

# Making

An inlay of fresh herbs makes this delicate pasta a fragrant partner for a seafood filling

BY ALAN TARDI



Author Alan Tardi drapes a sheet of fazzoletti dough to show its translucence and colorful pattern. All those herbs translate into flavor and fragrance on the plate.

Pasta and fresh herbs are paired frequently in Italian cooking, but never so beautifully as in *fazzoletto*, which means handkerchief. As the name suggests, the pasta is shaped into a large, thin square. Cooks in the northern region of Liguria toss the pasta sheets on a plate and drizzle them with pesto or a walnut sauce. Southern cooks layer *fazzoletti* in a pan and cover them with tomato sauce to make a baked dish that resembles lasagne. The version I'm presenting here borrows from these various traditions but includes my own twist—I "sandwich" fresh herbs between two layers of the pasta.

#### HERBS ADD COLOR AND FLAVOR

I roll out a long sheet of pasta, scatter half of it with fresh herbs, lay the other half over, and then roll again. I end up with a beautiful sheet of translucent pasta—the simple handkerchief becomes a delicately patterned silk scarf.

Few Italian housewives (the unofficial standard-bearers of the art of pasta making) would take the trouble to imprint the herbs, opting instead to simply toss herbs with the pasta after cooking. But for a special meal, I think the reward is worth the extra effort.

**A flavorful benefit from a decoration.** The pasta is really beautiful, but the technique isn't just culinary lily-gilding. Encasing the herbs between two sheets of pasta preserves the individual fresh flavors of each herb, and it allows the herbs to blend subtly, bite by bite, with the filling. With my version of *fazzoletto*, the sauce is served underneath the pasta, so the herbal print elevates the look of the dish to something exciting beyond plain white pasta.

**An appealing dynamic between pasta and filling.** When I serve *fazzoletto*, I'm offering a surprise to the diner, since the drape of pasta hides what's underneath. I like to see how each person approaches the dish when they start to eat. The cautious, tentative



Photos: Ellen Silverman

# Handkerchief Pasta

## Prepare the dough



**Mix the dough.** Shape the flour into a well and put the eggs, oil, and salt in the center. With a fork, whisk the eggs until well mixed. Knock in a little flour from the edge of the well and mix it into the eggs. Continue mixing in a little flour at a time until the dough becomes too stiff to work with the fork.



**Knead the dough.** Keep adding flour by pressing and folding the ingredients together. When the dough has absorbed as much flour as it can, scrape up the remaining flour and sift it back onto the work surface, discarding the dried bits. Knead the dough, pushing with the heel of one hand and pulling with your other hand.



**Test the dough.** Knead until the dough is no longer sticky and it feels smooth and resilient. When you poke the dough, it should spring back (see the ball at left). Wrap it loosely in plastic and let it rest for at least an hour or up to a day. When the dough is relaxed enough, it won't spring back when you poke it (see the ball at right).

eaters carefully peel back the layer of pasta to display the filling. The aggressive, frontal-attack types take a knife and fork and cut right through the middle to see what's inside.

### CHOOSE CHUNKY FILLINGS AND DELICATE HERBS

Many filling combinations are possible, but it's important to avoid strong game flavors or fillings that are too spicy because they'll overwhelm the delicate flavor of the herbed pasta. Light stews or chunky ragoûts are most successful because they add a third dimension to an otherwise flat presentation.

In spring, I might drape the pasta over leeks, fresh morels, and fiddlehead ferns; vine-ripened tomatoes and fresh basil provide a sweet, light accompaniment in summer; in autumn, wild mushrooms and white truffle oil are a frequent choice. For this article, I'm preparing a favorite winter filling, a rich

shellfish ragoût. It's an extremely easy filling (the whole thing can be made in one sauté pan), which will give you more time to devote your energies to making the pasta sheets. (See the recipe on p. 57.)

**Tender herbs for the pasta.** As for your choice of herbs to go into the pasta, use what's fresh and available, as long as it's tender. Parsley, cilantro, small basil leaves, chervil, tarragon, and dill are all good choices. You can mix flavors or pick only one or two. Just be sure to choose flavors that work well with your filling. I wouldn't use rosemary, thyme, or even oregano because their textures are tough and their flavors are slightly harsh when eaten raw.

### MAKE A SUPPLE DOUGH BY HAND

I like to make my pasta dough by hand, rather than with a food processor or mixer, because I have more control over the finished consistency of the dough. Also, making a batch of pasta for four people will take



## Enclose the herbs



**Roll the pasta and add herbs.** Cut the dough in half, lightly flour the work surface, and roll each half about 8 inches wide and as thin as possible. Keep one half covered as you work on the other. Do not dust the top surface of the dough with flour. Arrange the herbs in an even layer over one sheet.



**Enclose the herbs.** Check for heavy stems that might poke through the pasta; remove them. Lift the second sheet and lay it, unfloured side down, over the first. Gently roll lengthwise until the sheet measures about 8x32 inches.

about 10 minutes, which is much quicker than the time it would take to wash and dry an appliance.

The pasta dough for the *fazzoletti* should be smooth, supple, and by the time you're ready to shape it, it should have lost a lot of its elasticity. While you want to develop a certain amount of gluten so that the finished pasta has some body, you don't want it to become too stiff. This is another advantage handmade dough has over machine-made dough—you'd really have to work hard to overwork the dough by hand, while with a machine the dough can become too stiff before you realize it.

**Flour types and amounts can vary.** The flour you use will really make a difference in the texture of the finished pasta. Italians use a very fine, soft flour called "00," similar to our pastry flour. I use a blend of all-purpose and Italian 00, but you can use half all-purpose and half cake or pastry flour, or even straight all-purpose if you like. The amount of flour you'll need to use will depend on the type of flour, the size of the eggs, and even the humidity on the day you're making it. The photos on p. 55 should help you find the right consistency.

**A cool rest makes a more pliant dough.** The final step of making the pasta dough, which is a long, cool rest in the refrigerator, will also improve the pasta's texture. The cold and rest relax the gluten, making the dough easier to roll into thin sheets. You

can really see the difference in elasticity in the "poking" photos on p. 55.

### ROLL THE DOUGH THIN FOR DELICATE RESULTS

The challenging part of *fazzoletti* comes in the rolling. The goal is to roll two very thin, rectangular sheets. You cover one sheet with fresh herbs, lay the second sheet on top, and then roll the two together to make one single, herb-flecked sheet.

At the restaurant we use large pasta rollers, which crank out a thin sheet that's the right width, about 8 inches. Most home pasta rollers will only give you a narrow strip of dough, but you can start your *fazzoletti* by rolling the dough through a few times (but only to the fifth notch so it doesn't get too thin). This will give you a strip about 5x26 inches. Continue from that point with a rolling pin. Or you can skip the machine altogether and roll the dough entirely by hand.

**Control your urge to dust the dough with flour.** When you roll *fazzoletti*, it's very important to keep the upper side of the pasta sheet as moist and free of flour as possible. This is so that when you join the two sheets of dough, they'll stick properly and fuse into one thin, herb-filled sheet. Your dough shouldn't be sticky, but if the rolling pin sticks a bit, coat the pin with a thin film of flour and keep trying. The underside of the pasta sheets can be dusted liberally with flour; you can brush it off before cooking.

## Trim and cook the pasta

Ditto for when you've joined the two sheets together—use as much flour as you need to help you roll, and brush it off before cooking.

When your herbed pasta sheet is thin enough so you can see the outline of your hand through it, it's ready to use. If you make the pasta ahead, layer the squares with plastic wrap or waxed paper, seal in plastic, and refrigerate for up to two days.

### BOIL THE HANDKERCHIEFS, TWO BY TWO

Cooking the handkerchiefs is as easy as boiling any pasta. Use lots of water, be generous with the salt, and pay attention so you don't overcook the fresh dough, which only needs about three minutes in the water.

The slightly tricky part is managing the big sheets, which are slippery and prone to tearing. I find that cooking two at a time in a very large pot and fishing them out with a large, flat strainer (called a spider) works well. Drain the pasta sheets for a few seconds on a clean dishtowel. When the excess water is gone, lift each sheet and gently drape it over your filling.



**Trim the fazzoletti.** With a pastry wheel or a knife, cut the sheet into four squares and trim the edges, if necessary. Brush off any excess flour.



**Cook the fazzoletti.** Bring a large pot of water to a boil, add salt, and add the pasta squares, two at a time. Boil until tender, about 3 minutes. Lift the sheets out of the water with a large, flat strainer or slotted spoon, and drain them on a tray covered with a dishtowel.

### Dough for Handkerchief Pasta

Flour amounts are listed by weight (ounces) and volume (cups). Use either measurement. *Yields enough dough for four servings.*

**10 to 13½ oz. (2¼ to 3 cups) flour (all-purpose or an equal mix of all-purpose and cake flour); more for rolling**

**3 eggs**

**1 tsp. olive oil**

**½ tsp. salt**

**1½ cups fresh herb leaves, lightly packed (choose small leaves of flat-leaf parsley, basil, tarragon, chervil, cilantro, dill)**

### Tomato-Shellfish Ragoût

*Yields enough for four fazzoletti.*

**½ lb. bay scallops**

**½ lb. peeled and deveined large shrimp**

**1 Tbs. olive oil**

**1 large clove garlic, minced**

**Salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste**

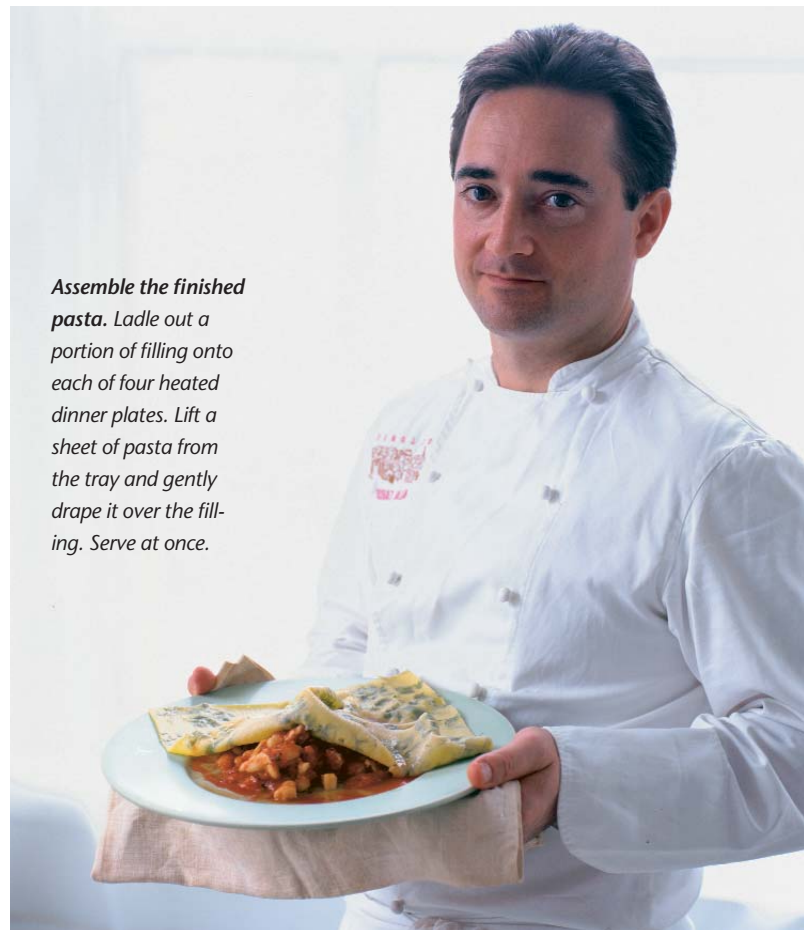
**½ cup dry white wine**

**One 28-oz. can tomatoes in purée, chopped coarse (you should have about 2 cups total tomatoes and purée)**

**½ cup rich homemade shellfish stock or chicken stock or low-salt canned chicken stock boiled to concentrate the flavor**

**1 Tbs. chopped parsley**

Pat the scallops and shrimp dry. Heat a large frying pan until hot, pour in the oil and add the shellfish. Sauté over medium-high heat, shaking the pan, until the shellfish start to become opaque, about 2 min., and then add the garlic. Season with salt and pepper. Sauté 1 min. and then transfer the shellfish to a plate with a slotted spoon. Deglaze the pan with the white wine and cook until the wine has reduced to about 2 Tbs. Turn the heat to high and add the tomatoes, tomato purée, and stock. Simmer until slightly thickened, about 5 min., and add the parsley. Return the shellfish to the sauce and simmer 1 min. to warm through. Taste and correct the seasonings.



**Assemble the finished pasta.** Ladle out a portion of filling onto each of four heated dinner plates. Lift a sheet of pasta from the tray and gently drape it over the filling. Serve at once.

*Alan Tardi is chef/owner of Follonico restaurant in New York City. ♦*