



WINE WITH...Pasta alla Norma

After seeing Ron Howard's delightful documentary, "Pavarotti," we decided to honor the great tenor's notorious love for all things pasta by making Pasta alla Norma, a dish that originated in Sicily as a tribute to Vincenzo Bellini's opera Norma. This is a dish that is relatively quick and easy to prepare, and very easy to fall in love with (even for people who aren't normally partial to eggplant, one of its main ingredients). It is also one of the most wine-friendly of all pasta preparations. Pavarotti himself is said to have preferred accompanying pasta alla Norma with high-end, chilled Lambrusco, the red wine of his native Emilia Romagna. We didn't have a bottle on hand, but certainly would be glad to try it.

Two steps make our recipe a particularly delicious interpretation of the classic Norma. The first is to partially peel the eggplant and to cut it in small pieces. (There is no need to salt and drain these). The second step is to oven-roast those pieces rather than frying them in olive oil. The result is small, tender, almost caramelized bites of eggplant that have no bitterness, greasiness or mushy texture.

Ricotta salata is an Italian cheese much favored in Sicily. Made from sheep's milk, it is pressed, salted and aged until it has a firm texture and a distinctive, somewhat salty flavor. Since our local markets tend not to carry it we substitute feta, which we air-dry for a few hours. The result doesn't have true ricotta salata flavor, but it's a very tasty substitute.

We're told that in Sicily bowls of extra ricotta salata and eggplant are sometimes placed on the table to be added as desired. Seems like a good idea.

Pasta alla Norma

Serves 4

If you prefer to use fresh instead of canned tomatoes, we recommend peeling and seeding them.

Preheat oven to 425°.

- 1 large or 2 small eggplants
- 3-4 tablespoons olive oil (divided use)
- 1 cup minced onion
- 2-4 garlic cloves
- 1 teaspoon thyme
- 2 14-ounce (400 grams) cans chopped tomatoes
- 3/4 cup red wine
- salt and pepper
- 1 tablespoon minced fresh parsley and/or mint
- 16 ounces (454 grams) rigatoni or ziti
- About 1 cup ricotta salata or feta substitute*
- Fresh grated parmesan cheese
- 5 or 6 fresh basil leaves torn into pieces

Using a vegetable peeler, peel off bands of eggplant skin lengthwise (there should be about equal sized skin and skinless stripes). Cut the eggplant into 1-1½ inch pieces.

Toss the eggplant pieces with a couple of tablespoons of olive oil until they are reasonably well coated. Spread them on a sheet pan and roast them for about 20-30 minutes or until they are soft and just beginning to brown (stir them once or twice as they are roasting, adding more oil if necessary). When they are done, transfer the eggplant pieces to a plate lined with paper towels and let them drain until ready to use.



To make the tomato sauce, place another tablespoon of oil in a deep saucepan and stir in the onions. When they have softened, add the garlic and thyme and cook for a minute or two. Add the tomatoes and wine and cook over medium heat, uncovered, for about 15 minutes, or until reduced by about a third; then season with salt and pepper and stir in the parsley and/or mint. (The sauce may be made several hours or up to a day ahead of time.)

Bring a large pot of lightly salted water to a boil then add the pasta. Cook according to package directions. Meanwhile, stir the eggplant into the tomato sauce and reheat it if necessary. Drain the pasta and mix in the tomato sauce. Garnish with the ricotta salata and sprinkle very lightly with Parmesan cheese. Garnish with the basil leaves.

*To make the ricotta salata substitute sandwich about 1 cup of feta cheese between a couple of paper towels and let it sit out at room temperature for about 2-3 hours.

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With its hearty tomato sauce, this is definitely a red wine dish. We tried all sorts (but not Lambrusco), and found that two types performed equally well. First came wines with an earthy edge, second wines with power and aggression. The best examples from both categories distinguished themselves by having a relatively high level of acidity--enough, that is, not to be overshadowed by the sauce. So avoid soft, subtle wines. This dish calls for bold flavors, whether coming primarily from fruit or from earth.

<u>Selection</u>	<u>Approx. Price</u>	<u>Comments</u>
Arènte, Valpolicella Ripasso (Italy) 2016 (Imported by Montcalm Wine Importers)	\$30	A wine that straddles the two categories, this is a brash red, chock-full of fruit but enhanced by hints of leather and savory spice. An excellent example of the Ripasso style, it tastes vivid and vivacious.
Buehler Vineyards, Napa Valley (California) Cabernet Sauvignon 2016	\$35	Youthful and fresh, with dark and savory (so not sweet) fruit flavors, this attractive Cabernet was one of stars of our tasting. It resembles Napa Cabs of 20 or 30 years ago more than the many heady, sugary wines being made today.
Marchesi di Barolo, Barbera del Monferrato (Italy) "Maraia" 2017 (Imported by Frederick Wildman)	\$16	Medium-bodied, with a dusty, leathery finish, this Piedmontese gem is always a great value. It matched the dish note for note, and in fact seemed fully part of it.
Pessimist, Paso Robles (California) Red Blend	\$24	A powerful wine, made with Syrah, Petite Sirah, Zinfandel, and Tanat, this was the most aggressive wine in our tasting. The pasta, however, more than stood up to it,

2017		and the wine itself was marked by sun-drenched fruit flavors. It seemed unmistakably Californian.
<i>Pascual Toso, Mendoza (Argentina) Malbec Reserva "Barrancas Vineyards" 2016 (Imported by Quintessential)</i>	\$25	Softer and gentler than many Argentinean Malbecs, this wine nevertheless stands out due to the purity of its plum-like flavors. Oak plays a secondary role, as does spice. Bright, fresh fruit is its calling card.

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