

Pasta with Sardines and Fennel

Pasta con le Sarde

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

Sicilians are passionate about this dish, and every cook claims to have the best and most authentic recipe. Some add tomatoes, and some stew the sardines along with the fennel, but I prefer this method of cooking the sardines separately and layering them with the pasta and saving the tomatoes for another recipe.

Fennel grows wild all over Sicily, and the green fronds are used to make this pasta. Cultivated fennel does not have the same flavor, but the wild fennel is not widely available here. I use a combination of fresh dill and cultivated fennel to approximate the flavor of this classic Sicilian dish. Toasted bread crumbs, not cheese, are the appropriate topping.

2 medium fennel bulbs, trimmed and sliced

1 cup chopped fresh dill

1/2 teaspoon saffron threads

1/2 cup plus 1 tablespoon olive oil

1/4 cup plain dry bread crumbs

**1 pound fresh sardines, cleaned and filleted
(see Note)**

Salt and freshly ground black pepper

1 large onion, chopped

6 anchovy fillets

1/2 cup dried currants

1/2 cup pine nuts

1 pound perciatelli or bucatini

1 Bring at least 4 quarts of water to a boil in a large pot. Add the fennel and dill and cook until tender when pierced with a fork, about 10 minutes. Scoop out the fennel and dill with a slotted spoon, reserving the cooking water. Let the fennel and dill cool, then finely chop them. In a small bowl, soak the saffron threads in 2 tablespoons of the fennel water.

2 In a small skillet, heat 1 tablespoon of the oil over medium heat and cook the bread crumbs, stirring constantly, until toasted, about 5 minutes.

3 In a large skillet, heat 1/4 cup of the oil. Fry the sardines cut-side down first in the oil until cooked through, about 1 minute on each side. Sprinkle with salt and pepper. Transfer the sardines to a plate.

4 Wipe out the skillet. Pour the remaining 1/4 cup of the oil into the skillet. Add the onion and cook over medium heat until golden, about 10 minutes. Add the anchovies, currants, pine nuts, saffron, and salt and pepper to taste. Cook, stirring often, 10 minutes.

5 Add the fennel and dill to the onion with one cup of the cooking water. Cook, stirring, 10 minutes.

6 Add more water to the pot to equal 4 quarts of water for cooking the pasta. Bring the water to a boil. Add 2 tablespoons of salt, then the pasta. Stir well, gently pushing the pasta down until it is completely covered with water. Cook over high heat, stirring frequently, until the pasta is al dente, tender yet still firm to the bite. Drain the pasta.

7 Transfer the pasta to the skillet with the fennel mixture and toss well. Spoon half the pasta into a warm serving bowl. Layer with half of the sardines. Add the remaining pasta. Sprinkle with the bread crumbs and top with the sardines. Serve immediately.

Note: *To clean sardines:* With a large heavy chef's knife or kitchen shears, cut off the heads. Slit the fish open along the belly and remove the innards. Pull out the backbone. Snip off the fins. Rinse and drain.