

Pasta alla Norma with 3 Cheeses

Few things will make you feel more like a Sicilian nonna than cooking up this gorgeous, tomato-rich pasta dish on a hot summer day. A simple shallow pan-fry turns cubes of hearty eggplant into tender bites of goodness, while drawing out toasted caramel notes. A mix of cow and sheep's milk cheeses gives the sauce a savory, punchy creaminess. Set out a bowl of Castelvetro olives — a sweet, mild variety that also hails from Sicily — and a salame plate for you and your guests to snack on while the sauce cooks. Mild and sweet sorts, like sopressata, capocollo and fuet are great with this dish.

See Cook's Note on choosing eggplants and using up leftover tomato juices.

Ingredients

Kosher salt
2 (28-ounce) cans peeled tomatoes, preferably San Marzano
1¼ cups vegetable oil
1½ to 2 pounds eggplant, cut into 1/2-inch cubes
1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/2 medium red onion, very thinly sliced
3 cloves garlic, very thinly sliced
1/2 teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
1 pound mezze rigatoni or rigatoni
¾ cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano
8 large fresh basil leaves, torn if large
1/2 cup fresh whole-milk ricotta cheese
2 ounces ricotta salata, grated
Freshly cracked black pepper

Directions

Preheat the oven to 200F. Bring a large pot of well-salted water to a boil.

Strain the tomatoes, reserving the juice. Crush the tomatoes by hand into a bowl, then add 1/2 cup of the reserved juice. (Save the remaining juices for another use.)

Heat 1 cup of the vegetable oil in a 10- to 12-inch skillet or wide, heavy pot over medium-high heat until very hot but not smoking. In 3 to 4 batches, fry the eggplant, stirring, until it is golden on all sides, 7 to 9 minutes per batch. Using a slotted spoon, transfer batches as cooked to paper towels to drain. Add and heat up more oil between batches as necessary.

Transfer drained eggplant to a rimmed baking sheet; season with a generous pinch of salt, then place in oven to keep warm.

Pour off the oil from the skillet, then wipe clean with paper towels. Add the olive oil and heat over medium-high until hot but not smoking. Add the onion and cook, stirring frequently, until tender and lightly golden, about 5 minutes. Add the garlic and cook 30 seconds more. Stir in the red pepper flakes and 1/4 teaspoon salt, then add the tomato

mixture. Increase the heat to high and cook, stirring frequently, until the sauce is slightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Remove the sauce from the heat.

Cook the pasta until al dente. When the pasta is 1 to 2 minutes from ready, add about half of the eggplant to the sauce and bring to a simmer.

Drain the pasta, then return it to the pot over low heat. Add the sauce and gently toss to combine, then remove from the heat. Stir in the Parmigiano-Reggiano and basil, then gently stir in the fresh ricotta just until barely combined.

Divide the pasta among serving bowls. Top with the remaining eggplant, ricotta salata and cracked black pepper to taste.

Cook's Notes

There are many varieties of eggplant to choose from at the market, and just about any sort can be used for this dish. The only variety we avoid is white eggplant, which tends to be tough and especially seed-y. Most importantly, choose eggplants that are firm, with smooth, shiny skins and green stems — all indicators of freshness.

When you cube the vegetable, take a look at the seeds. Cut away any dark seeds to avoid bitterness (fresh white flesh and seeds can stay in). Salting the eggplant can remove some bitterness, but it isn't necessary if your eggplant is fresh and the seeds are white.

When you fry, be sure that the oil is very hot before adding the eggplant, and avoid crowding the pan. A single layer of eggplant pieces, with a little room between each one, will help you fry quickly and evenly. Use plenty of paper towels to drain, and don't press or squeeze the eggplant. Let it drain on its own.

Leftover tomato juice can be used in cocktails, homemade broth, soup, stew or other pasta dishes. It freezes well for up to 3 months.

total time: 1 hour 10 minutes

active prep: 1 hour 10 minutes

serves: 6 to 8

difficulty: easy