

PENNE ALLA VODKA

Splashes of vodka and cream can turn run-of-the-mill tomato sauce into luxurious restaurant fare—or a heavy, boozy mistake. We set out to fine-tune this modern classic.



This restaurant-quality pasta dish is made with ingredients you probably have on hand and comes together in just 20 minutes.

Asked to develop a recipe for penne alla vodka, I phoned a few Italians with the hopes that they'd share some secrets about this dish. No such luck. This dish is an American creation, the winner of a 1970s recipe contest promoting vodka. An instant hit, it's now a featured item on many restaurant menus, but that doesn't necessarily mean that things have not gotten lost over the years. Most versions are absurdly rich, containing more cream than tomatoes; others add too much vodka too late, yielding soupy, boozy sauces. I wanted to fine-tune this modern classic to strike the right balance of sweet, tangy, spicy, and creamy.

As with most dishes that look simple on paper, this one finds success in its proportions and timing, as proved by a survey of recipes with identical ingredient lists. Most recipes begin with a basic sauce of canned tomatoes—I pureed half and chopped half to achieve the perfect consistency—onion, garlic, tomato paste, and red pepper flakes. While many recipes add the vodka along with the heavy cream near the end, I found that no matter how much restraint I mustered, the sauce tasted unappealingly boozy. By trial and error, I learned it was best to add a liberal amount of vodka along with the tomatoes so that the alcohol mostly—but not

completely—cooked off. To finish the sauce, I swirled in $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of heavy cream for a luxurious but not over-the-top consistency. By letting the penne finish cooking in the sauce (a standard Italian method), I encouraged cohesiveness. As a finishing touch, I garnished the pasta with minced basil and grated Parmesan.

—REBECCA HAYS, *Cook's Illustrated*

Penne alla Vodka

SERVES 4 TO 6

NOTE: If possible, use premium vodka; inexpensive brands will taste harsh in this sauce. Pepper vodka imparts a pleasant flavor and can be substituted for plain if desired. Do not drop the pasta into the boiling water until just after you add the vodka to the sauce, or it will be cooked before the sauce is ready. Make sure to cook your pasta until not quite al dente, as it will cook further (and absorb some of the sauce) when it is combined with the sauce in step 4. The sauce can be made through step 3 and refrigerated in an airtight container for up to 2 days or frozen for up to 1 month.

- 1 (28-ounce) can whole tomatoes, drained and liquid reserved**
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup minced onion**
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste**
- 2 garlic cloves, minced**
- $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon red pepper flakes**
- Salt**
- $\frac{1}{8}$ cup vodka (see note)**
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup heavy cream**
- 1 pound penne**
- 2 tablespoons minced fresh basil**
- Grated Parmesan cheese, for serving**

1. Puree half of the tomatoes in a food processor until smooth, about 20 seconds. Chop the remaining tomatoes into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces, discarding the cores. Combine the pureed and diced tomatoes in a liquid measuring cup (you should have about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups). Add the reserved liquid to equal 2 cups.

2. Heat the oil in a large saucepan over medium heat until shimmering. Add the onion and tomato paste and cook, stirring occasionally, until the onion is light golden around the edges, about 3 minutes. Stir in the garlic and pepper flakes and cook until fragrant, about 30 seconds.

3. Stir in the tomatoes and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt. Remove the saucepan from the heat and add the vodka. Return the saucepan to medium-high heat and simmer, stirring frequently, until the alcohol flavor has cooked off, 8 to 10 minutes. (Lower the heat to medium if the simmering becomes too vigorous.) Stir in the cream and cook until hot, about 1 minute.

4. Meanwhile, bring 4 quarts water to a boil in a large pot for the pasta. Add 1 tablespoon salt and the pasta to the boiling water. Cook, stirring often, until the pasta is almost al dente. Reserve $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of the pasta cooking water, drain the pasta, and return it to the pot. Stir in the sauce and toss to combine. Cook over medium heat until the pasta absorbs some of the sauce, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes. Thin the sauce with the reserved pasta cooking water as needed. Stir in the basil and season with salt to taste. Serve, passing the cheese separately.

NOTES FROM THE TEST KITCHEN

OUR FAVORITE VODKA

Does vodka quality matter in our penne recipe? To find out, we conducted a taste test of sauces made with six brands of vodka, ranging in price from \$6.99 to \$34 per bottle. To our surprise, nine out of 10 tasters favored the sauce made with the most expensive vodka, noting a "fresher," "cleaner" flavor. It turns out that cheap vodkas are distilled only once to remove harsh tastes, while "premium" and "super-premium" brands are filtered three or more times—and you can taste the difference, even in a tomato sauce. You don't necessarily need to cook with Grey Goose (winner of this taste test), but don't ruin your sauce with rotgut vodka you'd never drink on its own.



THE BEST TOMATO PASTE

Tomato paste is basically tomato puree with most of the moisture cooked out. Tomato paste adds body, color, and intensity to many dishes. Here in the test kitchen, we discovered that a tablespoon of tomato paste deepened the tomato flavor in our vodka sauce and improved its color. We simply sautéed the tomato paste with onion, which darkened its color as it intensified its flavor. We find that no-fuss tubes of tomato paste are more convenient than cans, and Amore was the hands-down winner in a recent tasting.

