

The Easiest Pasta Dinner

Pasta is one of the best places to start if cooking still feels intimidating. You do not need a complicated sauce, expensive ingredients or a long list of techniques. You need a pot of boiling water, something flavorful to coat the pasta and a few ingredients that make the meal feel complete.

Think of this less as one strict recipe and more as a dinner formula. Once you know the formula, you can make pasta from what is already in the refrigerator or pantry instead of feeling like you have to shop for a specific recipe.

The easiest formula to remember

Start with pasta. Add an easy sauce. Add one substantial ingredient if you want it. Toss everything together with a little pasta water, then finish with cheese, herbs or black pepper. That is the whole idea.

Boil the pasta

Bring a large pot of water to a full boil before adding the pasta. Salt the water generously, add the pasta and stir it during the first minute so the pieces do not settle together. Cook according to the package directions, but start tasting a minute or two before the suggested time. You want it tender with a little bite rather than soft and mushy.

Before you drain it, scoop out about a cup of the cloudy cooking water. You may not need all of it, but this is the ingredient that can rescue a sauce that feels too thick, dry or separate.

Choose your easy sauce

Jarred marinara, pesto, olive oil with a little butter, or even butter with Parmesan can all become dinner. There is no prize for making every component from scratch. On a busy night, the best sauce is the one that gets a good meal on the table.

Warm the sauce in a skillet large enough to hold the cooked pasta. If you are using olive oil and butter, add garlic if you have it and let it become fragrant without browning it aggressively.

Add something substantial

If you want more protein, brown Italian sausage or ground turkey, slice leftover chicken, add shrimp, or stir in drained white beans. For vegetables, spinach, mushrooms, zucchini, peas and cherry tomatoes are all forgiving choices. You do not need several additions. One protein or one vegetable is enough to turn simple pasta into a complete-feeling dinner.

Bring it together

Drain the pasta and move it directly into the warm sauce. Toss it for a minute rather than simply spooning sauce over the top. Add a small splash of the reserved pasta water and toss again. The starchy water helps the sauce cling to the noodles and makes a basic sauce feel much more finished.

Add more pasta water a tablespoon or two at a time only if you need it. You can always add more; you cannot take it back out.

Finish it

Turn off the heat and add grated Parmesan, black pepper and fresh basil or parsley if you have them. A squeeze of lemon can brighten an olive-oil or butter-based pasta. Taste before adding more salt, especially if you used Parmesan, sausage or a salty jarred sauce.

Three combinations that almost always work

Marinara + Italian sausage + spinach. Pesto + leftover chicken + cherry tomatoes. Olive oil and butter + white beans + Parmesan. Keep those combinations in the back of your mind and you will almost always be able to turn a box of pasta into dinner.

The Cooking 101 rule

Do not wait until you feel like a “real cook” to improvise. Cooking gets easier when you learn a few dependable patterns and repeat them. This pasta formula is one of those patterns.

That is dinner. Once you understand the basic structure, pasta stops being a recipe you have to look up and becomes an answer to the much more useful question: What can I make with what I already have?

Jane’s Note

Keep a box of pasta and a jar of sauce in the pantry, and you always have a dinner plan. Just remember to save some pasta water before you drain.

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