

Pesto Trapanese

(Raw Tomato-Basil Pesto)

Other pasta sauces are as good, but none is better. This creamy pesto from the city of Trapani in westernmost Sicily is partly like the famous pesto from Genoa, but the Sicilian one contains no cheese, adds tomatoes, and uses almonds in place of walnuts or pine nuts. Both kinds are served raw over hot pasta, which in Trapani, ideally, is homemade *busiate* (long corkscrews), though other shapes are often used, such as *bucatini* (long, narrow, hollow tubes) and even spaghetti. The proportions of ingredients for *pesto trapanese* vary considerably from cook to cook. It's more important that the tomatoes be delicious and not gorged with water from too much rain or irrigation. The sauce is not beautiful to look at, its color being more or less muddy depending on the ratio of basil to tomato. In Sicily, the honored variety of basil, *basilico siciliano*, has tiny leaves and, from the Sicilian perspective, a more intense perfume than the Genovese variety, which I know well from growing it for years. The essential point about basil, at least the Genovese kind, is that it is vastly superior — much more strongly and distinctively perfumed, the leaves paler and more tender — if it is grown in part shade. Full sun produces tougher, darker green leaves that the Genovese consider “minty.”

To peel almonds, put them in boiling water for half a minute, remove them with a slotted spoon, and then pop them out of their skins and dry them. Prepare the tomatoes by scoring an X in the blossom end and putting them into the same pot of boiling water for 30 to 45 seconds; then cut out the core of each and pull off the skin. (You can pull off the skin of an extremely ripe tomato almost as easily without any blanching at all.) Slice the tomato in half; with your little finger, scoop out the seeds and gel and discard them. Compared with a food processor, a mortar produces a superior texture — more uneven and slippery. If you have one with a capacity of at least a quart (a liter), use it. Giuseppe Coria, the great recorder of Sicilian recipes, wrote, “Let the sauce rest for as long as it takes to cook the pasta.”

about ¼ cup (35 gr) peeled almonds

2 to 4 cloves garlic

1 teaspoon salt

½ to 1 cup (15 to 30 gr) basil leaves

½ cup (125 ml) excellent, fresh-tasting olive oil

4 to 6 ripe red summer tomatoes (about 2 pounds or 900 gr total), peeled, seeded, and coarsely chopped

black pepper

1½ pounds (700 gr) dried pasta

In a large mortar, mash the almonds to a paste with the pestle and remove them. Put in the garlic and the salt, and reduce those to a paste; then add the basil and reduce it. Return the almonds to the mortar, add the olive oil, and turn with the pestle until the whole becomes creamy. Add the tomatoes little by little, mashing each time so as to retain the emulsion.

Or, if you are using a food processor, reduce the almonds, garlic, salt, and olive oil to as smooth a paste as possible. Only then — to avoid a brown color, an utter purée, and a loss of flavor — add the basil and pulse several times, and then add the tomatoes and pulse several times, and don't pulse again.

With either method, taste the sauce and season it with salt if needed and grind in pepper. Cook the pasta and drain it well, then mix it immediately and thoroughly with the room-temperature raw sauce in a large warm bowl, and serve it in warm individual bowls. Because you can't serve the sauce chilled and you can't heat it, use it within about 2 hours (the flavor is good for several hours — left overnight in the refrigerator, it largely deteriorates). *Serves 6.*