



# The *new* noodles

ALTERNATIVE FLOURS ELEVATE THE CRAFT OF PASTA-MAKING

by **Gabriella Gershenson**

In a post gluten-free world, alternative-flour pastas are making their way onto restaurant menus without too much fanfare. During his time as executive chef at Del Posto in New York City, Mark Ladner broke ground by offering every one of the pastas he made in a gluten-free iteration. But there's more to alternative-flour pastas than senza glutine. At Misi, the new restaurant from Missy Robbins, her pappardelle is made from semolina cut with chickpea flour, served with more chickpeas, rosemary, garlic, and Parmigiano-Reggiano. She, and many other chefs, are testing the limits and the rewards of making pasta without relying entirely on wheat.

Even so, alternative-flour pastas are not the innovation that some people would make them out to be. Chefs have been slinging noodles made from non-wheat flours for ages, and there are plenty of pastas out there that, in their most traditional form, contain little to no grain. Consider soba, the delicate Japanese noodle that's usually a mixture of buckwheat and wheat flours, and sometimes, in the hands of a skilled artisan, made from 100 percent buckwheat.

Or rice noodles, from skinny vermicelli to broad chow fun, that figure vastly in major world cuisines, including Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, and Malaysian. They're in our bún bowls, our pho, and our pad Thai, to name a few. And there's a whole universe of plant-based pasta made from vegetable starches, such as sweet potato (seen in japchae) or mung bean (spun into Chinese bean threads), which are gluten-free, considered to be healthier than grain-based pasta, and make frequent appearances in Korean, Japanese, and Chinese kitchens.

Even in Italy, where semolina is king, there's pizzoccheri, a short, broad buckwheat-flour noodle from Valtellina, a valley in the Italian Alps near the Swiss border. Sara Jenkins, chef/owner of Nina June in Rockport, Maine, where she specializes in Mediterranean cuisine made from local ingredients, seized the opportunity to make pizzoccheri from buckwheat flour milled by Maine Grains, one of her favorite vendors. It made sense to Jenkins to recreate an obscure Italian noodle in a place where buckwheat is part of the regional cuisine. "There's an old Acadian tradition of eating

buckwheat," says Jenkins, referring to the pancakes called ployes. She says that the hearty, brothy dish of buckwheat noodles, potatoes, cabbage, speck, and Parmigiano-Reggiano lends itself well to the rugged American Northeast (\$22, recipe, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com)). "It's good for winter in Maine," she says. "The pasta is dark and it's nutty, so it's dramatic looking, and the flavor really comes through," says Jenkins. "Sometimes if I'm so inclined I jazz it up by roasting the cabbage to give it a little char."

Jenkins, who sees herself as "a home cook who just wound up in a restaurant," takes a rustic approach to pasta-making. "I dump the two flours into a bowl on the table; I don't even sift them together first because they'll come together in the kneading," she says. Her preferred ratio is about one-third buckwheat flour to two-thirds AP flour. "The buckwheat has the flavor and the color, so you want to use as much of that as you can," says Jenkins. "But you have to be careful not to go too far. Buckwheat doesn't develop gluten, so it doesn't develop the texture of pasta and gets really sticky and hard to roll out."

Further south, in Washington, D.C.,



Farro Pasta with Speck, Green Onions, and Poppy Seeds, Matthew Accarrino, SPQR, San Francisco. RECIPE, [plateonline.com](http://plateonline.com).



**Porcini-Rye Cavatelli,**  
**\$22, Adam Howard,**  
**Blue Duck Tavern,**  
**Washington, D.C.**  
**RECIPE, p. 65.**

Adam Howard of Blue Duck Tavern also patronizes a local mill for the ingredients to make his alternative-grain pastas. Wade's Mill in the Shenandoah Valley, which grinds flour in a grist mill that's been continually operating since 1750, is his go-to.

Howard uses the flour to make gluten-free rye cavatelli, which he serves in a Parmesan broth with fennel pollen sausage and piment d'Espelette (\$22, recipe, p. 65). His pasta is a blend of buckwheat and rye flours, cocoa (for color), autumn spices, plus a whole egg, some egg yolks, and ricotta. After Howard mixes the dough, he vacuum-seals it before rolling it out.

"The buckwheat flour is in the rhubarb family of plants; it doesn't have the same gluten structure or starch structure that wheat flour does," he notes, adding that vacuum-sealing the dough assists with

hydration. "It really gets the fat in there and the flavor expressed, and it helps to pull the air out, so it forms a tighter dough when you roll out the cavatelli," he notes.

The shape of the pasta was also a particular choice. "Cavatelli is more forgiving than other pastas," Howard says. "It's a pretty moist dough, which you're extruding out with the cavatelli roller, so you don't need a gluten structure to hold a whole noodle together."

While chefs like Howard and Ladner offer gluten-free alternative-flour pastas, more often than not, chefs embrace non-wheat flours for what they add, rather than for what they take away. Ulises Olmos, executive chef at New York City's Boulud Sud, is new to rye flour, but loves the taste. He makes a campanelle pasta, shaped like a ruffled cone, from a mixture of rye and semolina flour, and little else, with the goal of letting the taste of

the rye shine. "There are no eggs in the pasta," adds Olmos, who believes that they interfere with the purity of the flavor. He uses rye flour, water, a little salt, and as much semolina as necessary to achieve the desired consistency. A dough made from rye flour alone, says Olmos, is gooey. Add the right amount of semolina, and it becomes smooth and flexible.

Olmos' pasta, which he serves with shrimp butter, uni, and peekytoe crab, is a playful interpretation of the classic flavor combination of rye and seafood, which has a legacy at Jewish appetizing stores (herring and pumpernickel), at Scandinavian sandwich shops (shrimp smørrebrød), and at your corner diner (tuna melt on rye). He makes his sauce from an excess of shrimp shells that are left over from Boulud Sud's Sunday paella and gambas al ajillo. He makes a shrimp stock, then reduces it to a concentrate



**Rye Campanelle with Shrimp, Peekytoe Crab, and Sea Urchin, \$26, Ulises Olmos, Boulud Sud, New York City. RECIPE, p. 66.**

and mixes it with butter, confit shallots and garlic, and scraps of uni to make the shrimp butter he uses to dress the pasta. He finishes the dish with peekytoe crab, more uni, garlic breadcrumbs, and lemon zest (\$26, recipe, p. 66).

Tried-and-true flavor combinations also inspire an alternative-flour pasta dish at SPQR in San Francisco, where Matthew Accarrino makes cocoa short rib mezzalune, half-moon-shaped cocoa pasta stuffed with slow-braised meat and slicked with a rich red wine sauce (recipe, plateonline.com). Although chocolate-flavored pasta may be a novelty, the flavors themselves make perfect sense. “There are things that have natural affinity,” says Accarrino. “A lot of the chocolate production in Italy happens in the northwestern part of the country. In that area you have cold winters, and dishes like braised beef are typical in the region.

The flavors make sense because those things go together geographically.” For another dish, Accarrino fashions pasta ribbons from a combination of 00 and farro flours, which he serves with speck, poppy seeds, and a creamy sauce—flavors reminiscent of the Trentino-Alto Adige region that borders Switzerland and Austria (recipe, plateonline.com).

Incorporating alternative flours has been a process of trial and error. “Plain pasta dough—eggs, flour, and water, or flour and water—is the starting point,” says Accarrino, who, for instance, swaps in cocoa powder for about 20 to 30 percent of the 00 flour for his mezzalune. “You hit a point of diminishing returns if you add too much cocoa. The pasta texture suffers and the flavor stops improving.” When Accarrino was experimenting with making a lime pasta, he tried grating lime zest into the dough, but realized that

it didn’t add much more flavor than if he were to microplane the zest on top. But pulverizing dried black limes and incorporating them into the dough did the trick. All told, Accarrino has more than 120 recipes for pasta in various shapes and colors, including a charcoal-gray charred onion pasta, a coral senise pepper mafaldine, and a brick-red bludnudlen.

“If I’m making a flavor of pasta, I think, what would that add in terms of appearance?” he asks. “In the case of the mezzalune, we are really harnessing the cocoa and the short rib liquid, which is a dark reddish-brown color. It would turn a yellow pasta murky and brown, but if I make the pasta that mirrors the color of the sauce, it’s a deep, rich mahogany.” And it tastes as good as it looks.

Gabriella Gershenson still dreams about the soba noodles with yuzu broth she had in Tokyo.