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PASTA MASTER

The chef's secrets turn your Italian experiments into finger-licking meals. Here's how

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PIZZA DOUGH

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Italian cuisine is arguably the one non-Indian cuisine that has penetrated deeply into our kitchens. We all whip up lasagne, pasta and at least a bread-toast version of pizza in our homes. But it's the finer points that make all the difference between Italian and Udipi. Arjo Banerjee, the head chef at Pizza Hut, and the man behind their new Tuscany menu, fine tunes your take on Italian cooking.

» **Good quality pasta** will not make the boiling water cloudy or frothy. Stir the pasta in the beginning as this is when the maximum starch is released and the pasta tends to stick. You'll need 10 times more water than the quantity of pasta used.

» **Classic Italian cooking** uses ingredients that are fresh and in season such as tomatoes, eggplants, zucchini, peas, bell peppers, mushrooms, spinach, etc. So at the risk of Indian-ising your pizza in favour of flavour, use vegetables such as marinated zucchini or eggplants instead of tinned mushrooms.

» **Fresh herbs taste** better than dried ones. Buy small quantities of fresh basil, oregano, thyme, parsley

etc. that you should use quickly. To store, wrap the fresh herbs in wet paper tissues and refrigerate.

» **Buy fresh meat**, sea food and use the bones, shells to make up some stock. When making sauces, replace water with stock to bring in great flavours.

» **Never add oil** when boiling the pasta, or hold it under running water; or toss it with butter before letting it mix with the sauce. These prevent the sauce from coating the pasta during final cooking.

» **The perfect way** is to cook the pasta a minute or two less than recommended (Average cooking time is between 8-10 minutes), adding about 7 grams of salt per litre, drain it and toss it in the sauce for a few minutes (which is on medium flame), where it will cook again, imbibing the flavours.

» **With over 200 kinds** of pastas, pairing can be a bit tricky. A generic guide would be: Thin and delicate pastas like spaghetti are best paired with smooth and thin sauces which coat the surface evenly; Ridged pasta or tubed ones, like penne go best with chunkier sauces (like arabiatta) which can be trapped by their texture. Thicker pasta shapes like fettuccine go best with heavier and creamier sauces.

» **The correct proportion** of sauce to pasta is equal portions of both, but a couple of extra spoons is fine if you like it that way.

» **When marinating meats**, poultry or seafood, do not add salt, as it draws out the moisture. Salt your proteins on the grill.

» **Invest in good quality** olive oil for salads, preferably extra virgin oil. Olive oil imparts a great taste and flavour when cooking.

» **When making the sauce**, use wine to deglaze — loosens burnt bits of sauce stuck at the bottom of the pan. This is where all the flavour is. The wine should be of moderate quality. Ideally, white wine should be used for deglazing milder flavoured sauces that contain cream, seafood and vegetarian ingredients; red wine is for red meats and sauces with stronger flavours such as Rosemary.

» **Put day-old bread** to use in bruschettas, sandwiches or paninis. These tend to be crispier and hold toppings better.

» **Always sauce your pizza** leaving a quarter inch of rim, and cover the sauce completely with cheese and toppings, so that it doesn't burn during cooking.



If you are trying to make pizzas at home, getting the base right is the winning trick. Try the chef's special.

MAKES 8 9-INCH PIZZAS

INGREDIENTS:

500 gm all purpose refined flour, 275 gm luke warm water, 15 gm fine sugar, 8 gm salt, 12 gm dry yeast, 20 ml olive oil

METHOD:

Mix the yeast in water and set aside for 5 minutes till the yeast starts to bubble. Mix flour, salt and sugar together. Make a well in the centre and add the oil and water. Mix using a spoon to get everything together. Transfer the mix on to a clean surface and knead well using your hands. Continue to knead till the dough is smooth. Let the dough rest for a couple of minutes and divide into 8 equal balls.

Place the rounded dough balls on a lightly oiled tray and cover with a clean, wet kitchen towel. When the balls double in size (should take roughly one hour) they are ready to use.