

Presto...it's pesto!

It's that time of the season when the little basil plant you purchased a month ago now threatens to overtake your patio and make the side of your house look like the outfield wall at Wrigley Field. Making pesto is a great way to use abundant herbs like basil. Like so many yummy sauces, pesto originated in Italy and is the essence of simplistic, authentic cooking. By incorporating just a few basic ingredients like herbs, cheese, nuts and olive oil, you can create a flavor-packed mixture with endless culinary purposes. While basil pesto is the most popular version, you can experiment with other herbs and greens such as mint, spinach and arugula.

A batch of pesto can complement a variety of preparations from appetizers to vegetables to entrées:

- Serve pesto with a wedge of cheese, olives, prosciutto and crackers for a perfect cocktail hour(s) hors d'oeuvre;
- Smear a small amount of pesto on grilled fish or chicken for an added flavor boost;
- Use in pasta dishes instead of standard red sauce;
- Mix with mayonnaise to create a pesto salad dressing;
- Drizzle over vegetables like steamed asparagus, grilled zucchini, roasted new potatoes or freshly sliced tomatoes;
- Here's my new favorite summertime "bite": Scoop out the center of cherry tomatoes and salt lightly. Slice in half several small, fresh mozzarella balls and stuff one half into each tomato. Top with a small dollop of fresh pesto for a delicious and easy appetizer.

Make plenty of pesto and store in the refrigerator for up to two weeks. The following recipe is for a summertime pasta dish that can be served either as a dinner entrée or a unique pasta salad at room temperature.

Summer Spaghetti with Basil Pesto, Roasted Corn and Bacon (6 servings)

Ingredients

3 cups fresh basil leaves (large stems removed)
3 tablespoons pine nuts
2 small garlic cloves (peeled)
¼ cup grated parmesan cheese
¾ cup extra virgin olive oil
One pound bacon
One pound spaghetti or linguine
3 ears of fresh sweet corn
Butter, kosher salt



Set a large pot of water to boil.

Cook bacon: Slice bacon into 1" pieces and cook in skillet over medium high heat until browned, about 7-8 minutes. Remove bacon with slotted spoon and reserve 1-2T bacon fat.

Make pesto: While bacon is cooking, roughly chop garlic cloves. Place fresh basil, garlic, pine nuts and parmesan and process for 30-40 seconds until finely chopped and blended. While processor is on, drizzle in olive oil and continue to process until smooth. Taste for salt. (If you have different sized bowls for the processor, use the smaller one.)

Cook pasta: When water is boiling, add one tablespoon of kosher salt. Carefully add spaghetti to the water and cook until al dente, 8-9 minutes.

Roast corn: While pasta is cooking, slice corn kernels off each cob. Place one tablespoon of butter in the skillet with the bacon fat and melt over medium heat. Add corn kernels and roast until browned, about 5-6 minutes, stirring only occasionally so the corn can properly caramelize. Sprinkle with salt.

Prepare dish for serving: Drain water from spaghetti and return to pot. Stir in roasted corn, bacon bits and pesto. Place in large serving dish or individual pasta bowls and garnish with fresh basil or shaved parmesan if desired.