

# The Science of Cooking Pasta Like a Pro



# Choose your vessel

You can cook it in just about anything. Small pot, large pot, dutch oven — it all depends on what you're making and how much of it. Many chefs prefer an extra deep pot to boil pasta. It ensures long, thin noodles like spaghetti can submerge fully right away. But remember, the more water you have, the more salt you'll need.

# Salt the water

Have your salt handy. Add it to the boiling water — and not a second before it boils because salted water takes longer to reach a boil. Then get ready to add the noodles. The boiling process is your first and only opportunity to add flavor to the noodles themselves. Without it, you rely solely on the ingredients mixed into your pasta dish to bring the flavor.

And don't worry about the sodium. The noodles absorb the flavor of the salt, not the sodium content. My starting rule of thumb is to add 1 tablespoon of salt for every 4 quarts (16 cups) of water. That's for 1 pound of pasta.

# Always bring the water to a complete boil

Pasta takes patience. While it seems harmless to add the noodles to the pot before the water reaches a boil, it can lead to mushy noodles. Always resist the urge to add the pasta to the pot too soon.

Why does it matter so much? The starches on the surface of the noodles will begin to fill with water right away. You can't see it happening, but they're being rehydrated and will eventually burst into the water.

When the water is boiling, the noodles' surfaces will cook quicker and allow them to set. When the outside sets, the center of the noodle will absorb the water and rehydrate rather than burst and release like the surface starches. This helps the noodle maintain more structure and not get too soft and mushy.

# Stir the water when you first add the noodles

Once you do add the pasta noodles to your pot, the water temperature will drop slightly. As long as it reached a full boil prior, it should quickly heat back up to a boil before your noodles are in danger of getting mushy. However, because some of those surface starches from the noodles will begin to release immediately, noodles can stick together and to the sides of your pot if you don't stir them.

# Taste the noodles sooner than later

Plan on cooking your dry noodles anywhere from 8 to 10 minutes, depending on the type of pasta. However, start checking it after four minutes because it can vary based on the size of the noodle. If you've made fresh pasta noodles, you may only need to boil for a minute or two, sometimes three.

If you're boiling the noodles to add them to a casserole like a classic lasagna that will continue cooking the oven, stop cooking when they're al dente. Additionally, if you're cooling the cooked pasta to make pasta salad, cook the noodle just past al dente status to soak up more of the dressing.

## What is al dente?

The perfect al dente noodle should be mostly chewy but with a little resistance and be slightly firm in the center. If you cut it one half, you might see that's it not as hydrated in the center. That's a good sign that it's time to stop cooking.

After all, al dente means "to the tooth" in Italian. Most pasta packages will provide cooking times for cooking al dente noodles. If not, turn off the heat about two or three minutes before the cooking duration it does provide.

# Serving size

Two ounces of dried pasta is about a 1/2 cup when still dry, but this can vary based on noodle shape. Sometimes it's more like 2/3 cup and sometimes closer to 3/4 cup. Once cooked, this measurement doubles, give or take. Again, it depends on the noodle type. As a baseline: 2 ounces of dried pasta is 1/2 cup, which will turn into 1 cup cooked.

Now, you're an expert in boiling pasta. But pasta's cooking methods are just as versatile as the ingredient itself. It can also be microwaved, steamed, and cooked in the ever-popular Instant Pot. Or, as in this one-pot chicken cacciatore recipe, you'd add the uncooked noodles and water to a deep skillet that you've cooked your veggies in, skipping that whole pre-boiling step.

## Reserve some water before you drain

Almost always reserve a cup or so of your pasta water before you drain it. All the starch that your noodles released into the water will help thicken any sauce you make to dress the noodles. Plus, it will be a little salty, so it adds flavor to homemade sauces as well.

## How to Cook Pasta

Pasta is such a simple ingredient, pairing well with just about any spice, flavor, or protein, no wonder so many weeknight dinners start with noodles.



Prep Time 10 mins

Cook Time 15 mins

Total Time 25 mins

Servings 8 servings

## Ingredients

- ▣ 4 quarts water
- ▣ 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- ▣ 1 pound dried pasta

## Instructions

1. In a large pot, bring water to a boil. Stir in the salt until dissolved.
2. Add the pasta to the water, stir a few times to prevent the noodles from sticking together.
3. Cook according to package directions, stirring occasionally, until al dente or softer depending on desired texture.
4. Drain and toss with desired sauce. If using the pasta in a salad, add to a colander and rinse with cold water for about 1 minute, stirring until cooled down.