

BUONA DOMENICA

PASTA, COZZE, PATATE e PECORINO

Pasta with Mussels, Potatoes, and Pecorino Cheese

This seems an unlikely combination of ingredients, yet it's delicious and maybe not all that odd after all. Pasta e patate (pasta and potatoes) is a classic Neapolitan dish, as is pasta with mussels. Combining the two is a clever riff. But the genius touch is the addition of pecorino cheese, as mixing seafood with cheese is usually frowned upon in Italian cuisine. But it's not completely unheard of, and it works here. The sharp cheese, stirred in at the end, enhances the shellfish's briny flavor and punches up the starchy potatoes. *(Recipe from Pasta Gragnano in Corsica)*

Makes 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

2 medium yellow-fleshed potatoes

Salt

2 pounds (1 kg) live mussels; about 5 dozen

4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 garlic clove, lightly crushed

Generous pinch of red pepper flakes (about 1/2 teaspoon, or more to taste)

1 to 2 tablespoons finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley

1 pound (454 g) short, sturdy pasta, such as medium shells, mezze-maniche, or penne

1/2 cup (45 to 50 g) freshly grated Pecorino Romano cheese, plus more for serving

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil over medium-high heat and salt it generously.

While the water is heating, place the potatoes in a separate pot with cold water to cover by 2 inches (5 cm) and add 1 tablespoon salt. Cover partially, bring to a boil and boil until just tender. Drain the potatoes in a colander and let rest until cool enough to handle. Peel and cut them into smallish dice.

2. While the potatoes are cooking, prepare the mussels. Check to make sure they are alive and fresh. They should smell briny and not at all fishy, and they should be tightly closed; if any are open, tap them lightly against the countertop. They should close up. If they stay open, toss them. Place them in a colander and scrub them under cold water to remove any dirt or grit. (Most mussels available in the U.S. are farmed and cleaned before you buy them, so you don't usually have beards to pull off.). Put the mussels in a large saucepan and pour in about 3/4 cup water—enough so that they are resting in about 1/2 inch of water. Cover and cook on medium-high to high heat until the mussels start to open, 3 to 5 minutes. Rather than wait for all of them to open, I start removing the ones that open first, transferring them with tongs to a bowl. Once all the mussels have been transferred, pour the liquid remaining in the pot through a fine mesh sieve lined with damp paper towel into a bowl or liquid measuring cup. You should have at least 1 cup liquid. Set it aside.

3. Remove the mussels from their shells and place them in a small bowl, taking care to leave about a dozen of them in their shells for garnish.

4. Pour the olive oil into a large skillet and add the garlic and red pepper flakes. Cook over medium-low heat, just until the garlic is softened slightly and aromatic but not browned, about 5 minutes. Press on the garlic to release its flavor into the oil. At this point, you can remove it or leave it in (I leave it in). Add the potatoes and about half the reserved mussel liquid. Bring to a gentle simmer and cook, stirring a few times, until the potatoes have absorbed some of the liquid and are soft but not mushy (they should mostly hold their shape).

5. When the pasta water is boiling, drop in the pasta and cook according to package instructions until just al dente. Finish the sauce while the pasta is cooking: Add the mussels to the potatoes, along with the rest of the reserved liquid and cook gently until heated through. Stir in the parsley.

6. When the pasta is just shy of al dente, use a spider or slotted serving spoon to transfer it to the skillet, along with a little pasta water. Toss gently to combine and let the pasta cook for about a minute, just enough to absorb some of the liquid. Remove from the heat and stir in half the Pecorino cheese. Spoon into shallow warmed bowls, sprinkle more Pecorino cheese on top, and serve.