

prized pesto

Chef Paolo Laboa brings the mother of Italian summer sauces to America from his native Genova, and delivers the secrets of his spectacular recipe.

by Mindy Fox



When Paolo Laboa discovered a potted Genovese-style basil plant at a supermarket in San Francisco in the spring of 2007, he couldn't believe his luck. A recent transplant from Genova who came to the city to helm Farina restaurant in the Mission district, the 43-year-old chef hadn't had a proper plate of pesto after three months in the U.S.—a near culinary tragedy, since like most Genovese, he ate it several times a week back home. Paolo had hoped to bring his recipe for Pesto alla Genovese to

the restaurant, and this discovery meant he could pursue the undertaking. His family recipe, made the way it had been for generations, would prove to be Farina's flagship dish, and it has been internationally recognized as the best of its kind.

"Genovese are raised on pesto, but the rest of the world has never understood how to prepare it," says Luca Minna, Farina's owner. Pesto alla Genovese in the U.S. is often a disappointment. It can be army green in color, too garlicky >>>

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MANDILLI DI SETA
AL PESTO GENOVESE



BEST BASIL

In Italy, Genovese basil is a D.O.P. product (Protected Designation of Origin)—basil grown outside of the region of Liguria cannot legally be labeled Genovese. To make a proper pesto in the U.S., look for basil labeled Italian Classic, Sweet or Genovese-style. Young bunches are best. The leaves are sweet with brighter flavors than older plants, which carry a scent of licorice. When you’re buying basil at the market, look for bright, pale emerald, cup-shaped leaves. You can also grow your own basil. We order from Seeds from Italy, a U.S.-based company that distributes heirloom seeds from Italy’s oldest family-owned seed company (growitalian.com).



FINELY GRATED
Using a fine blade to grate cheeses for pesto creates light, fluffy strands that dissolve seamlessly into the sauce. We prefer Microplane for its razor-sharp blades (us.microplane.com).

and unappealingly grainy—far from authentic and nothing like Laboa’s bright, pea-green sauce that is at once vibrant, delicate and impossibly creamy.

To make authentic pesto, Italian pine nuts, cheeses and oil can be imported, but shipping fresh basil from Genova is another matter. Genovese basil (*ocimum basilicum*) is a finicky variety not popular with U.S.-based commercial herb growers. It prefers a desert climate, needs shadehouse protection and succumbs easily to infection and disease. Lucky for Laboa, the plant he spotted at the market carried a label for Maristone Farms, a grower who was becoming known among discriminating chefs as a star supplier of specialty herbs.

His pesto, traditionally paired with mandilli di seta, or handkerchief pasta, won the gold in 2008 at the prestigious Genova World Pesto Championship, a competition of 100 chefs from around the world held in the Palazzo Ducale in the city’s Old Town.

Below, we’ve included his family recipe, along with tips and techniques Laboa employs to give his sauce its winning edge.

pesto alla genovese



GENOVESE BASIL PESTO

30 minutes | Makes 1 1/8 cups

- 2 ounces basil leaves (6 cups loosely packed), preferably Genovese-style (see sidebar, left)**
- 1/3 cup pine nuts, preferably Italian**
- 1/3 small garlic clove, any center green stem removed and discarded**
- 1/2 cup fruity, mild extra-virgin olive oil, preferably Ligurian plus more for keeping, if needed**
- 1 teaspoon medium or flakey coarse sea salt**
- 1/3 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese**
- 1/3 cup freshly grated Fiore Sardo or aged Pecorino Toscano cheese**

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: a blender with glass or metal (not plastic) jar

Place blender jar in freezer to chill. Meanwhile, submerge basil in a large bowl of cold water; let stand 5 minutes. Using hands, gently lift leaves from water. Repeat twice, using rinsed bowl and fresh water each time. Rinse bowl again and fill with cold water. Soak the cleaned leaves in the water, 15 minutes.

After basil has soaked, remove blender jar from freezer. Combine nuts and garlic in chilled jar, then cover with oil. Purée until nuts are very finely chopped and mixture is creamy, then add salt.

In 4 additions, lift basil from water, shaking off excess but not all water from leaves (a bit of water will aid emulsification), add to blender and, using 3 or 4 short pulses for each addition, purée just to combine (do not overblend). Add cheese, then, using 2 or 3 very short pulses, purée just to combine. >>>

LET IT SOAK

Soaking basil leaves for 15 minutes in cold water before making pesto softens them, and removes unwanted bitterness or licorice notes. Avoid large leaves (3 inches or more) from older plants, which are more fibrous and bitter, and require a more aggressive preparation. In lieu of soaking older leaves, blanch them for 30 seconds in boiling water, then plunge them in ice water.



CHOICE CHEESES

Laboa uses a blend of Parmigiano-Reggiano, aged 24 or 36 months, and Pecorino Fiore Sardo, a Sardinian sheep’s milk cheese with a hint of salty smoke. Aged Pecorino Toscano can be used in place of Fiore Sardo, but avoid Pecorino Romano, which is too salty.





BLENDER

Traditionally, pesto is made by hand by grinding the basil and other ingredients in a mortar and pestle. But Laboa also stands behind his blender technique, which not only saves on time and effort, but creates a sumptuous, creamy sauce (see recipe, p.29). He chills the blender jar in the freezer before making the pesto. The cold blade reduces the oxidization of the basil leaves, which can cause bitterness.



Paolo Laboa is a master of more than Genovese pesto. His other signature pesti include walnut and olive. Go to Icimag.com/pesto for these additional pesto recipes, as well as a slideshow of him working with Mindy Fox in our test kitchen.

Transfer pesto to a small container. If not using within 30 minutes, cover with a thin film of oil and refrigerate, covered, for up to 3 days, or freeze for up to 3 months. Thaw frozen pesto in refrigerator overnight or at room temperature about 1 hour.

mandilli di seta al pesto genovese

SILK HANDKERCHIEF PASTA
WITH GENOVESE BASIL PESTO

35 minutes plus resting | 4 to 6 servings

- 2 cups "00" or unbleached all-purpose flour plus more for dusting**
- 2 large eggs, at room temperature**
- ¼ cup dry white wine**
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese plus more for serving**

Fine or coarse sea salt

1½ cups Genovese Basil Pesto (see page 29)

Small basil leaves for garnish (optional)

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT: parchment or wax paper, pasta machine

On a clean work surface, mound flour, then form a well in center. Add eggs to the well. Cup hand around outside wall of well to prevent collapsing and, using a fork, gently beat eggs to combine whites and yolks, then add wine and cheese to the well. Using the fork, slowly incorporate flour from the inside rim of the well. Continue until liquid is absorbed (about half of the flour will be incorporated), then knead until dough forms a mostly complete mass. Knead 7 to 9 minutes more to form a smooth dough. Cover dough with clean, lightly dampened dishtowel (not terry cloth); let rest at room temperature 30 minutes.

Divide dough into 4 pieces. Cover 3 pieces with towel. Flatten uncovered dough so that it will fit through the rollers of a pasta machine. Set rollers of pasta machine at the widest setting, then feed dough through rollers 3 or 4 times, folding and turning dough until it is smooth and the width of the machine.

Feed pasta through machine, dusting pasta sheet lightly with flour, if needed, as you roll, decreasing the setting one notch at a time (do not fold or turn pasta), to thin sheet that you can just see your hand through, ½ to 1 millimeter thick.

Cut sheet crosswise into 6- or 7-inch lengths; dust both sides of sheets with flour. Layer sheets between floured pieces of parchment or wax paper. Cover with paper and repeat with remaining dough.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Place pesto in a large wide serving bowl. Cook pasta in the boiling water until al dente, about 2 minutes. Reserving ¼ cup pasta cooking liquid, drain pasta. In a slow, steady stream, add pasta cooking liquid to pesto, whisking to combine. Add pasta; gently toss together. Divide pasta among serving plates. Serve immediately, garnished with basil and sprinkled with cheese. □

TEMPERING THE SAUCE

Slowly whisking just enough hot pasta water into the pesto (see recipe, left) before tossing it with pasta gently warms the sauce and renders it light and creamy. Never heat pesto over a flame or in a microwave. This destroys both flavor and texture.



NOT JUST FOR PASTA

Here are four easy ways to use Laboa's pesto to elevate everyday dishes. **1.** Swirl it into chicken or vegetable soups. **2.** Spoon it over fried or poached eggs. **3.** Use it as a sauce for roast or grilled chicken, grilled shrimp or other grilled fish. **4.** Drizzle it over your next caprese salad, freshly sliced mozzarella or bright summer vegetables.



KEEPING IT FRESH

Pesto keeps, with a thin layer of extra-virgin olive oil on top to prevent oxidation, in an airtight container, for up to 1 week in the refrigerator or 3 months frozen. Thaw in the refrigerator overnight or at room temperature for an hour. If it separates, whisk a few drops of warm water into thawed pesto.