

Pasta all'Amatriciana Estiva, for 2

¼ pound pancetta, cut into matchsticks
½ onion, diced small
3 cloves garlic, sliced into 2 mm slices (use a mandolin, or just chop it)
1 pinch chili flakes
1 ½ pounds tomatoes, big ones quartered, small ones halved
½ pound bronze-cut rigatoni
Shredded basil, parsley, and grated Pecorino Romano, for garnish



This is not the pasta sauce I meant to make this week. I went to the store to get ingredients for another favorite pasta, puttanesca. But once I was at the store, my mind drifted and I found myself at the deli counter, gazing at the pancetta. “All right,” I thought, “Let’s make Amatriciana.”

Amatrice (pronounced ah-ma-tree-chay) is a town just outside of Rome. It’s possible you have heard of it, as there was an earthquake back in 2016 that almost swallowed the entire place. This pasta is the signature dish of the town. When the earthquake hit, thousands of restaurants across the world started cooking it to raise funds to help this little, but mighty, town to rebuild. I learned about this pasta back in Cincinnati, at the restaurant I was working in, and I cooked it that night for the people who had suddenly lost everything in what seemed an idyllic and perfect village. This sauce will always have a special place in my heart, because of the knowledge that when I rendered guanciale that night, thousands of others were doing it, too, and we all had one goal. Besides that, it’s a damn tasty sauce, and a most excellent way to celebrate summer tomatoes.

This summer version (“Estiva” means summer) is more modern than its traditional predecessor. Traditionally, it’s made with canned tomatoes, and the herbs are omitted. But when it’s summer, and the tomatoes are heavy and ripe and the herbs are almost out of control, I see no reason to not use them. Usually, this sauce would be served with bucatini, but I like that the rigatoni gets filled with chunks of pork and tomato. It’s like a little surprise.

There’s a whole thing about the 4 pastas of Rome and what they are and why they are and how they’re connected but telling that story would make this intro far too long. Suffice to say, this pasta is important in Rome, and as such, Pecorino Romano, rather than Parmigiano Reggiano, is the preferred cheese. I highly recommend you seek it out. If you can find guanciale (cured, unsmoked pork jowl), use it. It is the traditional meat. But honestly, I’ve never found it outside of a high-end Italian restaurant. You can probably order it online, but pancetta makes for an

acceptable substitute. Get it cut very thick (my deli counter called it “dinner cut”). Bacon will work if it’s all you have and you’re not going to the store any time soon. But don’t invite your Roman friends over for dinner.

Put your water on to boil. Salt it well.

Put all the pancetta (or guanciale or bacon) in a cold pan. It’s very important that the pork goes in the pan before you heat it up. Turn your pan to low heat. You will see the fat in the pork turn translucent after a few minutes. When that happens, turn your heat to medium and let the pork fry, stirring occasionally, until it’s just starting to turn golden, about 10 minutes.

Once your pork is golden, add in your onions. When your onions are translucent, add the garlic and chili flakes. Let cook until just starting to turn golden, about another 10 minutes.

Add your tomatoes, a splash of water, and cover your pan. Raise heat to medium-high. Let cook until the tomatoes burst. Use a potato masher if it’s taking a while. When you’re happy with the consistency of the sauce, turn the heat down to low and cover to pan, just to keep the sauce warm.

Cook your rigatoni to your liking. I like a bit just past al dente. Once your pasta is ready, dip out a few cups of the pasta water, and drain your pasta.

Ok, now this part is important, and will improve every plate of pasta you’ll ever make if you follow this technique.

Put your cooked pasta back into the still warm pot and pour your hot sauce over the top. Stir to combine everything. Put the pot on low heat. Add in about ½ cup of the pasta water that you saved. Keep stirring everything together. We are forcing the starch in the pasta and in the water to meld with the sauce and make a smoother, thicker sauce. Add more pasta water, ¼ cup at a time, as the sauce begins to tighten and thicken. Grate in about ½ cup pecorino romano and stir to melt it into the sauce. A lump of butter stirred in about now is optional but recommended.

Once you are happy with your sauce texture, taste and adjust for salt. I doubt you’ll need any. Pancetta and pecorino are both very salty. Stir in a small handful each chopped basil and chopped parsley.

Serve at once, with more grated cheese on top.

A note on bronze-cut pasta. It’s not a gimmick. It really is better quality. It’s also more expensive, so any company who is doing it is advertising it on their box. Barilla makes a line of bronze cut pasta under their “Collezione” name. There are others out there that are even better quality, but Barilla is pretty widely available. Just check the surface of the pasta. If it

looks rough, kind of like sandpaper and like it would feel like a cat's tongue, that's the one you want. Pasta that is totally smooth is made with a Teflon die, not a bronze one, and won't hold on to the sauce as nicely. And, as a general rule, a company that chooses to make their pasta the more expensive, traditional way with bronze dies, will use higher quality ingredients to begin with, yielding a better end product all around.