

# Wellington foodies say let's twist again

Maggie Follett

Forget what your mom told you. Play with your food! Exhorted master chef Johan van Schalkwyk (aka Twist) with a fiendish grin – hair awry and sweating slightly under the spotlights – whilst exuberantly slapping a large, dusty dough flap ... before cranking it with a flourish through the gleaming steel teeth of a pasta-machine.

Held at Die Bórdienhuis, this entertaining, informal cooking demo with a focus on pasta was the first of a series dubbed "Twisted Tuesdays", which will be hosted by Johan each month.

No stranger to cooking as performance art, Johan – a former Capetonian with an impressive culinary CV, which includes a stint as a local TV chef – opened the evening with a brief history of pasta (which simply means "paste"). Now an international favourite staple food, noodles are generally accepted to have been introduced to Italy via the Arab conquest of Sicily in the 8th Century (although evidence apparently exists that they were around thousands of years before). Pasta "took off" in the 1300s, when dried noodles, with their high nutritional value and long shelf-life, became popular during extensive sea voyages. One of the most successful food marriages ever must surely be that of pasta and tomatoes, which made their debut from the new world during the 19th century. (The earliest pasta and tomato sauce recipe was documented in 1839.)

Today, the average Italian consumes a hefty 30kg of pasta a year, and demand outweighs supply to the extent that much of the nation's preferred hard Durum wheat (Semolina) is now imported, including from Canada where – oddly enough – it thrives in the chilly climate.

Over the centuries, technological advancement has facilitated enormous diversity in terms of pasta styles, shapes and sizes, with the result that there are now over 400 types, divided into fresh, or wet (Fresca) and dry (Secca) styles. Made from flour and water, dry pasta is typically found in Southern Italy, while the fresh variety (which includes eggs) predominates in the North.

Pasta is further sub-divided into three general categories:

Pasta Corta – short noodles, which feature the whole gamut of lyrically-named and funky shapes, from tiny "alphabet" soup-noodles, to wheels, pipes, stars, snails, ears, bows, screws, shells, elbows and, of course, Macaroni.

Pasta Lunga – long noodles, including Spaghetti, Tagliatelle, Linguini, and anything longer than four inches.

Pasta Ripiena – filled pasta parcels such as Tortellini, Ravioli, Cannelloni, Lasagne, etc.

Johan subscribes to the traditional belief that the choice of pasta depends on



Left: Master chef Johan van Schalkwyk (aka Twist)

PICTURE: DUDLEY BARKER

the sauce. "Flat pasta works best for creamy sauces, and round pasta for tomato sauces. Long pastas favour seafood sauces (especially those with mussels, prawns and calamari), as these dishes tend to be quite oily, which helps the pasta move, so you can swirl it onto your fork.

"Meat and ricotta sauces are suited to small pasta shapes. With their large, uneven surface areas, pastas like penne, rigatoni, conchiglie (shells), and fusilli can physically hold more drizzly sauce – meaning fewer mishaps between dish and mouth. The most famous, notable exception to these pasta tips is, of course, Spaghetti Bolognese."

According to Johan, "smooth pasta is rubbish. The sauce needs to stick, so rather go for ribbed or convoluted shapes."

After fielding questions from the floor, the flamboyant raconteur (who maintains that – as it contains fewer than 100 calories per serving, and only 1 gram of fat – pasta is a healthy, heart-friendly dish), proceeded to effortlessly rustle up a classic fresh pasta from scratch, in double-quick time.

The resultant, cling-wrapped dough-ball was fondled by an admiring audience before being followed, several swift turns of the handle later, by a smooth, pliable, scarf-soft swath which formed the precursor to linguini, destined to sport a tastebud-tingling Pesto sauce.

Tips from Chef Twist for authentic Italian pasta: Don't obsess about durum wheat. Any good cake or bread flour will do the trick and can even be coloured and flavoured with a little spinach, butternut or beetroot puree.

Once the dough has been blended to resemble coarse breadcrumbs, knead well and refrigerate for at least an hour (preferably overnight).

Then take a tennis-ball sized lump, flatten it into a patty and feed through the pasta machine, starting on setting 1. Keep dusting liberally with flour. Feed through

each setting twice, stopping at 7. Cut the dough into the approximate size of a shoebox. Set the machine on the desired pasta type, feed the dough through again, and pasta strands of 1 to 2mm in thickness should emerge. When boiling, remember pasta must swim. Don't add salt before the pasta, and don't bother with oil. Remove when "al dente" (slightly chewy), and never rinse. Simply drain in a colander, keeping a little of the drained water to add "substance" to your sauce. Fresh pasta can also be frozen, or stored in the fridge for a week.

With fresh pasta, Johan favours simple sauces, as they allow the taste to speak for itself. After demonstrating a classic pesto (with linguini), servers appeared on cue to distribute tantalising souppons between the assembled guests – some experiencing the delights of this unusual, acquired taste for the first time.

Wine and witty (largely) food-related repartee flowed amongst the tables before Johan alighted once again onto his well-equipped stage-kitchen to create a basic, zesty tomato sauce as a topping for the same fresh pasta recipe, destined to be enjoyed by the enthusiastic audience.

"Forget the bloated, insipid long-life tomatoes you find on supermarket shelves. If you can't get ripe, red, juicy Roma tomatoes, use the inexpensive canned plum variety without a twinge of conscience."

For the grande finale, Chef Twist produced a delectably subtle, creamy pasta sauce (crafted, once again, from simple, inexpensive ingredients) to top a commercial brand of dry penne. "Why make a boring, old-fashioned white sauce when you can use real cream?" asks Johan.

Amidst complimentary murmurs and the muffled slurs of studious scoffing and quaffing, Johan stressed the importance of minimalism, restraint and – above all – the use of top-quality ingredients when creating any dish.

An acclaimed caterer (who conducts

regular food and wine pairings on invitation), this consistently creative chef also supplies wholesome, genuinely home-cooked, pre-packaged takeaway meals, produced under his Twist – Some More label.

A missionary for locally-grown foodstuffs, Johan strives for an 80% organic component in his cooking, and concluded the evening by extolling the virtues of the Wellington area as a veritable cradle of excellent, uncontaminated produce.

"We are blessed in this valley with the most amazing organic and biodynamic products, from vegetables, fruit, nuts, olives and olive oil to goats' cheese, wine, and even beef. Why buy mass-produced, when you can support local farmers, and experience authentic taste, grown on your own doorstep?"

Chef Twist will perform his own special brand of culinary magic again on Tuesday July 28, this time spicing up a winter's night at Die Bórdienhuis with an informative talk and demo on curries, including Thai, Indian, and our own traditional Cape Malay varieties.

Turning up with a rumbling tum is obligatory! For details on Twisted Tuesdays, contact Johan on 082 873 2258 or chef@twistsortemore.com

## Chef Twist's traditional pasta

550g flour  
5ml salt  
4 eggs  
6 egg yolks  
30 ml olive oil  
(Instructions as above)

### Basil pesto

50g basil  
50g pine nuts  
50g parmesan  
30g garlic  
120ml olive oil

### Seasoning

Blend first 4 ingredients in food processor whilst drizzling olive oil in through the chute till smooth puree has formed. Season to taste.

### Tomato (Napolitana) sauce

80g onion – chopped  
25g garlic – chopped  
50g celery – chopped  
500g plum tomatoes (or tin of whole peeled tomatoes)  
100ml white wine, vegetable stock or water  
5g oregano – chopped  
5g basil (if fresh, torn not chopped)  
15ml sugar  
seasoning  
olive oil

Chop tomatoes roughly. (If using fresh tomatoes, score, blanch and peel first.)

Into a saucepan (coated with a thin layer of olive oil), add onions, garlic and celery. Gently sauté until transparent without browning.

Add tomatoes and wine/stock/water. Bring to the boil.

Reduce heat and allow to simmer for 15 minutes. Add herbs and check acidity. Add sugar if necessary. Season to taste.

### Creamy sauce

100g onion – chopped  
30g garlic – chopped  
100ml white wine  
500ml cream  
seasoning  
30ml olive oil  
25g butter – cubed  
(Blue cheese and thyme if desired)

Heat butter and olive oil in saucepan.

Add onion and garlic. Sauté until transparent but not brown.

Add white wine and allow to reduce to syrupy liquid.

Add cream.

Enhance with additional flavours if desired.

● Sauces improve the longer they are cooked.

● Hard goats' cheese is a cheaper, locally available, and equally delicious alternative to Parmesan.

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