

Fresh Tomato and Fennel Pasta

Serves 4

I like to cruise the farmers markets and see which vendors are selling tomatoes, then ask if they have any bruised ones in the back-- they're often sold at a discount and perfectly ripe for turning into a quick sauce like this one. Sungolds (small, sweet, orange tomatoes) are my preference, but any tomato works; simply cut them into 1"-2" chunks before cooking down. The goal for the sauce is to have bits of tomato floating in a juicy, almost jammy sauce for the pasta to finish cooking in. Fennel seed, when used here in conjunction with crushed red pepper flakes and garlic, has the ability to turn this sauce into something vaguely resembling sausage, which frankly, I love.

12 oz pasta of your choice, I like rigatoni

Kosher salt

¼ cup olive oil

2 tablespoons unsalted butter (or more olive oil)

5 garlic cloves, 4 thinly sliced, one finely grated

1 tablespoon fennel seed

Crushed red pepper flakes (optional)

2 pounds tiny tomatoes, the smaller and sweeter the better, doesn't matter what color but I like sungolds, quartered or halved depending on the size

2 tablespoons white distilled vinegar

Pecorino or parmesan cheese, for grating

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. While that is happening, start the sauce.
2. Heat olive oil and butter in a large pot over medium-high heat. Add 4 garlic cloves, fennel seed and a good pinch of crushed red pepper flakes, if using. Season with salt and pepper and cook, stirring occasionally until garlic begins to turn a lovely golden brown, while the spices toast alongside, 3 to 4 minutes.
3. Add tomatoes, season with salt and pepper and turn the heat to high. Cook, tossing or stirring occasionally until they burst but don't turn to total mush (there should be juiciness, but not jamminess), 5 to 7 minutes (it might look thin, that's okay). Add vinegar and season again with salt and pepper. Remove from heat while you cook the pasta.
4. Once pasta is cooked to a nice al dente, drain (I like to use a slotted spoon or strainer and leave the water behind) and add to the pot, tossing to coat. Add some pasta water to loosen things up if it needs and keep tossing and cooking until the pasta is perfectly cooked and the sauce coats each piece.
5. Remove from heat and spoon into a bowl, shower it with cheese, the remaining clove of garlic, and more pepper.

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