

Who Is Norma?

From a culinary perspective, that question might be better asked as, what is Norma?

In this case, Norma refers to pasta con le melanzane, better known in the main eastern Sicilian city of Catania—where the dish was presumably introduced—as *pasta alla Norma*.

There are many stories about, and interpretations of this popular dish, which most people believe was named after the opera *Norma* written by composer Vincenzo Bellini, a Catanian native son.

In my view the best interpretation of the origin of this dish was offered by Coleman Andrews—author of many cookbooks, former editor, columnist, culinary expert, and influencer—in his cookbook *The Country Cooking of Italy*, where he offered:

Vincenzo Bellini's celebrated opera Norma, which premiered at La Scala in Milan in 1831, has long been considered one of the masterpieces of the bel canto tradition. The usual story is that when the Sicilian writer and theatrical producer Nino Martoglio—who, like Bellini, was a native of Catania—first tasted pasta dressed with tomato sauce, fried eggplant, and ricotta salata, he thought it was as close to perfection as the opera was, and gave it this name.

The dish is almost certainly older than the opera, though, and it must have had another name for some time, since Martoglio was not born until 1870. Whoever christened it, I'd like to think that he or she was conscious of the inherent wordplay: the role of Norma was created at La Scala by one of the great Italian sopranos of the nineteenth century, Giuditta Pasta.

Thus Pasta alla Norma was launched.

I have been preparing it over the years, mostly during the Summer months, when eggplants and tomatoes are at their peak of freshness and flavor. Like many of the dishes I enjoy making and eating at home, their recipes often evolve to a place where I make them my own. Alla Norma is no exception. Here is how I prepare the dish now.

First a few cooking notes about my approach to this recipe:

- As mentioned above, I normally make this pasta dish in the Summer months, however, as circumstances turned out there were still medium-size globe eggplants available at our CSA, and a pint or two of San Marzano tomatoes calling out my name at a local farm market I shop at all season, so I took advantage of both opportunities.
- The basic recipe includes eggplant, tomatoes, olive oil, basil, and ricotta salata, however, I also add garlic and onion.
- The classic preparation yields a pasta sauce of substance—fried eggplant is never light!
- Since we eat little to no fried food, I choose to roast the eggplant initially, removing most of the softened pulp from its outer skin shell, and slicing a few rounds to garnish the dish for the table. Rather than making a sauce from the tomatoes, I also slow-roasted those, adding more texture and depth of flavor to the final sauce when combined with the roasted eggplant and the sauté of onion and garlic.

Pasta alla Norma

Ingredients (serves two, can be scaled up easily)

1/4 pound pasta per person, many options, farfalle was used

3 small to medium eggplants

1 pint of San Marzano or other plum tomato

1 small red onion

1 large garlic clove

1/4 cup olive oil or as needed

Salt, pepper, and red chili flakes

Ricotta salata and several sprigs of basil to finish the dish



Mise en place

Method

Since I slow roasted the tomatoes, which takes several hours to complete, you may want to do this step a day or so ahead of time to have the tomatoes readily available to complete the sauce. Back in 2014, I published a post titled *The Tomato—A Slow Approach*, which you can access [here](#).

Alternately, if you are short on time, open a 14.5-oz. can of chunky tomatoes, drain and set aside the thin tomato liquid and use the chunky tomato pulp to complete the sauce. It won't be as flavorful but will still taste fine.

Preheat the oven to 375 degrees.

Trim the stem from two eggplants and slice them in half lengthwise. Cut a grid pattern across the flesh side of the eggplant halves, careful not to cut through the skin. Drizzle olive oil and sprinkle the flesh side of the eggplant with salt and pepper.

Additionally, from another small eggplant, cut 3 to 4 rounds about 1/2-inch thick. These will be used to top the pasta as a garnish. Olive oil and season the rounds same as done with the halves.

Place the prepared eggplant on a lined baking sheet pan and roast for 35 to 40 minutes, or until the flesh is tender but not soft like a puree.

When cool enough to handle, scoop out the flesh and discard the skin shells. Set the eggplant pulp and rounds aside for assembly into the sauce and the final plated dish.

Peel both the garlic and the onion, then thinly slice each.

In a large sauté pan placed over medium to high temperature, warm 3 to 4 tablespoons of olive oil. Once the oil is hot but not smoking, lower the temperature to medium and add the garlic and onions to begin the sauté. Season with salt, pepper, and chili flakes to your liking and stir the sauté from time to time, allowing the mixture to soften and become translucent, about 4 to 5 minutes.

Next add the roasted eggplant pulp, mixing it into the sautéed onion and garlic. Add another tablespoon of olive oil as needed and once the eggplant is thoroughly combined into the sauté, add the tomato.

If using the slow-roasted tomatoes, break them up with a large wooden spoon and fold them into the sauté.

Or, if using the drained canned chunk tomatoes, simply fold them into the sauce.

If the sauce seems too thick, spoon some of that saved tomato liquid in and around, or simply use a little pasta cooking water.

Once the sauce is heated through and has reached a thickened but shiny consistency, taste and correct the seasoning to your liking. Reduce the stovetop

temperature to very low and cover the pan to hold the sauce until the pasta is completely cooked.



Sauté

Once the pasta is cooked to your liking, add the pasta directly to the sauce in the sauté pan. Thoroughly fold and mix the pasta into the sauce, adding a little pasta cooking water if needed, and raising the stovetop temperature so that the entire mixture is heated through evenly. Scatter some of the basil leaves around and mix those in as well.



Sauté with pasta

Spoon the sauced pasta into warm bowls, topping each serving with several cut pieces of the roasted eggplant rounds, some extra basil leaves, and a scattering of the grated ricotta salata to serve.



Plated

If the weather holds as it is seemingly doing where we live, then there still might be time to source some eggplant and tomatoes from your local farm markets so that you could give this dish a try.

If not, keep the recipe around for next Summer when eggplants and tomatoes again make their way to the market. While you are waiting, maybe take in an opera for entertainment and to pass the time!

Either way, do enjoy.



Eat well • Drink well • Be well

A good meal at home is proof of time well spent.

Not all of us were made to cook. Some of us were only made to have conversations with the person cooking!!