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# Pasta

I OFTEN FIND THE TRICK to entertaining in Moscow is to create dishes that show imagination but are dead simple to make. This pasta dish is one of them. Hailing from Alsace, you can serve it with a hearty meat dish, on its own, or with vegetables. Don't just associate the poppy seed with sticky buns. The beauty of the seed is it tastes just as good with savory dishes as sweet.

In the old days, if you couldn't track them down in the *rynok*, you had to resort to the Moscow gourmet heaven, the Finnish supermarket. What made shopping there fun (apart from the thrill of wondering how you could possibly pay the bill) was the fact everything was written in Finnish. I miss describing my black whole grain pepper as *mustapippuri rouhittu* and long-life whipping cream as *vispi kerma iskukuumennettu vähälaktoosinen*. Give the guests too much to drink and you will find some of them will be able to recite these tongue-twisters with ease.

# Alsatian Poppy Seed Noodles

|                       |                 |
|-----------------------|-----------------|
| 4 <i>tabsp</i>        | butter          |
| 2 <i>heaped tabsp</i> | Dijon mustard   |
| 4 <i>tabsp</i>        | crème fraîche   |
| 2 <i>level tabsp</i>  | poppy seeds     |
| 4 <i>cups</i>         | dried fettucine |

Melt butter in a heavy saucepan over low heat. Add mustard and whisk so that it is blended. Add the crème fraîche and one tablespoon of poppy seeds and whisk in well. Bring to a simmer and cook for about one minute until slightly thickened. Remove from heat.

Cook pasta in salted boiling water, drain, add the pasta to the mustard sauce and stir so that the mixture coats the pasta well. Return to the heat, stirring constantly until the mixture is hot. Transfer to a warm platter and top with the remaining tablespoon of poppy seed.

MURPHY'S LAW: if anything can go wrong it will. I bought a new stereo, a heater and a toaster last week, and excited by such extravagance, turned them all on at once. I blew the fuses in every light socket and appliance in the apartment.

Worst of all, this happened late Friday night. I mended the fuses, but then had to contemplate a wretched weekend ahead. A weekend without the World Service, without the stereo, without toast! I sat in my very quiet, gusty apartment contemplating the strange noise of a little child thumping up and down in the lane outside on a pogo stick.

Remember them? They make a most insistent noise. Luckily he will have to take his toy indoors any day now when the snow starts and he will only be able to drive the upstairs neighbors insane with the noise rather than the whole street.

By Saturday morning I worked out the strategy: Compromise. Do I sit in the dark and eat toast; do I listen to the stereo and freeze, or do I sit next to the toaster to keep warm, enjoying the stereo?

I have opted for the stereo and toast. Sitting huddled by my toaster gave rise to many thoughts, few pleasant. I ran through my mind some other Murphy's Law scenarios and was amazed at the plethora of examples. Everyone has their variations, this is mine and this is true.

It is November and it is bleak. The water and heating go off at the same time. For days. When they come back on the ceiling above your bed will collapse under a wall of water because your neighbors have been so fed up by the sound of the little child pogo-sticking above them, they left for the dacha, but left a tap on.

This will happen about 3 o'clock in the morning.

You call the plumber but the telephone gives you a slight electric shock then expires. You decide to go upstairs, break into the neighbors apartment and turn off the tap. You prepare to leave but the key to your front door snaps off in your hand. You throw yourself at the door, splintering the frame but getting it open. Panting with relief you notice a looming shadow in front of you. "Ah, the Mafia," you say not a bit surprised. But no, it's not the mafia. It's a distant relation of a person you met at a dull party two years ago who hauls his suitcase into your hallway saying over his shoulder "Hi, the name is Bill Murphy. Didn't you get my letter, I posted it ages ago, I'm coming to stay."

"Come in, come in." You cheerfully reply, wading through the water lapping over the parquet. Then you pop out to the shops to get that bunch of basil for the pesto and never, ever come back.

# Moscow Pesto

|            |                        |
|------------|------------------------|
| 2-1/2 cups | fresh coriander leaves |
| 2 cloves   | garlic, finely minced  |
| 2 tbsp     | fresh lemon juice      |
| 1/4 cup    | olive oil              |
| 1/2 tsp    | salt                   |
| 1 tsp      | black pepper           |
| 2 cups     | cooked penne pasta     |
| 1 tbsp     | butter                 |

Traditional pesto sauce comprises basil and pine nuts, neither of which we have in abundance. This is a food processor sauce. For those of you who don't have one, make friends with someone who does and haul the ingredients over to their house. Put the coriander and garlic in a food processor. Turn on the machine and carefully pour the lemon juice and olive oil in the top for a few seconds. Scrape down all the ingredients and pulse again until you have a purée. Add pepper and salt and serve over hot buttery penne pasta.

THE BATTLE LINE has been drawn in the kitchen this week — my house guest has spurned my smelly cheese in preference to his own.

"How is it possible?" I asked, waving a ripe slice under his nose, "that you could denigrate this king of all cheeses — Roquefort?"

"King. Roquefort, pah!" He replied. And gesticulating wildly with a huge hunk of marbly, veiny, dry pasteurized milk produce, he declared: "There is only one king when it comes to cheese, and your smelly French one just doesn't rank."

Those English. Xenophobia always comes out at its most fiercest when defending Stilton cheese.

Invented about 250 years ago, Stilton's origins are hotly disputed: was it Mrs. Scarbrow, the housekeeper to Lady Beaumont at Quenby Hall, Leicestershire who passed it on to her daughter Mrs. Paulet, who made it for her brother-in-law the innkeeper of Bell Inn in Stilton, Leicestershire? Or was it created by cheesemakers in Stilton, Cambridgeshire? We grappled over this weighty topic just yesterday. That and who was going to get the last slice of Stilton after lunch. Acknowledging my rampant gourmand appetite, House Guest gave me the last piece. (And knew instinctively that it would therefore be my turn to do the washing up.)

Roquefort isn't embroiled in such an identity crisis. It's simple, Roquefort comes from Roquefort-sur-Soulzon. A rugged, wild area of southern France near Millau. More particularly it comes from the caves in the surrounding hills. (And I couldn't help pointing out to HG that they have been making it there since 1411.)

The milk must come from the village itself and follow the special maturing process to be given the name. For Roquefort the cheese is made in the factories, injected with the special fungus, taken up to the hills and placed on the floors of the caves in tight rows, brushed over, perforated with holes to let the air penetrate, rubbed over with a little salt then left to mature for three months.

If you want a really good one, they leave them in the caves for up to a year. They cost a fortune and add a new definition to the word ripe. When you have Roquefort or Stilton, you don't have to do very much. Cube it and add it to a green salad, crumble it and add it to soup, melt it and turn it into the fastest, tastiest pasta sauce, or just eat it in slices with walnuts and port for dessert.

HG makes a mean Spaghetti Stilton. But I naturally prefer Roquefort.

# Roquefort Sauce

|                |                             |
|----------------|-----------------------------|
| <i>1 tbsp</i>  | butter                      |
| <i>3/4 cup</i> | Roquefort cheese, crumbled  |
| <i>1</i>       | whisk                       |
| <i>1 tsp</i>   | freshly ground black pepper |
| <i>2 cups</i>  | cooked pasta                |
| <i>Plus</i>    | olive oil                   |

Melt. That's it. Melt the butter slowly, add cubes of cheese, use a whisk and stir continually over a low flame until the Roquefort has melted. I find it best to have the pasta already cooked and tossed in a good olive oil, waiting nearby. The cheese sauce is ready in seconds, don't let it stand, otherwise you will have a disaster on your hands.

Pour over the pasta, add a good grind of pepper and sprint it out to the table.

BY MY RECKONING it was dinner party number 17 for this year; another impromptu one, with a twist. Vegetarians were Coming for Dinner. The first course was to be my favorite mushroom soup with eggplant, but I was completely stumped as to what the main course should be. I took a careful look through Mollie Katzen's *Enchanted Broccoli Forest* — not much to excite the hungry hoards there, I decided. A more careful look though my enormous pile of collected recipes (composed mostly of meat dishes or wicked sugary treats) was little help. At the last minute, on the way to the *rynok*, I had to do the vegetarian equivalent of pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

And it came to me. What is the dish you make almost every week without getting all silly and quivering "Oh my god I'm not eating meat?"

Pasta of course. With tomato sauce.

Being the beginning of summer, the *rynok* had plenty of tomatoes, fresh garlic, eggplant, onions and tables groaning with delicious lettuce.

Russian tomatoes are delicious — just like they used to be in the West before the marketing boards got hold of them and decided we had to have varieties that traveled well and could hold their shape at the expense of juicy, tasty and non-fibrous flavor. If you have time, make the sauce entirely of *rynok* tomatoes. I never have time and give a silent prayer of thanks to the most essential ingredient in any kitchen, the tinned tomatoes. Bulgaria, Spain, Italy, they are generally all acceptable.

Nothing could be more simple than this dish and if you know the tricks, memorable. My trick is to make a standard tomato sauce, but add artichoke hearts. The day Moscow *rynoks* have fresh artichokes for sale we will all give up dreams of moving to France; until then it's hard-currency supermarkets to the rescue.

# Tomato and Artichoke Sauce

|                           |                         |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|
| <i>1 large</i>            | onion, finely chopped   |
| <i>5 cloves</i>           | garlic, finely chopped  |
| <i>1 large tin (800g)</i> | peeled tomatoes         |
| <i>2</i>                  | fresh tomatoes, chopped |
| <i>2 tbsp</i>             | tomato purée            |
| <i>1/2 glass</i>          | white wine              |
| <i>1</i>                  | bouquet garni           |
| <i>1 tin</i>              | artichoke hearts        |
| <i>4 cups</i>             | penne pasta             |
| <i>Plus</i>               | Parmesan cheese         |

Cook the onion and garlic together in a large dish on very low heat. This is the part where people get lazy. Rush the onions and the garlic, burn just a little and you will give the whole dish the wrong flavor. Slow cooking, even if the guests are arriving any minute, is necessary.

Once the onions are quite transparent, add the tomatoes and tomato purée. Stir well, bring the mixture to the boil furiously to reduce the liquid for about five to ten minutes, then turn down the heat. Add the wine, and the herbs. Cover, and simmer. Plan to add the artichoke hearts to the sauce just about ten minutes before you serve the pasta. I quartered mine because I didn't want to see my generally well-behaved guests fighting over the portions.

Make sure your pasta is fat and juicy (no thin spaghetti will do for this rich sauce, you have to have voluptuous pasta) and drizzle olive oil over the pasta if you can't manage the timing and have to let it stand for more than a minute. Serve with generous helpings of Parmesan cheese.