

How to Cook Pasta Like a Pro (8 Steps Total)

Cooking pasta is simple, but doing it correctly makes a big difference. Follow these steps for perfectly cooked pasta every time.

Step 1: Boil the Water

Start by filling a large pot with plenty of water—about 4-6 cups per serving of pasta. Using enough water is important because it gives the pasta room to cook evenly and prevents it from becoming sticky. Place the pot on the stove over high heat and let it heat up. You'll know the water is ready when it reaches a rolling boil—this means big, continuous bubbles rapidly breaking on the surface. Avoid adding pasta before the water is boiling, as it can result in uneven cooking.

Step 2: Add Salt

Once the water reaches a rolling boil, add a generous amount of salt—about a tablespoon for a large pot. Salting the water helps season the pasta from the inside, giving it better flavor. Without salt, the pasta can taste bland, even when mixed with sauce. The water should taste slightly salty, like seawater. Don't worry about the pasta becoming too salty—it only absorbs a small amount.

Step 3: Drop in the Pasta

Carefully add your pasta to the boiling water. If you're cooking long pasta, like spaghetti, hold it in the center and let the ends slowly bend into the water as they soften. For shorter pasta, like penne or fusilli, simply pour it in. Immediately stir the pasta with a spoon or tongs to prevent it from sticking together. This is especially important in the first minute of cooking when the pasta's surface is most likely to become sticky.

Step 4: Cook Until Al Dente

Check the package instructions for the recommended cooking time, but don't just rely on that—start testing the pasta about a minute before the time is up. Take out a piece and bite into it. The perfect texture, known as “al dente,” means the pasta is fully cooked but still has a firm bite. If it's too soft and mushy, it's overcooked. If it's still hard in the center, it needs a bit more time. Cooking it just right will help the pasta hold its shape and absorb sauce better.

Step 5: Save Some Pasta Water

Before draining the pasta, scoop out about a cup of the starchy cooking water using a ladle or measuring cup. This water contains starch released from the pasta, which helps thicken sauces and make them cling better. Even if you don't think you'll need it, it's always good to have some on hand. If your sauce looks too thick or dry, a splash of pasta water can bring everything together with a smooth, silky texture.

Step 6: Drain the Pasta

Once the pasta is cooked to your desired doneness, pour it into a colander to drain the excess water. Avoid rinsing the pasta under cold water unless you're making a pasta salad—rinsing removes the

starch that helps the sauce stick. If you're using a sauce, transfer the pasta back to the pot or directly into the sauce while it's still warm. This way, it absorbs more flavor.

Step 7: Mix with Sauce

Add the pasta to your sauce immediately and toss everything together while the pasta is still hot. Stir well to coat each piece evenly. If the sauce seems too thick or isn't sticking well, add a little of the reserved pasta water—just a tablespoon at a time—until you reach the perfect consistency. Let the pasta and sauce simmer together for about a minute so the flavors can blend. This step makes a huge difference in how well the sauce clings to the pasta.

Step 8: Serve and Enjoy

Once the pasta is well mixed with the sauce, it's time to serve! Divide it onto plates or into bowls, then top it with extras like grated Parmesan cheese, chopped fresh herbs, or a drizzle of olive oil. Serve immediately while it's hot, and enjoy your perfectly cooked pasta!