


nutrition

(*Making sense of all that science*)

made easy



The Healthy Cook's Guide to **PASTA!**

Your supermarket-to-stove guide to the best whole-grain varieties

BY SIDNEY FRY, MS, RD

IN JUST ONE serving of whole-grain pasta, you can meet your daily whole-grain needs (plus a few extra) at the cost of about \$0.25 a serving. Add in supporting ingredients like healthy oils, seafood, greens, nuts, veggies, and beans, and you've got yourself a winning weeknight dinner. But not every noodle is as pleasantly slurpable as the next, and navigating the endless pasta aisle can be a bit overwhelming. We tasted more than 60 varieties in order to give you our 12 favorite brands. The verdict: Whole-grain pasta is tastier than ever, and on the following pages you'll find the tips, tricks, and tasting notes you need to make good pasta even better.

THE TASTE TEST

Healthy Pasta Matrix: Our 12 Favorites

Pair wheatier pastas with hearty meat sauces or a good oil and roasted veggies. Pestos and cream sauces go well with a more neutral noodle.

Flavor

MILD



MARKET PANTRY (TARGET STORE BRAND)

So delicate it was creamy; a lovely stand-in for traditional white pasta.

WILD OATS ORGANIC

Toss this tender noodle with something simple: a bright pesto or olive oil-dressed tomatoes.



ALMA'S PENNE

This neutral noodle will let the sauce shine beautifully. Best if kept al dente.



BIONATURAE LASAGNA

This top pick builds a sturdy frame for saucy layers, but its mild profile won't compete with other ingredients.



LUNDBERG BROWN RICE SPAGHETTI

Elegant and delightfully chewy: Splash with olive oil, and toss with roasted veggies.



TINKYÁDA BROWN RICE ELBOW

Silky, nutty, and mildly sweet—perfect for mac and cheese (see our recipe on page 104).

Texture

DELICATE



TRADER JOE'S BROWN RICE QUINOA

Silky and springy; the only quinoa-based noodle we tasted with no bitterness.

DELALLO NO BOIL

No-boil lasagna with bounce! Coat entire noodle in sauce to avoid crunchy edges.



BARILLA SPAGHETTI

Elegantly thin, pleasantly bran-flavor-forward, and great under a hefty sprinkle of Parmesan.

STURDY



BARILLA PENNE

Nice and nutty; built with grooves to keep sauce clinging on the outside.



BARILLA LASAGNA

We love the hearty chew this one lends to a gooey, supersaucy white lasagna.



WHOLE FOODS 365

A top pick for those who want an earthy profile. Thick and sturdy, it's perfect for a hearty meat sauce or Bolognese.

ROBUST

WHAT ABOUT BEAN PASTAS?

Legume-based pastas have an impressive protein and fiber count, some with as much protein as meat. Just don't expect these to taste—or be firm to the bite—like traditional pasta.



Banza Chickpea Pasta

With 14g protein and 8g fiber per serving, this pasta is starchy like its main ingredient and goes best with something it won't soak up—a few glugs of good olive oil, garlic, fresh tomatoes, and feta cheese.



Explore Asian Edamame & Mung Bean Fettuccine

Thin strands with a bouncy, springy texture, much like tofu. A 2-ounce portion has 24g protein (as much as a 3-ounce steak) and 10g fiber. Try it with an herby or garlicky pesto.

THE WHOLE-GRAIN PASTA PRIMER

Whole-Wheat Pasta

Whole-wheat pastas are thirsty. They absorb a lot more liquid than traditional white pasta, so be sure to keep extra pasta cooking water on hand when preparing. They work better in a very loose sauce, and lots of it (see our one-pot pasta recipes on page 98).

Serve immediately. The longer whole-grain pasta sits, the more sauce it will soak in.

Whole-grain pasta includes the bran and germ part of the kernel, which lowers the percent of gluten in each noodle, making it structurally less sturdy than refined pasta, with a greater tendency to fall apart if it isn't made well (see details on drying below).

THE DETAILS

Gluten-Free Pasta

Gluten-free (GF) pastas are weaker in structure. Traditional pasta is made from durum semolina, a hard wheat that's naturally high in gluten—a protein that adds strength and structure to pasta.

Pasta without gluten has a greater tendency to fall apart during cooking.

Start checking for doneness a few minutes before the recommended cooking time. Most of the GF pastas we tested did not need to cook as long as the box directions stated.

GF pasta does not make for good leftovers, especially if your sauce is very thin or loose. For best next-day success, keep pasta and sauce separate, and mix just before serving.

THE INGREDIENTS

Just two: Whole-grain durum wheat flour and water. That's it.

Many GF pastas are made from refined grains. We limited our discussion and tasting to those made with 100% whole grains—mostly brown rice and quinoa.

THE TEXTURE

THE MILLING OF THE WHEAT

A smaller particle size eliminates sandy texture and bitterness.

THE QUALITY OF THE WHEAT

Better wheat makes a better pasta.

THE DRYING AND EXTRUDING

If dried too quickly, pasta has a greater tendency to crumble after boiling. Extruding the dough through bronze dies (instead of Teflon) gives the pasta a rougher surface, allowing sauce to cling better to the noodle.

BROWN RICE-BASED PASTA

Brown rice pasta has a bright, springy texture with a slick mouthfeel.

It's a bit more forgiving if you boil this pasta *past al dente*; it'll be less likely to dissolve into your sauce.

QUINOA-BASED PASTA

Many quinoa pastas have refined grains added to improve texture. Those made with 100% quinoa rapidly shift from toothy to overcooked and crumbly, so be sure to taste often during the boiling process.

THE NUMBERS

PER 2 OUNCES DRIED

(about 1-1½ cups cooked)

CALORIES: 180 (fewer calories than most granola bars)

PROTEIN: 8g (more than an egg)

FIBER: 6g (the amount in 2 packets of oatmeal)

WHOLE GRAINS: 56g (more than 3 servings of whole grains)

PER 2 OUNCES DRIED

(about 1-1½ cups cooked)

CALORIES: 200-210 calories

PROTEIN: Most GF varieties have

4g-5g per serving, about half that of whole-wheat pasta.

FIBER: 1g-4g (less than whole-wheat but more than a refined grain)

WHOLE GRAINS: 45g-56g

Quick trick: Look for white spots. More spots on uncooked pasta means it was dried too quickly and will likely fall apart in your sauce.

Gluten is a combination of two proteins. Pasta without it will naturally have less protein.

CARB-CONSCIOUS?

There's good news about pasta for you, too.

Whole-grain pasta has a low glycemic index (32-37, about half that of white bread). The lower the number, the longer it takes to digest, and the less it affects your blood sugar. Translation: You'll stay fuller longer and have steady fuel to support energy levels.

THE RECIPE MAKEOVER

Lighter Vegetable Lasagna

IT MAY SEEM an unlikely makeover, but the idea that vegetable lasagna is more virtuous than its meat-filled counterpart is actually a bit of a myth. How so? No amount of eggplant, squash, or tomato can lighten the hefty 1½ pounds of cheese and creamy béchamel sauce that blanket the buttery noodles of this classic dish, which packs over 700 calories and 22g sat fat into just one slice. The challenge: Re-create this dish to highlight the vegetables but still keep plenty of creamy, cheesy, layered goodness.

Béchamel is a butter-and-milk-based sauce often used in vegetable lasagnas. Light and bright as it may seem, all that butter actually

makes it as calorie-dense as a hefty meat sauce. We skip the butter altogether and look instead to hearty butternut squash, which becomes velvety and creamy when blended with a little garlic and milk—the perfect vegetable-based sauce that gets even better with a little nutty Gruyère and buttery mozzarella cheese. Whole-wheat noodles make a sturdy bed for sautéed greens and mushrooms that we cover in a layer of billowy part-skim ricotta cheese. Our saucy lasagna packs more than 2 cups of vegetables into each slice, is overflowing with melty cheese, and has half the calories of the original. Our only regret? Not having enough room in the pan for another layer.

Inside the Layers

THE CHEESES

Gruyère and melty mozzarella balance the sweet butternut sauce, ricotta lightens between layers, and Parm adds a salty pop on top, saving **149 calories** and **6.4g sat fat** per slice—a four-cheese punch that trims a whole pound off the original.

THE VEGETABLES

In addition to the 3 cups of squash “hiding” in our sauce, we pack a cup of buttery Swiss chard and meaty mushrooms into each slice.

THE PASTA

Lasagna needs a strong noodle to separate layers. Whole-grain not only does it best but also adds an extra 2.5g fiber to each slice. We love Bionaturae for its neutral profile, but see page 68 for more whole-grain pasta picks.

THE BÉCHAMEL

Creamy, silky butternut squash replaces the classic butter-, flour-, and milk-based béchamel to save **90 calories** and **6g sat fat** per serving.



See page 75
for recipe.

PASTA GUIDE

VEGETABLE LASAGNA WITH BUTTERNUT BÉCHAMEL

Hands-on: 36 min. Total: 1 hr. 34 min.

Here's a sauce so good you'll want to eat it by the spoonful. Make a double batch, and stir into whole grains, drizzle over vegetables, or use as a sauce for lighter mac and cheese.

- 3 cups cubed peeled butternut squash
- 1 cup plus 1 tablespoon organic vegetable broth, divided
- 1 cup fat-free milk
- 4 garlic cloves
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- Dash of ground nutmeg
- 2 ounces cave-aged Gruyère cheese, shredded (about ½ cup)
- 3 ounces part-skim mozzarella cheese, shredded (about ¾ cup), divided
- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 small onion, chopped (about ¾ cup)
- 1 pound sliced cremini mushrooms
- 1 bunch Swiss chard, trimmed and very thinly sliced (about 5 cups)
- 3 tablespoons pine nuts, toasted and chopped
- Cooking spray
- 6 whole-wheat lasagna noodles (such as Bionaturae), cooked
- ¾ cup part-skim ricotta cheese
- 1 ounce finely grated fresh Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese (about ¼ cup)

1. Preheat oven to 375°.
2. Combine squash, 1 cup broth, milk, and garlic in a medium saucepan; bring to a boil. Reduce heat to medium; simmer until squash is tender (about 20 minutes). Remove from heat.
3. Place squash mixture in a blender. Add salt, pepper, and nutmeg. Remove center piece of blender lid (to allow steam to escape); secure blender lid on blender. Place a clean towel over opening in blender lid (to avoid splatters). Blend until smooth. Place blended squash mixture in a bowl; add Gruyère cheese and 1.5 ounces

mozzarella cheese, stirring until cheese melts and mixture is smooth.

4. Heat a large skillet over medium heat. Add oil to pan; swirl to coat. Add onion and mushrooms; cook 7 minutes or until browned and liquid evaporates. Add chard and remaining 1 tablespoon broth. Cover and cook 2 minutes or until chard wilts. Place chard mixture in a fine sieve; drain 5 minutes. Place chard mixture in a bowl. Add pine nuts; toss to combine.
5. Spread ½ cup squash sauce in bottom of a broiler-safe 11 x 7-inch glass or ceramic baking dish coated with cooking spray. Arrange 3 noodles over sauce; top with half of chard mixture. Dollop ricotta cheese on top of chard. Spread half of remaining sauce over top. Arrange 3 noodles over sauce. Top with remaining chard mixture; top with remaining sauce. Sprinkle evenly with remaining 1.5 ounces mozzarella cheese and Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese. Cover with foil coated with cooking spray. Bake at 375° for 35 minutes. Uncover and bake an additional 10 minutes or until bubbly.
6. Preheat broiler to high. (Keep lasagna in oven.)
7. Broil lasagna 3 minutes or until cheese is golden brown. Remove from oven; let stand 10 minutes.

➤ **SERVES 6** (serving size: 1 piece)
CALORIES 363; **FAT** 16.2g (sat 6.3g, mono 5.2g, poly 2.2g);
PROTEIN 22g; **CARB** 36g; **FIBER** 7g; **SUGARS** 7g
 (est. added sugars 0g); **CHOL** 33mg; **IRON** 3mg; **SODIUM**
 584mg; **CALC** 444mg

THE SAVINGS

OUR VEGETABLE LASAGNA

saves **367 calories**,
16g sat fat, and **473mg**
sodium over traditional.
BONUS: Over 2 cups of
 vegetables per serving.

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