

Spaghetti Aglio e Olio con le Sarde e Capperi Fritti

- or -

Spaghetti Aptos

"OLLY-o ee O-leo kon lay SAR-day ee CAP-perry FREE-tee" or Italian for "Spaghetti Garlic and Oil with Sardines and Fried Capers". This dish is something I made for myself for late-night dinners when I was pulling bachelor duty when my wife was out of town on business for her company. It's quick and easy because it takes about as long as boiling the pasta and it was a meeting of my Danish and Italian heritages. "Aglio e Olio" is a common quick family meal in Italy and I added my own touch with a tin of good quality sardines and fried capers because I got bored of just sardines, cheese, and bread for dinner with a bottle of wine. So I decided to jazz that menu with a little creativity and it turned out rather good. For allergies to capers you can substitute fried fresh sage leaves, just add a little extra pinch of salt to the oil to replace what would have been added with the capers. I have done it both ways and both are fantastic. I don't know a good vegetarian/vegan substitute for sardines but I suppose you could soak Portobello slices in a brine made with olive oil and salt with long slices of white onion (regular or just virgin olive oil is fine - don't waste extra-virgin on that). Insofar as Parmigiano-Reggiano and Pecorino-Romano cheese substitutes, I have no ideas for you. Serves 4, or 2 hungry people with possible left-overs.

Warning: This is NOT a good choice for a first-date meal unless you want mouthwash for dessert and a night of Netflix-n-Chill with your cat...

Ingredients:

- 1 pound (approximately half a kilo) of dried or fresh spaghetti pasta (you can actually use any long noodle you want such as tagliatelle, capellini, pappardelle, etc. - whichever you have in your pantry)
- 1 tin your favorite good quality sardines packed in oil
- 1 fresh lemon
- 2 tablespoons (28 grams) capers, drained (alternatively 1 bunch fresh sage from garden or market plus a pinch of salt)
- 8-10 whole knuckles garlic
- 0.3-0.5 cup (79-118 ml) extra-virgin olive oil
- 0.5 cup (64 grams) grated high-quality Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (DO NOT use that sawdust in the green cylinder)
- 0.5 cup (64 grams) grated high-quality Pecorino-Romano cheese
- Kosher salt (sea salt or any other non-iodized salt is good, just DO NOT use iodized salt because under heat the iodine gets bitter and ruins the flavor profile)
- Black pepper to taste
- 0.5 tablespoon (7 grams) red pepper flakes (optional)

Procedure:

Start a stock pot of water to boil. Make sure the pot is big enough to give the pasta plenty of room to move around as it boils. Do not break the noodles in half and do not add oil to the water. Once water is at a rolling boil, heavily salt the water so it tastes like the ocean. Stir until all the salt is absorbed then lower in the pasta. As soon as it softens, give a good hard stir to keep pasta from clumping.

While water is coming up to the boil, set a thick-bottom large pan on medium heat (cast iron is a good tool for this job). Once pan is heated, pour in the oil. Open the tin of sardines and add the all the oil to the pan. Reserve the fish on a paper towel to soak up any oil residue. Let the oil heat up a moment while you peel the garlic then lower the whole garlic knuckles into the pan. Let cook for about 5-10 minutes, gently stirring until golden-brown (do not over-cook or the garlic turns bitter). Reduce heat to medium-low and carefully lower in the capers (or sage and salt) and let them fry for about 5 minutes until crisp (the capers or sage leaves will darken but should not brown or burn lest they turn bitter and ruin the dish).

Cut the sardines in half or thirds depending on desired bite size and lower into pan. Sprinkle with fresh-ground black pepper and the optional red pepper flakes.

The pasta should be just shy of al-dente (a little firm to the bite but not white or doughy in the middle). Transfer the pasta to the pan to finish cooking. Do not rinse it or you strip it of its ability to hold the sauce. Very carefully lower in about a half cup of the pasta water to help marry the pasta and sauce. Oil and water don't mix so the hot oil may want to pop vigorously at first which could be painful, so pour the water slowly until the oil settles down. Gently stir everything together to get the pasta thoroughly coated. Lower the cheese into the pan and mix gently as the cheese melts and coats the pasta.

The garlic should be roasted soft and not have that harsh bite with which we are so familiar. You should have the garlic taste without much of the unpleasant sulphurous after-effects.

Carefully zest about a teaspoon of lemon rind (only the yellow not the bitter white pith). Then cut lemon in half and add the juice of a half (take care to avoid letting any seeds fall into dish). Stir again very gently to distribute zest and juice then plate. Top with another generous portion of the cheese mixture then a sparse sprinkling of parsley for color and serve.

Pair with your favorite wine. Either red or white works with this dish. Garlic crostini topped with slices of fresh Roma tomato and basil leaf from either a Ciabatta or sourdough works well as a side.

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