

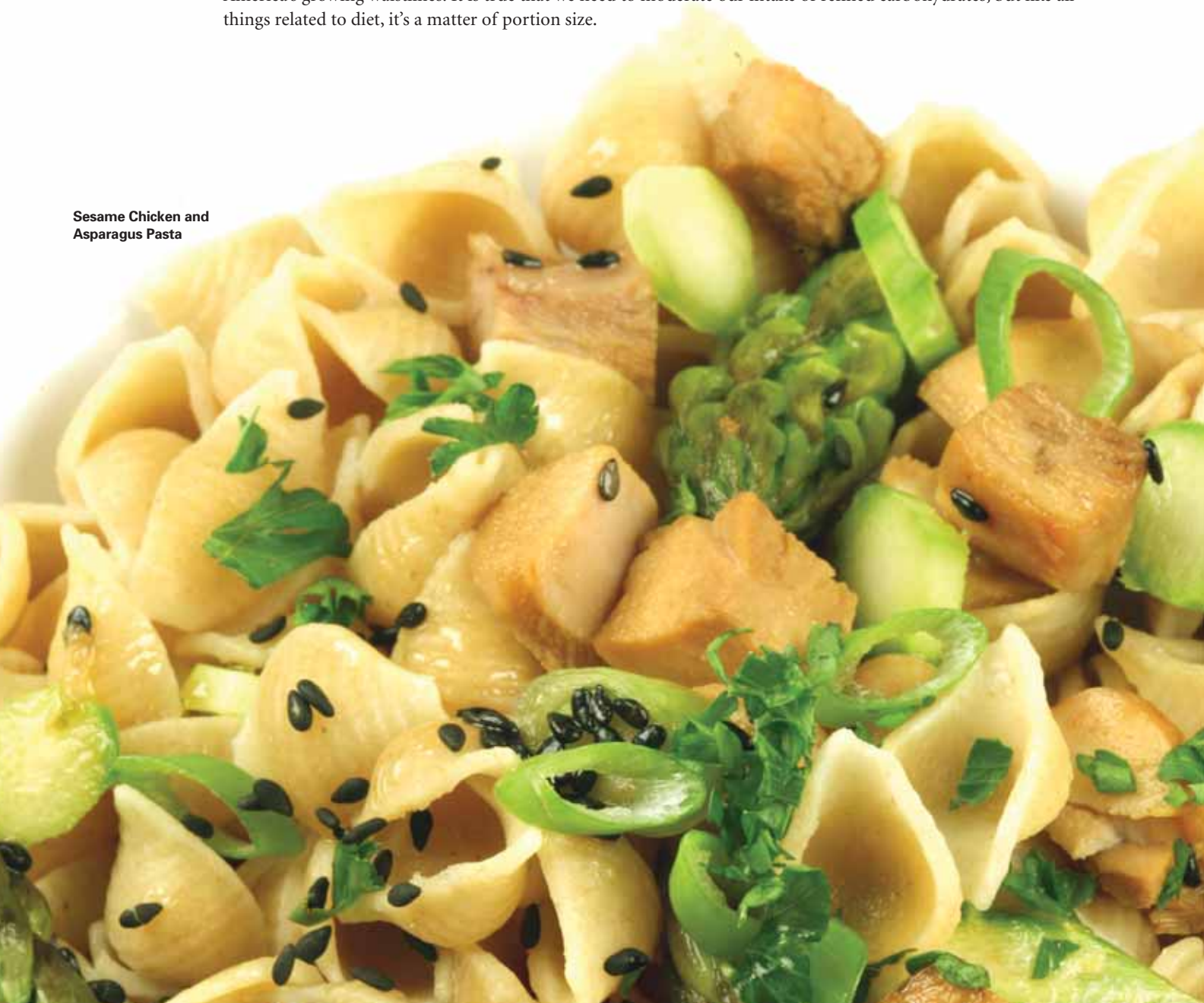
# Quick

## *pasta dinners*

By Laura Pensiero, RD

**Viva Italia! Pasta is back!** During the height of the last low-carb diet craze, pasta was banished from the nutritional “good” list by many misguided diners. It has been accused of causing diabetes and America’s growing waistlines. It is true that we need to moderate our intake of refined carbohydrates, but like all things related to diet, it’s a matter of portion size.

Sesame Chicken and Asparagus Pasta



The truth about pasta is that it can be a healthy, quick, and satisfying weekday meal, the perfect medium for all sorts of seasonal vegetables and lean protein. Making room for nutrition-packed whole grains is certainly a goal—recently one of the biggest pasta companies in Italy launched whole grain versions of its pasta shapes in America.

Now that there are many brands to choose from, sample to see which meet your quality standards. A couple of my favorite brands include De Cecco, Barilla, and Eden Organic. Whole wheat pasta can be substituted in any of the recipes below.

### Sesame Chicken and Asparagus Pasta (hot or cold)

This pasta deviates from the traditional Italian theme. It is a perfect way to use leftover chicken or turkey. Also, consider substituting leftover cooked vegetables such as broccoli or cauliflower for the asparagus, adding them to skillet with the chicken. Another variation is to add rinsed spinach (leaves only) to the skillet just before removing from the heat.

- 1 bunch (about 12 ounces) asparagus
- 1 pound dry short cut (penne, fusilli, radiatore, etc) pasta
- 3 tablespoons peanut oil
- 1 teaspoon sesame oil
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced
- ¼ cup sesame seeds
- 2 cups cubed, cooked chicken
- ½ cup soy sauce
- ½ cup rice wine vinegar
- 2 green onions, white and light green parts thinly sliced
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh Italian parsley
- 1 teaspoon sugar

Break the tough ends off the asparagus spears. Using a peeler, peel the stems of the asparagus (if using thick asparagus; otherwise proceed). Slice off the asparagus tips and halve them on a bias. Thinly slice the stems. Set aside separately.

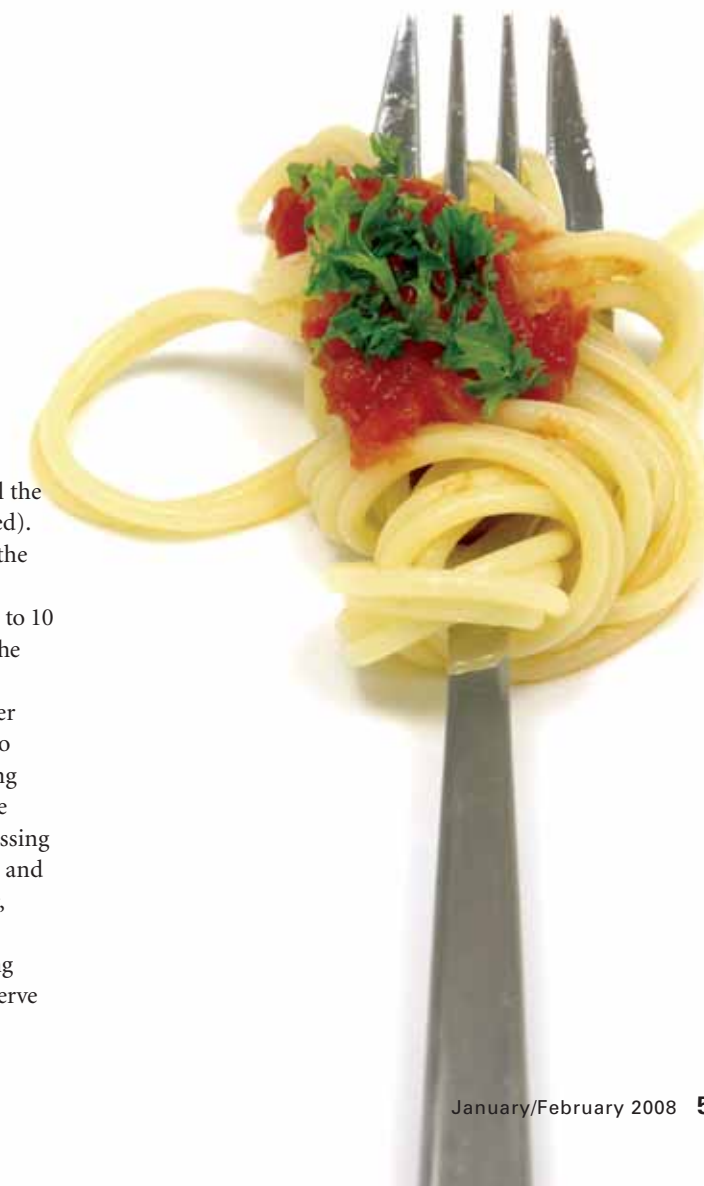
Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add pasta and cook for 8 to 10 minutes or until al dente. During the last 5 minutes of cooking, add the asparagus stems.

Meanwhile, heat the peanut and sesame oil in a small skillet over medium heat. Add the garlic and cook until the edges just begin to brown, about 1 minute. Stir in the asparagus tips and cook, stirring often, until cooked but still firm, about 4 minutes. Add the sesame seeds and chicken and turn up the heat to medium-high; cook, tossing or stirring until the sesame seeds are fragrant and begin to brown and the chicken is warmed, about 3 minutes. Stir in soy sauce, vinegar, green onions, parsley, and sugar. Set aside.

Drain the pasta and asparagus stems and transfer to a large mixing bowl. Pour the skillet sauce over the pasta and gently stir to blend. Serve hot or cover and refrigerate and serve as a cold pasta salad.



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### Fusilli alla Siciliana Fusilli With Olives and Cauliflower

This quick pasta dish offers hearty (and healthy) Sicilian flavors—anchovies, cauliflower, capers, garlic, and olives. Other pasta, such as bucatini, gemelli, or rigatoni, can be substituted for the fusilli.

Makes 6 servings

#### Olive Oil Breadcrumb Topping:

1 teaspoon olive oil  
3 tablespoons unseasoned breadcrumbs  
2 teaspoons minced Italian parsley  
Pinch salt

#### Pasta

1 pound dry fusilli pasta  
4 cups small cauliflower florets (break or slice to about 1 to 2 inches in diameter)  
3 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil  
2 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced  
½ cup pitted black olives, such as Gaeta  
3 tablespoons capers, rinsed  
3 anchovy fillets, roughly chopped  
3 tablespoons fresh chopped Italian parsley  
½ cup grated Parmesan cheese (good quality Grana Padana or Parmigiano-Reggiano)

Prepare the breadcrumb topping by combining all ingredients in a small nonstick skillet. Using your hands, work the olive oil into the breadcrumbs to evenly coat them. Place the skillet over medium heat and cook, stirring occasionally, until the breadcrumbs just begin to brown and smell toasty, 2 to 3 minutes. Set aside.

Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a boil. Add the fusilli and the cauliflower florets and cook until the pasta is al dente, about 8 to 12 minutes, depending on the brand.

Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a large, nonstick skillet over medium-high heat. Add the garlic and cook until the edges are lightly brown. Add the olives, capers, anchovies, and parsley and cook, stirring often, until the anchovies break down and dissolve, about 2 minutes.

Drain the pasta and cauliflower, reserving ½ cup of the cooking water. Add the pasta, cauliflower, and cooking water to the skillet and cook, stirring or tossing, until the pasta is well coated with the sauce, about 2 minutes. Add the Parmesan cheese, remove from the heat, and toss or stir to combine. Transfer to a serving bowl or dishes, top with the olive oil breadcrumbs, and serve immediately.

### Penne With Sausage and Butternut Squash Ragù

The sausage, butternut, and sage sauce can take you from autumn through winter. In addition to saucing pasta, it can be stirred into risotto, added to a whole grain pilaf, or used to stuff harvest peppers. I use a locally made Italian-style sausage from nearby Northwind Farms, which is sweet and delicious. Check out your local markets to see what's available. Chicken or turkey sausage can be substituted.

Makes 8 servings

2 tablespoons olive oil  
1½ pounds sweet Italian sausage, casing removed and torn or cut into about 1-inch pieces  
5 cups diced butternut squash (about 1 large, peeled, seeded, and diced)  
3 shallots, chopped  
1 garlic clove, crushed  
1 tablespoon fresh chopped parsley  
1 tablespoon fresh chopped sage  
1½ tablespoons all-purpose flour  
½ cup dry white wine  
1½ cups chicken stock or water  
Salt and freshly ground pepper  
1 pound dry penne pasta

Heat the oil in a large skillet or casserole over medium-high heat. Add the sausage and cook until evenly browned, about 5 minutes, and then transfer to a plate.

Drain all but 2 tablespoons of fat from the pan and then add the butternut squash, shallots, garlic, parsley, and sage. Cook, stirring often, until the vegetables soften slightly, about 3 minutes.

Return the sausage to the skillet and sprinkle with the flour. Stir until completely incorporated and no flour is visible. Add the

white wine, stirring to deglaze the bottom of the pan. When the wine is almost completely reduced, add the chicken stock or water.

Bring the mixture to a boil; reduce heat and simmer until the sausage is cooked and tender and the pan juices have reduced, about 10 minutes. Adjust seasoning with salt and pepper, if necessary. Set aside.

Bring a large saucepan of water to a boil. Season with salt and cook until the pasta is al dente, about 8 to 12 minutes, depending on brand.

Return the skillet or casserole with the butternut squash and sausage over medium-high heat. Drain the pasta, reserving ½ cup of the cooking water. Add the drained pasta to the sauce and cook, tossing or gently stirring, until the pasta is well combined with the sauce. Add a bit of the cooking water if the pasta needs any moisture. Serve immediately.

Spaghetti With Fresh Tomato Sauce



### Spaghetti With Fresh Tomato Sauce

This simple, fresh sauce should be made with the ripest tomatoes and can be tossed with just about any pasta shape. Basil is the most traditional herb used to finish the sauce, but chopped Italian parsley, oregano, or thyme can also be added. Up the protein by stirring in small chunks of fresh mozzarella just before serving.



Makes 4 servings

4 large, ripe local tomatoes  
¾ pound penne, dry  
¼ cup olive oil  
2 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced  
½ cup white wine  
Salt, to taste  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley  
2 tablespoons chopped fresh basil  
4 tablespoons grated Parmigiano-Reggiano or Grana Padana (optional)

Core the tomatoes and cut an X on the bottoms. Bring a large saucepan of salted water to a boil. Add the tomatoes and cook until their skins loosen, about 1 minute. Using a skimmer, remove the tomatoes from the water. Place them under cold water to cool and pull off their skins. Cut the tomatoes in half, discard the seeds, and dice.

Season the cooking water with salt, add the pasta, and cook until the pasta is al dente, about 8 to 12 minutes depending on shape and brand.

While the pasta is cooking, prepare the sauce. Place the olive oil and garlic in a large sauté pan or medium saucepan and cook over medium heat until the garlic turns golden, about 1 minute. Pour the wine in the pan and continue cooking until it has almost completely evaporated. Add the tomatoes, lightly crushing them with a wooden spoon. Season with salt. Simmer for 5 to 7 minutes, until the sauce thickens slightly.

Drain the pasta. Add the pasta and the herbs to the pan with the sauce. Toss or gently stir to combine. Serve immediately; sprinkle with Parmesan cheese, if desired.

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