

Beaneaters & bread soup

**PORTRAITS
AND RECIPES FROM
TUSCANY**

Lori De Mori and Jason Lowe

Giovanni Fabbri

Artisan Pasta Maker



'Did you know that San Lorenzo is the patron saint of pasta makers?' asks Giovanni Fabbri, pulling a lever on a hulking green pasta machine. After some rumbling and groaning, the machine dutifully begins pushing ribbons of *pappardelle di San Lorenzo* out of its yawning mouth. The edges are straight on one side and ruffled on the other. The straw yellow pasta takes its name from the patron saint's feast day in renaissance Florence, an occasion when *pastai* in the city's San Lorenzo quarter decorated their shops with the long pale noodles and the church broke them up into broth to offer to the poor.

'Most pastas get their names from the thing they look like,' Giovanni explains, his booming baritone voice more reminiscent of an old time radio announcer's than a fourth generation pasta maker's. *Ave Marie* (Hail Mary's) and *Pater Nostri* (Our Father's) are named after the beads on a rosary. There are *semi di mela* (apple seeds) and *fior d'olivo* (olive blossoms); *lumache piccole* (little snails) and *lumaconi* (big ones); *creste di gallo* (rooster's crests) and *cavatappi* (corkscrews); *capelli d'angelo* (angel's hair) and *occhi di ladro* (thieves' eyes).

We walk into a small room beside the pasta machine where rows of heavy bronze *trafile* (dies) patterned with the designs for scores of pasta shapes are stored. 'This is the *patrimonio* of the *pastificio*,' Giovanni says proudly. Some of the dies are as old as the place itself, which was first opened as a bakery, *pastificio* and grocery store by his great, great grandfather in 1893.

The main square of a small rural town in the heart of Tuscan wine country seems a strange place for a pasta factory, even an artisan one. Giovanni disagrees. 'A hundred years ago the countryside around here was covered in wheat fields,' he explains. Over the last 50 years, olives and wine grapes have mostly replaced *grano* and redefined the local landscape and economy, though the *pastificio* still buys Tuscan wheat grown around Siena, Grosseto and Pisa.

A lot has changed since the days when Fabbri spaghetti was air-dried on racks right in the square, bought by weight and carried home wrapped in brown paper and tucked under one arm, like a baguette. The recipe remains unaltered – nothing more than semolina and water – though with the arrival of electricity in the early 1900's,

the Fabbri's horse and millstones were retired. From then on, the dough was worked by machine and the pasta slow dried in heated cupboards inside the *pastificio*.

Before we talk about the differences between dried *pasta artigianale* and the industrially produced stuff, Giovanni wants to address the distinction between fresh pasta (think ravioli, tortellini and little old grandmothers with rolling pins) and dried pasta made from durum wheat semolina. 'One isn't better than the other,' he's quick to explain. 'They're simply two different things.' Fresh pasta is happy in lasagne, ravioli or bathed in a creamy sauce. Dried pasta is toothy – strong enough to hold up to the quintessentially Tuscan flavours and textures of things like beans, game meats and pecorino cheese. Fresh pasta likes butter. Dried pasta loves olive oil.

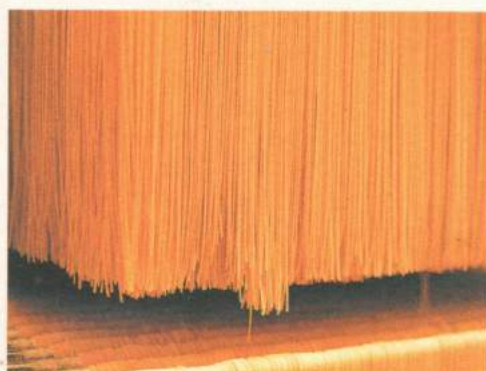
'*Ti faccio vedere*,' says Giovanni, making two little piles of wheat berries on the table, then taking one from each and biting into it. The first, *grano tenero* (from which fresh pasta is made) is the dusky yellow of dried corn on the outside, but floury white inside. The second grain, *grano duro* (durum wheat which is ground into *semola*) is hard, brittle and uniformly yellow throughout. *Grano tenero* is milled into soft white flour – but its glens aren't strong enough to make a pasta that won't break, so eggs are added to help bind the dough and give it elasticity. Semolina is grittier than flour – full of gluten, and so difficult to work by hand that it is traditionally pressed through bronze dies, then cut and slowly dried.

If the difference between fresh and dried pasta is obvious, the one between artisan and industrially made dried pasta is huge. 'Two things make our pasta better than the industrially manufactured variety,' says Giovanni: 'Its texture and the temperature at which it is produced.'

'*Senti. È ruvido*,' he says, opening the door of a drying cupboard and running his fingers through the long strands of spaghetti looped over metal rods to dry. The pasta looks smooth but is in fact slightly rough to the touch – a result of the dough's slow movement through the bronze dies. This texture enables the pasta to hold its sauce better than smooth, slippery industrially made pasta.

Giovanni is even more adamant about the importance of production temperature. 'We want to conserve everything that nature has given us in the grain,' he explains. If at any time during its production, the temperature exceeds 38°C, the glens are altered, and the pasta's ability to absorb water and sauce is compromised. Pasta that's made commercially is dried in as little as 10 hours. Pasta Fabbri takes anywhere from 2 to 5 days to dry.

I leave the *pastificio* that afternoon with an armload of pasta and the recipe for *Nastroni sulla 'Nana'*, Giovanni's mother-in-law's famous pasta with duck sauce, which she always makes with the family's own ducks in celebration of *la battitura* – the threshing of the wheat. When I ask Giovanni for a recipe for the sort of pasta he'd be happy to eat any day of the week, he doesn't hesitate. '*Pasta al dente con un filo d'olio. Tutto lì*.' Boiled, but not overly so, and drizzled with olive oil. That's all.



**SPAGHETTONI CON
CACIO E PIZZICO**
**SPAGHETTI WITH AGED
PECORINO & BLACK PEPPER**

SERVES 4

400g dried spaghettoni or thick spaghetti
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
4 tablespoons olive oil
100g aged pecorino (ewe's milk) cheese, grated
or crumbled

Add the spaghetti to a large pan of boiling salted water and cook until al dente. Drain, reserving a ladleful of the cooking liquid.

Toss the pasta with the olive oil and pecorino, and season generously with black pepper. If the pasta is a bit dry, add some of the reserved cooking liquid and toss well. Serve at once.

PENNE ALLA FIESOLANA
**PENNE WITH PROSCIUTTO,
CREAM & PARMESAN**

SERVES 4

20g butter
1 tablespoon plain flour
250ml milk, heated but not boiling
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
80ml cream
3 tablespoons freshly grated parmesan, plus
extra to serve
2 tablespoons olive oil
70g thickly sliced prosciutto, cut into small dice
400g dried penne
2 tablespoons finely chopped flat-leaf parsley

Warm the butter in a small saucepan. Stir in the flour and cook, stirring continuously until the mixture smells faintly of biscuits; do not brown. Slowly whisk in the warm milk, season with salt and pepper and cook until the mixture thickens into a thin sauce. Remove from the heat and stir in the cream and parmesan.

Heat the olive oil in a small frying pan and gently sauté the prosciutto until lightly coloured. Remove from the heat and stir in the cream sauce.

Cook the penne in abundant salted water until al dente. Drain and toss with the sauce. Ladle into individual serving bowls and sprinkle with parsley. Offer grated parmesan at the table.

NASTRONI SULLA 'NANA' **PASTA RIBBONS WITH DUCK** **SAUCE**

SERVES 6

4 tablespoons olive oil
 1 onion, finely chopped
 1 carrot, finely chopped
 1 celery stalk, finely chopped
 1 small duck, cleaned and cut into 8 pieces
 100g thickly sliced prosciutto, chopped
 handful of flat-leaf parsley, chopped
 handful of basil leaves, torn into pieces
 60ml white wine
 800g tomatoes, peeled, deseeded and chopped
 sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
 500g dried wide pasta noodles (such as pappardelle)

Warm the olive oil in a large frying pan. Add the onion, carrot and celery and cook over a medium heat until soft. Lay the duck pieces in the pan, then add the prosciutto, parsley and basil. Cook, turning the duck, until lightly browned on both sides.

Pour in the wine and let the alcohol evaporate, then add the tomatoes and season with salt and pepper. Cook over a low heat for 30 minutes, adding a little water if the pan begins to dry out.

Remove from the heat and lift out the duck on to a board. Pass the sauce through a mouli (hand mill) or mash with a fork. Remove the skin and bones from the duck, slice the flesh and return to the pan with the sauce. Check the seasoning.

Bring a large pan of water to the boil. Add salt and return to the boil. Cook the pasta until al dente. Drain, toss with the sauce and serve immediately.

