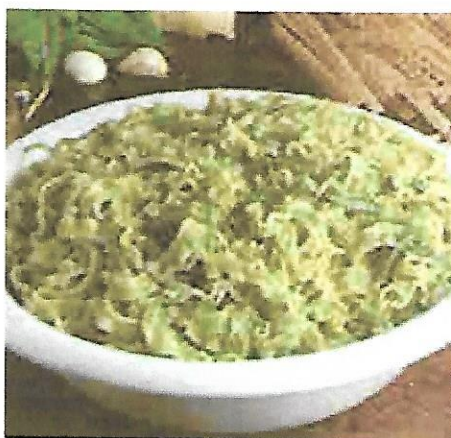


Pesto Sauce

Have you ever noticed that every summer there is a new "hot" food or ingredient that is hyped by all the cooking magazines?



I'm going to date myself here but I remember one year it was sun dried tomatoes, another year it was polenta, and yet another year it was anything Asian, then Mediterranean, then Southwestern, and so on and so on. This year olive oils and flavored vinegars from California are big as well as rubs for barbecues.

One of my favorites from years ago and still popular today is pesto. There was a summer back in New York City when you could always find a dish on the menu that had a variation of pesto. There was pasta with pesto, pesto on pizza, pesto sauce for fish, pesto vinaigrette for salads, black bean pesto, red bean pesto, cilantro pesto, arugula pesto, pesto, pesto, pesto. Get the idea?

Summer is the time of year when gardens are full of pesto's essential ingredient and what the Greeks called the "royal herb" or as we know it, basil. If you don't grow it, you can often find it at farmers markets in great big bunches for a fraction of the cost that you pay for it in the winter when it's sold in those tiny plastic bags. Fresh basil has a wonderful pungent aroma and an incredible flavor that is a cross between licorice and cloves. It is usually found with green leaves, but the Opal variety has intense purple color.

Pesto, which originated in Genoa, Italy, comes from the Italian word pestare that means to pound or to bruise. The traditional way of making pesto and still the best way is with mortar and pestle. Doesn't mortar and pestle just sound bruising? You can use your blender or food processor if in a hurry or if you're making large quantities, but they go far beyond bruising, they puree those poor tender basil leaves. Typically, pesto is made with fresh basil, garlic, pine nuts, parmesan cheese, olive oil, salt and pepper, but why not experiment with various herbs and nuts and cheeses to come up with your own special pesto.

Whenever I make a batch of pesto, I keep some in the refrigerator and freeze a bunch in ice cube trays. When frozen, I remove them from the trays and store them frozen in zip lock bags. This way whenever I need a quick pasta meal or I want to add some flavor to one of my soups, I have my supply. Plus as I mentioned earlier, the price of basil during the summer compared to wintertime makes freezing a batch worth the effort.



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INGREDIENTS

3 cloves garlic

2 cups fresh basil leaves

3 tablespoons pine nuts (pignolia)
1 dash salt and pepper
1/2 cup extra virgin olive oil
1/2 cup Parmesan cheese grated

PREP WORK

Not too much prep for this simple but flavorful recipe. Start by peeling and chopping the garlic. Then wash, dry and remove the stems from the fresh basil. If you are grating your own cheese and I highly recommend doing it yourself, now's the time to get it grated.

HOW TO MAKE AT HOME

The traditional way of making pesto is with a mortar and pestle. Start by adding basil, garlic, salt, and pine nuts to the mortar and grinding them to a paste. Pound in the cheese. Finally whisk in the oil until you have the desired consistency.

As much as I enjoy trying traditional methods, I usually don't have the time or energy to bruise basil leaves so I reach for my food processor and puree a batch in a matter of minutes. If you don't have a food processor, you can also use a blender. Here's how I make my pesto sauce.

Add the garlic to the food processor and mince. Next, add the basil leaves, pine nuts, and a dash of salt and pepper to the bowl of the processor. While the processor is running, slowly drizzle in olive oil through the feed tube until all the ingredients are pureed.

You may need to stop the processor at this point and scrape down the sides with a rubber spatula to get every mixed together. Now add Parmesan cheese and mix it into the rest of the mixture. If the pesto is too thick, add a tablespoon of water.

Cover and refrigerate until you are ready to use it. This should keep for 2 - 3 days in the fridge but freezes well if you want to keep it longer. Enjoy, RG

Making pesto is not a lot of work and the intense flavor and enjoyment of making your own may keep you from buying supermarket pesto in a jar for a while.

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