

Spaghetti con uovo, pancetta e zafferano

(Spaghetti with egg, pancetta and saffron)

1/4 tsp saffron threads

2 jumbo eggs at room temperature

1 3/4 oz freshly grated Pecorino Romano

1 3/4 oz freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano

Salt (we suggest kosher salt or sea salt, though no special need for sea salt)

2 oz finely diced pancetta. NOTE: You could easily just use good bacon.

Crushed red pepper flakes (go easy on these)

1 to 2 TB extra virgin olive oil

Few drops Nam Pla (fish sauce), very optional

12 ounces dried spaghetti or fettucine (do not use fresh; we've found DeCecco brand is really good)

We have talked about this before and probably will keep harping on it. Most cooked dishes taste better if served on very, very, very hot plates. Hot food on cold plates goes cold a lot faster and just doesn't taste as good. This is really important for this dish which is, of course, mostly just a plate of yellow spaghetti (not). So before you do anything, using heat resistant plates that can go in the oven, pre-heat the plates. For this dish we actually make our oven a lot hotter than normal as we want the plates really hot. We set it at 350 deg. F and heat them for 30 minutes. When the spaghetti hits the plate it should actually sizzle. Standard warnings. You can get badly burned. Be careful, use potholders or other protection, and keep away from children and others who can't handle the heat. [Disclaimer: Our plates are relatively thick pottery. They started life in a wood-fired kiln, which is a thousand degrees give or take hotter than our oven. We think you need hot plates, but only use ones that can stand up to the high heat we're talking about.]

Soak the saffron in 1/4 cup of water for about 10 minutes. We also have had no problem with putting the saffron and cold water in a glass measuring cup and heating it to almost boiling in the microwave, then letting it sit. We're likely to also say let it sit for at least 10 minutes, though we have let it sit a lot longer. This stuff is expensive! It is quite possible we use more than the 1/4 teaspoon because we like it... a lot.

Whisk (we just use a fork) together the eggs in a bowl until just combined. Stir in the grated cheeses. Add some salt and set aside.

Over moderate heat, sauté the pancetta, a pinch of red pepper flakes and 1 TB of olive oil until the pancetta has just released some of its fat and begins to turn brown. We suggest using a large non-stick pan for this dish. As much as we like (make that love, adore, go crazy over) chile peppers, do not overdo the red pepper flakes. You just want a bit of flavor. Too much overwhelms the saffron. Add the Nam Pla (fish sauce) if using. NOTE: fish sauce provides umami notes and can deepen the flavors of a dish. It is very potent and too much will make it taste fish. A few drops is all that is needed.

We do all of the above steps before we start eating our pre-main course salad. If you do that, you'll have to re-heat the pancetta to get going again....

Add the saffron and water to the pancetta pan and stir with a wooden spoon or plastic spatula (if it has a non-flimsy edge) to scrape up any bits of pancetta that may be sticking to the pan (less likely if you are using a non-stick pan). Set aside on a flame tamer over the lowest possible heat.

Heavily salt your pasta water and drop in the spaghetti. We strongly suggest you invest in a Pasta Pot. They have what is called an "encapsulated base" which is just a fancy way of talking about an insert that is almost as big as the pot but has holes in it. (See Pre-cooking Pasta, above.) You put the base in the pot then toss in the spaghetti (or more likely you've already measured your spaghetti and put it in the base, waiting until you need it) and put the base into the pot of boiling water. Cook until al dente. (We're not going to get into al dente today, we'll save that for another day.) Alternatively par-cook the pasta as described above then put the cool pasta into the boiling water to at least re-heat or finish cooking. You still want "al dente" when you are done.

Drain the spaghetti. (If you are using a Pasta Pot, all you have to do is pull the strainer base out of the water to drain.) Add the spaghetti to the large pan with the pancetta. Add a tablespoon of the olive oil and toss all of it together over low heat until each strand is coated with the pancetta, saffron water and oil. It will be easy to spot strands that aren't a deep yellow! Remove from heat.

Working quickly, pour the egg mixture over the spaghetti and toss to combine. **THIS IS IMPORTANT:** You don't want to do this over any heat. The idea is to get the eggs to thicken on the strands of hot spaghetti and become smooth and creamy without curdling. You want a sauce, not scrambled eggs. If the sauce is too thin you can put the pan back over the lowest possible heat (use a flame tamer) and toss the pasta constantly until you have the proper consistency. Taste for any additional salt it might need. (These eggs are cooked, but obviously not as much as many egg dishes. If you have issues with raw eggs, consider using pasteurized eggs... or find another recipe for dinner.)

Serve immediately on your very hot plates (see above). Eat immediately.