

Pastina . . . Eating with a Spoon

There is something fundamental about a spoon. As young children we all began eating home-cooked meals using a spoon. And what better way to employ a spoon than using it to deliver a comforting bowl of hot soup? Hot soup, yes, especially with some of the colder weather we have not been enjoying, mostly speaking for myself.

While we are considering fundamentals, pairing pasta with soup is almost as elemental as the bowl of soup itself.

What pasta to pair with your soup? Pastina, of course!

As a youngster I always enjoyed eating meals that included some dish, soup or otherwise, that used one of the many pastina shapes.

Pastina is a generic term used to define very small pasta shapes meant to be cooked in a broth and eaten with a spoon. In fact, many of the pastina varieties are simply miniature versions of larger pasta shapes, such as farfalline, which are mini-farfalle, the bowtie-shaped pasta.

Although, there are a few pasta *asciutta* dishes (pasta with sauce) that call for smaller pasta shapes, where a pastina is often included. Think a pastina sauced with butter, grated pecorino cheese, black pepper, and minced parsley. What could be simpler to prepare? Kids love it and I do to this day as well.

Today my cooking with pastina has become more focused on just a few shapes whether they are cooked in a soup or water and served as a sauced variation. My favorites are ditalini, farfalline, and fregola. Fregola is the small, toasted, semolina pasta originating from the island of Sardinia (*fregula sarda*), eventually being imported to Liguria on the Italian mainland and popular today. To explore a dish featuring fregola check out my post in the blog recipe archive from 2020 titled Crab or Lobster, Your Choice!

With this post I'm sharing a soup recipe featuring ditalini pastina paired with lentils that was introduced to me by my maternal grandmother and later reinterpreted from my aunt's rendition of the dish.

There are many different varieties of lentils. I would recommend seeking out either the Italian Castelluccio lentils from Umbria, or the Lentilles du Puy from the

Auvergne region of France, although the small brown lentils found in your local market will suffice.

This is how I make this dish today.

Ditalini with Lentils . . . Pasta e Lenticchie

Ingredients

1 to 1-1/2 cups lentils

1 to 1-1/2 cups ditalini pasta

5 to 6 cups vegetable broth or water

4 large garlic cloves, halved

1 large red onion, cut into eighths, keeping the root end

2 to 3 carrots, washed, trimmed, but not peeled, cut into bite-size pieces

10 oz package of baby spinach, thoroughly washed

Olive oil

Salt, pepper, and chili flakes



Mise en place

Method

Prepare all the ingredients as noted above. Place and sort the lentils on a sheet pan to remove any small stones that may have gotten into the packaging.

If using a bunch of fresh-cut spinach, in place of the packaged baby spinach leaves, increase the volume to a pound, break off any large tough stems, thoroughly wash, rough chop, and set aside.

Place a large stockpot with a lid or a Dutch oven, over medium-high temperature, put in 1/4 cup of olive oil. Warm the oil and add the garlic, onions, and carrots, season with salt, pepper, and chili flakes to your taste. Stir the vegetables to combine and coat, and when they begin to lightly color after about 5 minutes, add the lentils, stock, or water.

Lower the temperature to a gentle simmer to avoid the lentils from splitting, cover the pot, and cook for 20 to 25 minutes.

While the vegetables are simmering, heat a second pot with salted water to a boil. Add the ditalini and boil for 3 to 4 minutes less than the recommended package cooking instructions. Drain the pasta and set aside, drizzled with a tablespoon of olive oil to keep it from sticking together.

Check the lentils and the vegetables to determine if they are tender but not too soft. Add the precooked pasta and the spinach. Stir the ingredients to thoroughly combine, raise the temperature to a gentle boil and cook the soup another 4 to 5 minutes so that the pasta has completed cooking, the spinach has wilted, and the lentils are tender to the bite.

Add another cup of stock or water if the soup seems too thick along with checking and correcting the seasoning as needed.



Ready for the table

Serve this soup in warm bowls topped with a drizzle of good olive oil, some grated pecorino cheese, and minced fresh parsley.



Served . . . yum!

A side of toasted bread and a glass or two of your favorite red wine should round out the meal.

Oh, don't forget the spoon!

You can do this one, and you should.

Enjoy!



Eat well • Drink well • Be well

Do not tinker too much with the age-old recipes. The recipes grandma used to make. Their appeal is in their simplicity!