

Spicy Seafood Pasta with Fennel

Serves 4–6

At its core, this is a light breezy pasta made with caramelized fennel and juicy, fresh tomatoes—already wonderful—but yes, there is also seafood. This can mean many things: shrimp and mussels or clams, squid or calamari, scallops or picked crab or lobster. These fruits of the sea can be fresh or frozen, tinned or canned. You can use a mix or stick to shrimp since you have a bag of it in your freezer anyway. The more interesting your seafood choice the more dynamic your sauce will be, which is to say: live a little. The raw garlic at the end coupled with torn basil and fennel fronds will bring as much life to the dish as that generous squeeze of lemon, so please do include them at the end..

Ingredients

¼ cup olive oil, plus more
½ large or 1 small fennel bulb (including stems and fronds), thinly sliced
Kosher salt, freshly ground black pepper
1 ½–2 teaspoons crushed red pepper flakes, plus more
1 tablespoon whole fennel seed
½ cup dry white wine (if not using wine, use ½ cup water with 1–2 tablespoons white wine vinegar)
4 cloves garlic, very well crushed, plus 2 cloves finely chopped
1 ½–2 pounds fresh tomatoes, any sort, chopped
1 pound pasta (any long noodle shape is my preference)
1 pound mussels or clams, scrubbed (and soaked, if using clams)
1 ½–2 pounds shrimp, head on or not
1 bunch basil, leaves torn
1–2 lemons, halved for squeezing

Instructions

1. Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Cook pasta until al dente (each pasta will cook differently depending on the brand, so use package instructions). Drain, reserving about 1 cup of pasta water. Return pasta to the pot, drizzling with a little olive oil to prevent pasta from clumping together while you finish the sauce.
2. Meanwhile, heat ¼ cup oil a large skillet over medium heat. Add fennel, season with salt and pepper, and cook, stirring occasionally, until nicely caramelized, about 5–8 minutes. Add fennel seed and crushed red pepper flakes, stirring a minute or two to toast in the oil. Add wine and let simmer until it's reduced by about half and the fennel is softened.
3. Add 4 cloves of your well-crushed garlic cloves, and cook a minute or two, then add your tomatoes maybe squeezing them a bit as you add (it's fun). Season with salt and pepper and simmer until the tomatoes turn juicy and jammy but are still chunky, 5–8 minutes. Add 1 cup of water and simmer for 5 or so minutes, until everything has melded together and the brothy sauce has thickened slightly, seasoning with salt, pepper and crushed red pepper flakes as needed.
4. Add shrimp and mussels to the sauce, cover the pan (use a sheet pan or large plate, whatever works), and cook, stirring occasionally, until the shrimp are bright pink and opaque and the mussels have opened, 5–8 minutes.
5. Add the sauce to the pasta in the larger pot (or the pasta to the sauce—whichever vessel holds more), gently tossing to evenly coat the pasta with the briny sauce and distribute the seafood (tongs are best for this). Add chopped fennel fronds, remaining 2 cloves finely chopped garlic and toss, toss, toss.

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6. To serve, transfer pasta to a large bowl or platter (or serve straight from the pot), finishing with a squeeze of lemon, a pinch of flaky salt, crack of pepper, and more crushed red pepper flakes. Scatter basil (and more fennel fronds if you have them) over top. Eat with some crisp white wine and sparkling water, and don't forget to bring a bowl for shells to the table.