

Pasta Quatre Funghi et Fromage

This dish is penne pasta with 4 mushrooms and 4 cheeses. It's quite rich but brightened up with a little lemon juice and steamed sweet peas. I used penne but any short pasta can be used like farfalle, fusilli, rotini, etc. Serves up to 4 (or 2 hungry people).

Ingredients:

- 2 gallons water
- 1 box dried penne pasta (or fresh if you have or make it but timing here is based on dried. 1 box = 2 pounds.)
- 1 package fresh Crimini mushrooms (“meaty” flavor background)
- 1 package fresh Shimeji mushrooms (sweet mild flavor background)
- 1 package dried Judah's Ear (“wood ear”) mushrooms (mild tangy background)
- 1 package dried Porcini mushrooms (main “meaty” flavor profile)
- 2 cups warm water
- 2-3 ounces Parmigiano-Regiano (finely grated - if you love cheese use 3)
- 2-3 ounces Pecorino-Romano (finely grated - if you love cheese use 3)
- 2 teaspoons Balsamic vinegar
- 1 teaspoon Worcestershire sauce (or 2 anchovies dispersed in the pan)
- 0.5 cup Pinot Gris wine
- 0.5 cup Half-n-Half
- 1 cup fresh or frozen peas
- 1 lemon
- 1 tablespoon fresh rosemary leaves (dried can do in a pinch)
- 1 teaspoon onion powder (NOT onion salt)
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt (sea salt or any non-iodized salt will do - iodine turns bitter under heat)

Procedure:

Take 6 of the Porcini and Wood Ear mushrooms and let soak in the 2 cups warm water.

Set the two gallons to boil on high heat. When water is boiling, lower in about a half cup of the kosher salt. The water should taste like seawater so add more if deemed necessary. Do not oil the water or the sauce won't stick to the pasta. While the pasta water is coming up to temperature, you will start cooking the mushrooms.

Take 6 of the Crimini and Shimeji mushrooms and brush or wipe off any remaining dirt then remove the stems and slice up the caps. Take the stems and dice them. Reserve for after the Porcini and Wood Ear mushrooms are done reconstituted.

When the dried mushrooms are reconstituted, take out of water, remove stems from Porcinis (if you can find stems on the Wood Ears you have the wrong mushrooms...) and blot everything dry with some paper towels. Reserve the mushroom water. Slice up the Porcini caps and the Wood Ears and dice the Porcini stems.

Start a saucepan with about an inch (2.54 cm) water in the bottom on high heat. Place steamer basket into the saucepan. When water boils, lower peas into steamer and steam for a few minutes until tender and bright. Take saucepan off heat and set aside until pasta is finished. Do not boil the peas with the pasta or they will be mushy and grey.

Start a heavy-bottom pan heating on medium-high heat (cast iron is a good choice). When pan is heated, lower in 2 tablespoons butter and olive oil to melt and mix. When the butter is just melted and foaming, lower all the mushrooms and stems into the pan, sprinkle the onion powder over them, and sauté for about 5 minutes. Lower in the Balsamic and Worcestershire with 0.5 cup of the mushroom water. Sauté for about another 5 minutes then lower in the wine. Sauté for another 2 minutes then lower in the Half-n-Half. Drop the heat to medium-low so the cream doesn't split and let sauce reduce by about a third while stirring occasionally. While the sauce is reducing (10-15 minutes), chop and lower in the rosemary. Zest the lemon into the sauce then reserve it (do not juice it into the sauce yet or the cream might split).

By now the pasta water should be boiling and salted, lower the full box of pasta into the water to boil (boil for about 3 minutes less than the directions specifies - you will need it el-dente and will finish cooking it in the pan with the sauce). When pasta is done so should the sauce. Using a slotted spoon, scoop the pasta into the sauce and reserve the water (keep a cup for immediate use and freeze the rest of the starchy and salty water in ice cube trays for use in thickening soups, sauces, etc.). Lower a half cup of the pasta water and mix into the sauce and pasta. Lower in the 2-3 ounces of the Parmigiano-Regiano into the sauce and mix well then repeat for the Pecorino-Romano (the Parm gives a base flavor and the Romano gives a tang due to the goat milk from which it's made). Lower in 1 tablespoon butter and mix to melt and "gloss the sauce".

Once the cheese is thoroughly mixed and melted and the sauce is thick, lower in the peas and fold in. Slice lemon in half and juice both halves over the pasta. Drizzle a little olive oil over the top and toss to mix. Serve up the pasta. Let diners add more cheese and fresh ground black pepper if they wish.

Serve with a light bruschetta, the same wine you used in the sauce, and after an antipasto appetizer. A fresh green salad under a vinaigrette would be a great finish.

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