley
- 1 ounce Parmesan cheese, grated (1/2 cup)

1. Process pancetta in food processor until ground to paste, about 30 seconds, scraping down sides of bowl as needed. Add carrot, celery, and garlic and pulse until finely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Add onion and pulse until onion is cut into 1/8- to 1/4-inch pieces, 8 to 10 pulses. Transfer pancetta mixture to large Dutch oven. Pulse tomatoes in now-empty food processor until coarsely chopped, 8 to 10 pulses. Set aside.

2. Add oil to pancetta mixture in Dutch oven and cook over medium heat, stirring frequently, until fond begins to form on bottom of pot, about 5 minutes. Add anchovy, pepper flakes, and rosemary and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Stir in tomatoes, chickpeas and their liquid, water, and 1 teaspoon salt and bring to boil, scraping up any browned bits. Reduce heat to medium-low and simmer for 10 minutes. Add pasta and cook, stirring frequently, until tender, 10 to 12 minutes. Stir in lemon juice and parsley and season with salt and pepper to taste. Serve, passing Parmesan and extra oil separately.

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