

The Guardian



Rachel Roddy's recipe for spaghetti with lemon, basil and breadcrumbs

A surfeit of citrus leads to a classic Sicilian pasta dish that's easy to rustle up at home

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Mon 30 Mar 2020 11.00 BST

There were grapefruits the size of small footballs and limequats like acorns; smooth-skinned, sweet oranges and bitter ones with bumps; four types of mandarin, each with more seeds than the next; pale and pendulous pomelo ...

In all, there were 133 fruits and 28 varieties of citrus, all windfalls from the botanical garden in Palermo that had been sent to a cookery school for a taste workshop. Fabrizia Lanza, who was in charge at the school, reminded us that while it was a sensory session, not a lesson in citrus taxonomy, it was worth keeping in mind that most modern varieties are hybrids of three ancestral fruits: mandarin, pomelo and citron. We stood next to a huge table, each of the 28 varieties on one plate, one fruit cut open, the plates spread all over the table for what felt like a mad, aromatic tea party.

We pressed, sniffed, scratched, squeezed, tasted and winced. I was reminded of being eight years old in the John Lewis perfume department, and while Mum talked intently to a heavenly assistant, I would spray myself and my clothes with as many samples as possible, and then feel as if I was going to keel over. What was interesting, though, was how quickly we acclimatised to the collective tornado of citrus scent, after a while finding it hard to smell anything, never mind define it. The solution was to go outside. Five minutes in the fresh air was all that was needed to recalibrate and appreciate the tidal wave of essential oils when you walked back in.

At the end of the session we pushed the plates to one end of the table, ready to be sorted into piles: one for marmalade, one for preserving in sugar, one for the pigs - or we could take as much as we wanted. I was flying back to Rome the next morning, with hand luggage, which meant I had to resist my hoarding desire and pick just five.

On the plane I pushed my bag under the seat in front. It was close and warm, so a few minutes later, I took my jumper off, and leant down to unzip my bag and shove my coat in it. The scent of the citrus rushed up at my face, and the woman's next to me, too - she was delighted. So I pulled out my pompia fruit to show her. I had grabbed the fruit quickly the day before, noticing a strange ridge on it, but not taking it in completely. Now I did - we did. The cricket ball-sized fruit, with its yellowy-orange skin and wide open pores, had not just a ridge, but a sort of split, and a swelling, a tiny growth. There were no two ways about it; even the shyest could not deny it - and especially not the delightful Sicilian octogenarian next to me: my citrus had a vagina.

Back home, it sat for three days in pride of place on the top of the fruit bowl, and every day I took more delight in my fruit. On the fourth day, one side felt soft - it was too beautiful to waste, so that night we had a slice in our gin and tonic. The next day, with the rest, I made one of my favourite dishes: spaghetti with lemon, basil and breadcrumbs for everyday grit.

Spaghetti with lemon, basil and breadcrumbs

Serves 4

1 large lemon

100ml olive oil

120g parmesan, grated

Salt and black pepper

1 handful basil leaves

40g fine dry breadcrumbs

400g spaghetti

Put a large pan of salted water on to boil for the spaghetti. Prepare the breadcrumbs: heat a little olive oil in a pan and add the crumbs, along with a pinch of salt, pushing them around so they are toasted and smell like a digestive biscuit. Pull from the heat and tip into a bowl.

Once the water boils, add the pasta and cook until al dente.

Meanwhile, grate the zest from the lemon and then squeeze the juice from it - you want four tablespoons. Tear the basil into little pieces.

In a large warm bowl, whisk together the juice and zest with the olive oil, parmesan, and salt and pepper to taste.

Either drain the pasta, saving some of the cooking water, or use tongs to lift the spaghetti directly into the lemon bowl. Toss thoroughly, adding some pasta cooking water to loosen and the basil, toss and swish again, then serve immediately, passing around the crumbs.

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