

FETTUCINE ALFREDO

One of the most popular pasta dishes in America today is fettucine Alfredo. You can even buy a jar of Alfredo sauce in the supermarket. And yet in Italy, my Italian friends have never heard of the dish—nor of Alfredo. It turns out that what we've got is a triumph of marketing—and of American marketing at that.

Fettuccine Alfredo was the invention of a Roman restaurant owner named Alfredo Di Lelio, who had a restaurant in Rome called Alfredo alla Scrofa in the old city center. He also opened a restaurant at the 1939 New York World's Fair. There he took the popular Roman dish of fettuccine alla Romana, or noodles in the style of Rome, which was a dish of wide noodles dressed with cream, butter, and parmesan cheese, and claimed it as his own. He initially claimed that it was the water from the Roman aqueducts that was used in the making of the pasta that made the dish so special.

Alfredo sold his restaurant during World War II, and after the war the new owner capitalized on the restaurant's popularity with American tourists, who all wanted to eat fettuccine Alfredo. The dish was prepared at the table with some ceremony by the headwaiter, and the lady of the party was presented with a golden spoon and fork with which to eat her pasta. The restaurant did so well that Alfredo opened another restaurant, also called Alfredo's and claimed to serve the *original* fettuccine Alfredo. For awhile there were two competing Alfredo's in Rome, each claiming to be the original.

The recipe was a closely guarded secret. Some said that the creaminess and lightness of the recipe was in the cheese he used, or in the addition of a little olive oil to the preparation of the fettuccine, others claimed that the pasta was cooked in milk. But before long Italian restaurants back in the U.S. were trying to duplicate fettuccine Alfredo, with varying degrees of success. Eventually the cream sauce would end up with garlic, (my Italian friends complain that Americans put garlic in *everything*), and be called Alfredo sauce. While no one knows exactly how Alfredo made his fettuccine so good, here's a pretty good approximation of the recipe.

The trick is the quality of the ingredients. Homemade pasta is tastier and more tender than store-bought pasta, and judging from the pictures on the restaurant's website and my own memory of eating there, the noodles are wider than regular store-bought fettuccine. So first of all try to make some homemade pasta. Otherwise I would recommend the widest fettuccine or pappardelle you can find.

You'll want about a pound of fresh pasta or 12 ounces of dry. You'll also need about 1 ½ cups of heavy cream which you need to pour into a bowl and whip just slightly, 1 cup of freshly grated real parmigiano reggiano, 1 ½ sticks of unsalted butter at room temperature, a little white pepper, and a nutmeg and grater. Cook the pasta, and drain it leaving it wet. Meanwhile, in a skillet large enough to hold the pasta, put in the butter and melt it over low heat. Add the about half the lightly whipped cream and keep stirring with a whisk to incorporate with the butter.

Add the cooked pasta and about two-thirds of the cheese and toss to mix very well. Add the remaining cream and a pinch of white pepper and a pinch of salt. Mix thoroughly and grate a little fresh nutmeg over the top and serve immediately, with the remainder of the cheese to pass at the table.

Some recipes sauté a little chopped shallots first in the butter and garnish with chopped fresh parsley, but I can tell you from my own recollection of eating fettuccine Alfredo at both restaurants there was neither shallot nor parsley.

This recipe is not for counting calories, and all you'll need is a glass of a light white wine, like a sauvignon blanc, and some fresh grapes for dessert. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.