

# Tracking down the history of traditional carbonara

Its origins are mysterious, but its tastiness is perfectly clear

By J.C. REID

**S**PAGHETTI alla carbonara is one of the most elemental of all pasta dishes. The recipe for traditional carbonara is deviously simple: pasta, eggs, cheese, cured meat and black pepper. From this combination of textures and flavors springs one of the most complex and satisfying dishes you will ever eat.

The origins of the dish known as carbonara are in dispute. One of the more romantic explanations is that the dish originated with coal miners (known as Carbonari) of the Italian region of Umbria who used readily available

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## SPAGHETTI: Hot pasta 'cooks' eggs into a creamy sauce

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE F1** ingredients and an open coal fire to cook a satisfying and hearty meal.

A more likely provenance originates in Rome, sometime after 1945, when American troops residing in Italy after the Second World War combined their rations of bacon and eggs with the pasta and cheese dishes traditionally served there.

Unfortunately, you're not likely to get this traditional version of carbonara in any restaurant outside Rome. What you'll get is a watered-down version with added ingredients, most notably heavy cream. So what went wrong? The fact is, making an authentic, delicious carbonara can be difficult, and shortcuts have been added over the years.

For example, one of its hallmarks is the silky-smooth consistency created by "cooking" the eggs in the hot pasta. This can be a tricky technique, and one wrong move will result in scrambled eggs. It's much easier for cooks to just add heavy cream, a signature of the American version.

Another barrier to making a traditional carbonara has been procuring the ingredients. The cheese and meat components of the dish — Pecorino Romano cheese and guanciale, or cured pork cheek — have only recently become more available in gourmet supermarkets in the United States.

Even though most of the purist recipes for carbonara call for guanciale, they often note that pancetta is an acceptable substitute. Don't believe

it. There's a big difference between pancetta and guanciale, and it makes all the difference in carbonara.

Pancetta is made from the pork belly; guanciale is made from pork cheek. The cheek meat yields a fattier, denser, and more intense and refined pork flavor and texture. And while pancetta and guanciale both use salt, sugar and spices in the curing process, guanciale is known for adding herbal notes, mainly rosemary and thyme.

For the home cook making an authentic carbonara, a good guanciale will impart just enough herby fragrance and subtle sweetness to counteract the saltiness of the cheese, thus alleviating the need to add heavy cream, onions or shallots.

The flavor of the cheese component, Pecorino Romano, is often described as "sharp." In fact, it does have a much saltier, spicier and more pungent flavor than its milder and better known cousin, Parmigiano-Reggiano. Pecorino Romano offers a singular and uncompromising flavor component that complements the richness of the guanciale and the nutty, wheaty flavor of a good dried pasta.

With the proper ingredients and a practiced technique, creating an authentic and ultimately delicious spaghetti alla carbonara is within reach of every home cook. Pasta, eggs, cheese, meat and pepper — the pieces of a Roman puzzle that, when solved, represent the culture and fascination of an ancient city obsessed with food.

### SPAGHETTI ALLA CARBONARA

- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- 4 ounces dried spaghetti
- 2 teaspoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 ounces guanciale, diced into ¼-inch pieces
- 1 large egg, room temperature
- ½ cup Pecorino Romano cheese, finely grated
- Freshly ground black pepper

■ Bring a large pot of water to a boil and add salt. Cook pasta according to package directions, 10-12 minutes or until al dente.

■ While the pasta is cooking, add olive oil to a sauté pan on medium-high heat. Add guanciale and cook until crispy and golden brown, 4-6 minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.

■ In a small mixing bowl, combine egg, a tablespoon of grated cheese and a pinch of black pepper.

■ When pasta is ready, drain thoroughly, reserving some of the water, and transfer pasta to a separate pan over low heat. Working quickly,

arrange pasta into a pile and pour egg mixture into the center of the hot pasta. Stir until pasta is coated with the mixture and the egg is "cooked" in the heat of the pasta.

■ Increase the heat to medium-high and add guanciale and about a half of the rendered fat to the pasta and egg mixture. Stir thoroughly. Add about ½ of the grated cheese; stir until cheese takes on a smooth consistency. Add remaining cheese in ½ increments. Add some reserved pasta water if the sauce gets too thick.

■ Add a generous amount of freshly ground black pepper. Combine thoroughly with pasta and sauce. Once plated, add a final dusting of grated cheese and black pepper and serve.

**Makes 2 servings**, each 560 calories (53.2 percent calories from fat), 33g fat, 155mg cholesterol, 1,020mg sodium, 44g carbohydrates, 2g fiber, 21g protein.