

BUONA DOMENICA

GEMELLI ALLE ZUCCHINE, RICOTTA SALATA, E ACETO BALSAMICO TRADIZIONALE

Gemelli with Zucchini, Ricotta Salata, and Traditional Balsamic Vinegar

Just a few drops of traditional balsamic vinegar—the real deal—elevates this simple pasta preparation into something slightly luxurious. The other notable ingredient is ricotta salata, which is ricotta cheese that has been pressed, salted, dried, and slightly aged. If you haven't tried it, it is worth searching out. It has a creamy-chalky texture that crumbles easily and a mild, slightly nutty taste. The recipe comes from Viola Buitoni's book *Italy by Ingredient*. Here's Viola's accompanying headnote:

I have been making this pasta for twenty-plus years, and I think of it as a seminal expression of the evolution of my relationship with traditional balsamic vinegar. I had always considered it a special occasion ingredient, a flavor to share with a chosen few who could understand its depths, until I saw someone I considered very in the know nonchalantly dripping it on roasted vegetables first, then over just-out-of-the-refrigerator spreadable cheese, and, to end, on vanilla ice cream. The apparent mundaneness of these pairings reframed traditional balsamic with an everyday-hero quality I had failed to see.

This is a dish best made in late spring to early summer when spring onions abound and Gadzukes zucchini—those grooved, dense-fleshed, striated squashes that look like asterisks when sliced crosswise—are in season. But other zucchini will work, or even yellow squash, as long as you choose small, taut, and compact specimens. And if you cannot find spring onions, use a small shallot or 2 scallions.

The only changes I made were seasonal: I used regular farmers' market zucchini because I could not find Gadzukes (known in Italian as costata Romanesco). I also substituted a small white onion for the spring onion, and a pasta shape called "riccioli," which is a slightly larger version of gemelli.

Makes 6 servings

INGREDIENTS

3 small tender zucchini
1 spring onion, or 1 small white onion
2 mint sprigs
Extra-virgin olive oil, as needed
Fine salt and freshly ground black pepper
1 pound (500 g) gemelli pasta, or other short pasta
1/2 cup (60 g) ricotta salata shredded on the large holes of a box grater
Traditional balsamic vinegar, for finishing

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Fill a pot with 3 quarts (3 L) water, cover it, and set it over high heat to come to a boil.
2. While the water heats, cut the zucchini lengthwise into 4 wedges, then thinly slice each quarter crosswise. Cut the onion in half from stem to root and slice into paper-thin half-moons. Pick the mint leaves from the stems, stack them, roll them up tightly lengthwise, and slice them crosswise into thin ribbons.
3. Pour enough olive oil into a 12-inch (30-cm) frying pan to lightly coat its bottom. Set the pan over medium-low heat and warm until the fragrance of the oil reaches your nostrils without you having to bend over the stove. Add the onion, half of the mint, and 1 teaspoon salt and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion has surrendered its stiffness and looks glassy and hazy. It will take 6 to 8 minutes.
4. The water should be boiling by now. Season it with 1 tablespoon salt, stir in the pasta and cover the pot. Set a timer for 2 minutes shy of the suggested cooking time. When the water starts to boil again, remove the cover, and adjust the heat so the water is at a lively, but not rolling, boil.
5. Add the zucchini to the frying pan and raise the heat to medium. Cook, stirring often, for 8 to 12 minutes, until the zucchini are tender but still bright green with sporadic spots of caramelization. If it is necessary to prevent the zucchini from sticking and burning, add dribbles of warm water. Sample the zucchini, season them with salt and pepper to suit your taste, and transfer to a warm serving bowl.
6. The pasta should be cooked by now. Lift it out of the pot with a handheld strainer and transfer it to the bowl with the zucchini. Add 3 to 4 tablespoons of the pasta cooking water, and 3 tablespoons of the ricotta salata, then toss until the starch and fat bind into a creamy

gossamer around the pasta. Stir in 1 to 2 tablespoons of olive oil to make the dish sheen. Toss thoroughly. Drip 10 to 12 drops of the balsamic onto the pasta and toss again. Artfully drizzle with a few more drops of vinegar and garnish with the remaining mint. Serve accompanied by the remaining ricotta salata and the balsamic bottle.