

Lemon Pepper Pasta with Browned Butter

Serves 4

While “lemon” and “pepper” are the two primary flavors here, this pasta really does taste enough like cacio e pepe to hit many of the same pleasure receptors as excellent boxed macaroni and cheese. Unfortunately, it does require a bit more technique here (the simplest things often do), in that the sauce is really only created with some browned butter, finely grated parmesan, pasta water and not much else. If this isn’t something you’ve done before, wow, are you in for a treat– but also, be patient, the al dente pasta does take a bit of time in the skillet to fully cook and create a thick enough sauce. It’s the ultimate “I can’t believe this came from only that” – my favorite way to cook.

Ingredients

12-16 ounces / 300-450g of pasta (a whole box or ¾ of a box)

Kosher salt

6 tablespoons/85g unsalted butter

½ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes, plus more

Lots of freshly ground black pepper (from a pepper mill)

1 lemon, zested and juiced

½ cup/50g finely grated parmesan cheese, plus more

Instructions

1. Cook pasta in a large pot of boiling salted water until it’s nicely al dente (it’ll finish cooking in the sauce you make); Set aside 2 cups of the pasta water, then drain the pasta, setting both aside.
2. Meanwhile, heat butter in a large skillet over medium heat. Let the butter melt, then begin to brown, using a whisk to scrape up all the browned bits as they form (this will give you a good evenly browned brown butter). Cook until the butter is all foamy and nutty-smelling, 3–4 minutes or so.
3. Add red pepper flakes, lots of freshly ground black pepper and the lemon zest. Add the pasta along with ½ cup cheese and ½ cup of pasta water. Season with salt and increase heat to medium–high. Cook, tossing frequently (I like to use tongs) until the liquid starts to thicken and evaporate, 3–4 minutes or so. Add another ½ cup pasta water to the skillet, and continue to cook, tossing, tossing, tossing...again until the liquid starts to thicken and evaporate, about 2-3 minutes (it’ll start happening quicker with each addition).
4. Add another ½ cup water and continue to cook until the sauce appears thickened, glossy, starchy and luscious. Taste a noodle– it should be salty, creamy and fully cooked (but not mushy). If you think the pasta or sauce needs it, give another splash of pasta water and get it to where you want it.
5. Remove from heat and add half the lemon juice. Season with salt and maybe more pepper or some crushed red pepper flakes. Taste a noodle and add the remaining lemon juice if “very lemony” is what you’re after (it’s what I’m after). Divide among bowls, making sure each has a nice pool of sauce. Top with more pepper and cheese, if you like.