



How to make the perfect cacio e pepe

It's 2016 most popular pasta dish, but should you use spaghetti, how much pepper do you need, is pecorino or parmesan best - and how do you achieve a smooth, creamy sauce?

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If you've never heard of it, don't worry - until about two months ago, neither had I. Then, suddenly, cacio e pepe was everywhere, virtually speaking at least, a million slick strands of cheesy spaghetti clogging up social media like a vast hipster hairball.

Those who claim a longer familiarity with the idea probably have some connection with Rome, where it's an old favourite - its simplicity means that it's rarely found in restaurants abroad, at least until recently. Then, suddenly, the once humble *primo* launched its quest for world domination - it pops up as the eternal city's "trendiest pasta dish" in 2012, and by the beginning of this year, *Time Out* was already declaring it New York's "trendiest dish of 2016".

And where America leads, Britain follows. London restaurateur Russell Norman claims he first came across cacio e pepe on holiday in Tuscany last summer, put it on the menu as a special and then, he told *Esquire*: "I noticed something odd - it had simultaneously started to appear on other

restaurant menus in London with alarming frequency. On a subsequent trip to New York, I saw it everywhere there, too. Cacio e pepe has fully entered the collective psyche of foodies. It is part of the restaurant zeitgeist. It has become a trend.”

Trendy for good reason: beautiful in its three-ingredient simplicity, cheap and quick to put together - but very easy to get wrong. As Rachel Roddy notes, there is a fine line between clump and cream, and making a smooth sauce from dry cheese and water is a skill that needs to be learned, as I realised on my first, second and seventh attempts. Once you’ve mastered it, however, cacio e pepe is a dish for life; one that can be knocked up in minutes with the most basic of store cupboard ingredients. So, don’t hate it because it’s hip, make it because it’s good.

The pasta



Rose Gray and Ruth Rogers' cacio e pepe. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

Norman says that in his experience, cacio e pepe is generally served with pici, “short, clumsily rolled, thick spaghetti”. Roddy reckons that tonnarelli, or square-cut spaghetti, is a favourite in Rome - indeed, Marco Baccanelli and Francesca Barreca, chefs of that city’s Mazzo restaurant, make their own. Caz Hildebrand and Jacob Kenedy recommend rigatoni in the *Geometry of Pasta*, and Christopher Boswell, the chef behind the Rome Sustainable Food project, prefers wholemeal paccheri or rigatoni in his book *Pasta*, on the basis that “the flavour of the whole grain is strong enough to stand up to the sharp and salty sheep’s milk cheese” (as I can find neither easily, I have to content myself with brown penne instead).

As with that other Roman favourite, carbonara, the principal pleasure of cacio e pepe is in the slurping up of slippery strands of saucy pasta, which, to my mind, rules out rigatoni or paccheri - long noodles are required. Tonnarelli is great if you can find it (spaghetti alla chitarra is similar, and slightly more widely available in the UK), but for the common or garden non-Roman, spaghetti will do just fine. Although the flavour works, I don’t find the wholemeal sort smooth enough for this particular dish, and testers agree they prefer the more robust texture of dry pasta with such strong flavours.

J Kenji López-Alt of the website *Serious Eats* breaks with ancient tradition by cooking the pasta in the bare minimum of water in order to concentrate the starch which, in this case, will help to thicken the sauce. Though I might be smitten by Jupiter himself for such heresy, the theory makes sense - and, as long as you stir the noodles occasionally during cooking, they don’t seem to suffer for lack of space.

The pepper



Rachel Roddy's cacio e pepe. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

Again, as with carbonara, this should be added in quantity - Roddy toasts the peppercorns before crushing, which brings out their flavour beautifully. López-Alt fries them in oil, which he reckons helps to distribute their flavour more evenly throughout the dish, and Bacchanelli and Barreca make a peppercorn broth to “enhance [the spice’s] lighter, more delicate qualities”. I’d prefer not to add any extra fat, and the broth doesn’t seem to make enough difference to justify the - very slight - faff; outside the restaurant kitchen, this is a dish that should be kept as simple as possible.

The cheese



Caz Hildebrand and Jacob Kenedy's cacio e pepe. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

It is traditionally made with sharp, salty pecorino romano, but Rose Gray and Ruth Roger’s recipe in River Cafe Easy adds parmesan too - delicious, of course, but it lacks pecorino’s distinctive tang, and makes the dish too aggressively cheesy for some testers.

It’s vital to grate the cheese as finely as possible and, as Michael Price helpfully informs me online, ensure it is as close to room temperature as possible to reduce the difference in temperature between it and the pasta.

Hildebrand and Kenedy sprinkle the cheese on top of the hot rigatoni, as is apparently traditional, rather than melting it into the sauce in the modern style. It’s nice (of course it’s nice, it’s cheesy fried pasta), but lacks the satisfying creaminess of the others.

The fat



Christopher Boswell's cacio e pepe. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

Adding extra fat in the form of oil (Roddy), butter (Gray and Rogers) both (López-Alt), or even Cook's Illustrated's double cream, “whose lipoproteins encourage the protein and fat molecules in the sauce to bond rather than separate”, make life easier for the cook, because they help the sauce to emulsify, rather than split, as it yearns to do. Plus, who doesn't love butter in everything?

The problem is that they also dull the flavour of the cheese and pepper, and this is a dish that should be almost aggressively sharp and hot. So, although it is making a rod for your own back, I'd recommend trying it without extra help, just once - it's well worth it.

The method



Marco Baccanelli and Francesca Barreca's cacio e pepe. Photograph: Felicity Cloake/The Guardian

A cacio e pepe recipe stands or falls by its method, the alchemy that turns dry cheese and water into creamy sauce. I have no problem believing that all the recipes I try work well in the hands of an expert - my job, I think, is to work out which one gives the rest of us the best chance of success.

Temperature is crucial: not only must the cheese be at room temperature, but the cooking water that is added to loosen it must not be too hot, or “the cheese will start to coagulate and the fat will separate, creating gummy lumps on one side and watery casein on the other”, as Baccanelli and Barreca explain. Scooping it out halfway through cooking, as Roddy recommends, seems to work a treat, as does allowing the drained noodles to cool for a minute before adding them to the sauce, as in Baccanelli and Barreca's recipe. López-Alt is not alone in combining sauce and spaghetti in a

cool pan, as opposed to that the pasta was cooked in, in order to control the temperature better, although unless you're very slow, you shouldn't need to reheat it afterwards, as he suggests.

Katie Parla and Kristina Gill, authors of *Tasting Rome*, who share a recipe from chef Leonardo Vignoli, whisk the cheese and water together to make a paste before adding the pasta, as do Baccanelli and Barreca, while Roddy and Boswell both prefer to stir in the noodles and cheese at the same time. This latter method seems fraught with danger for the amateur; I'm definitely not co-ordinated enough to vigorously beat pasta with one hand while adding cheese with the other, so the staggered approach works better for me.

Perhaps the most helpful advice I read on the subject is Roddy's admission: "With dishes like this, it is all about practice, about trying, possibly failing and trying again in order to discover how much pasta, cooking water, how much cheese and pepper, how vigorous is vigorous. In short, finding your way of doing things." How saucy you want it, how peppery, how bouncy the pasta, how sharp the cheese.

Fortunately, it's a happy subject for experimentation; even my worst failures were wolfed down. Cheese, pasta and pepper; really, it's hard to go wrong.

Perfect cacio e pepe

(Serves 2)

2 tsp black peppercorns

200g spaghetti (or pici, or tonarelli, if you can find them)

80g pecorino romano, at room temperature, finely grated

Toast the peppercorns in a very hot, dry pan until fragrant, then roughly crush.

Bring a wide shallow pan of well-salted water to the boil, then add the pasta; it should be covered but not by much. Stir occasionally during cooking and, five minutes into the cooking time, scoop out 250ml water into a wide bowl to allow it to cool slightly.

Drain the pasta and leave it to cool for a minute. Meanwhile, put the cheese and most of the pepper in a large, heavy bowl or pan and beat in some of the pasta water very gradually to make first a paste, and then a sauce the consistency of bechamel. Add the pasta and toss furiously while adding enough of the water (you shouldn't need it all) to make a sauce that coats each strand. Don't worry if it takes a while to come together - keep beating and it should happen.

Divide between warm bowls, sprinkle over a little more pepper, and serve immediately.

Cacio e pepe: old favourite, new love or hipster fad? What's your secret, and which other simple pasta dishes should every good carb-lover have in their repertoire?

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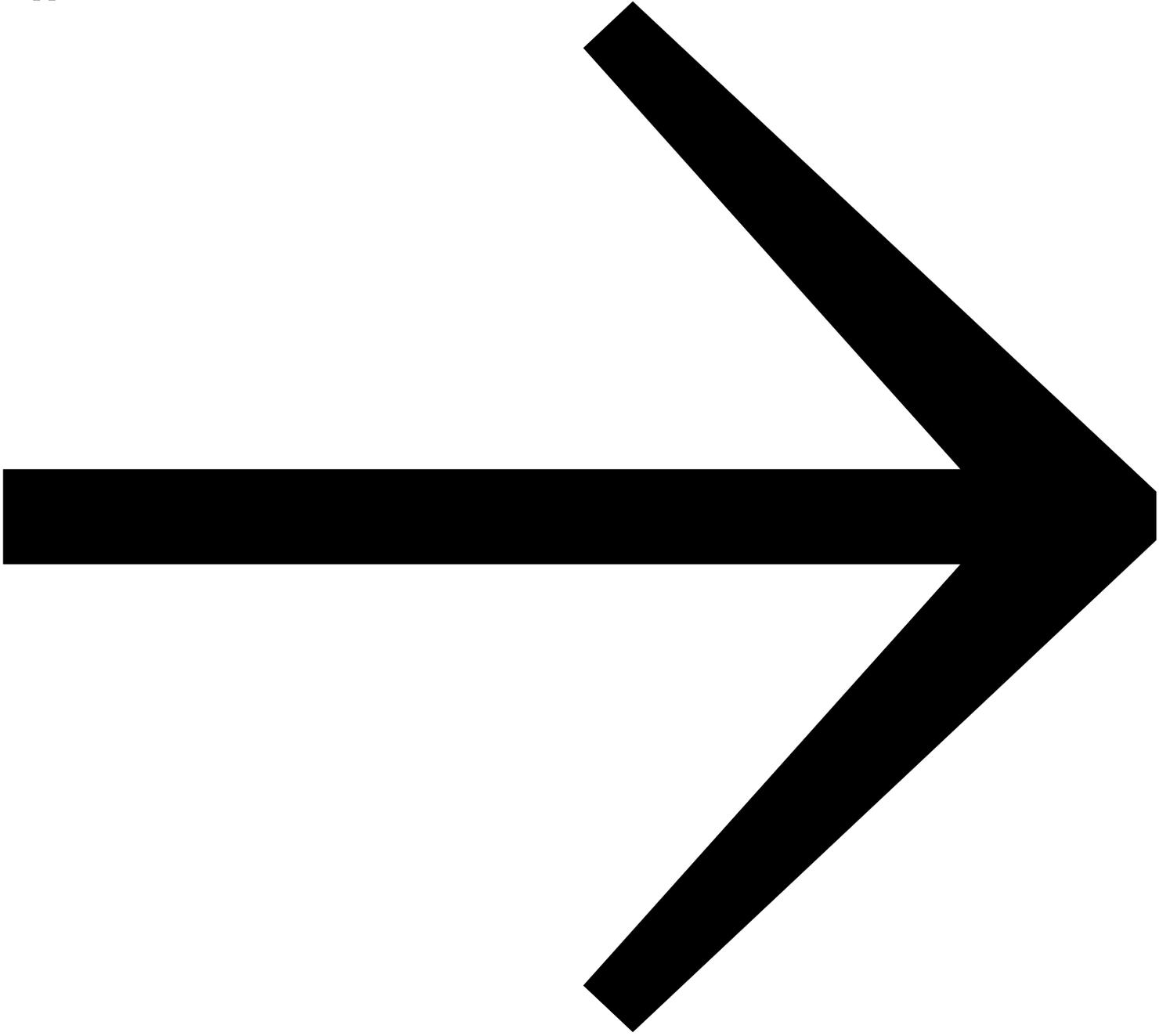
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