

BUONA DOMENICA

Pasta with Mushroom and Black Olive Sauce (Norcia Style)

This is Chef Cathy Whims's vegetarian take on a classic Umbrian pasta dish, Pasta alla Norciana. The original combines crumbled sausage, cream, and (sometimes) shaved truffle or porcini mushrooms. Here, meaty oil-cured olives take the place of the sausage, their strong, salty flavor tamed by the addition of button mushrooms and a generous quantity of cream.

Here's Cathy's note accompanying the recipe:

"This pasta celebrates the simple earthy flavors of Umbria, a region I call "Tuscany with the volume turned down." Umbricelli or Pici, a hand-rolled spaghetti, would be the traditional accompaniment but store-bought durum wheat flour spaghetti or penne work well. Open a bottle of Rosso di Montefalco to pair with this pasta."

Makes 4 to 6 servings

INGREDIENTS

12 ounces (340 g) button mushrooms, cleaned
3 tablespoons (45 ml) extra-virgin olive oil
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 clove garlic, minced
3/4 cup (125 g) oil-cured black olives, pitted
3 tablespoons chopped flat-leaf parsley
1 tablespoon unsalted butter
Pinch of red pepper flakes
1 cup (240 ml) heavy cream
1 pound (454 g) penne, spaghetti, or bucatini
3/4 cup (70 g) freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Bring a pot of water to a boil and salt it lightly (less than sea water; the olives are salty)

2. Chop the mushrooms into 1/2-inch x 1/2-inch (1 cm x 1 cm) pieces. Heat the olive oil in a large heavy sauté pan or skillet. Add the mushrooms and a pinch of salt and toss to coat with oil. Cook, tossing as the mushrooms begin to release their liquid. Continue to cook and toss until the mushrooms begin to brown, about 10 minutes. Lower the heat to medium, add the garlic and toss together for about a minute. Transfer the mushrooms and garlic to a food processor and add the olives and parsley. Pulse to a smooth, pesto-like consistency.

3. Melt the butter in a large pan over medium-low heat. Add the mushroom and olive mixture, along with a pinch of red pepper flakes. Cook over medium-low heat for about 5 minutes, until the mushroom mixture has absorbed the butter. Stir in the cream and cook until heated through.

4. Cook the pasta in the boiling water until al dente. Drain and transfer it to a warmed serving bowl. Toss with the sauce, lemon juice, and 1/2 cup of the Parmigiano cheese. Serve on warmed plates with additional cheese on the side.