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Penne “Orchidee delle Eolie”

Pasta with a pesto of tomatoes, almonds, capers, anchovies, garlic, and basil

Visiting Lipari, the Aeolian island off the coast of Sicily, my husband, Doug, and I tried the strategy of seeking out the busiest restaurant for our lunch. To our surprise, all the simple trattorias in the heart of Lipari town were virtually empty. Where was everybody? We finally found a bustling dining room at Filippino, a nearly century-old hilltop restaurant that I had mistakenly thought was a tourist trap. The pleasant setting does indeed draw tourists, but the cooking is excellent.

Chef Lucio Bernardi gave me the recipe for the dish I ordered, which was named for one of its chief ingredients: capers, the “orchids” of the Aeolian islands. A blend of uncooked tomatoes, almonds, anchovies, capers, and herbs, it closely resembles the famous pesto of Trapani, another Sicilian waterfront town.

3 tablespoons blanched (skinless) almonds
1 pound tomatoes, halved and seeded (no need to peel)
1/4 cup salt-packed capers, well rinsed
4 anchovy fillets
2 cloves garlic
20 fresh basil leaves
5 fresh mint leaves
1 Calabrian chile or a pinch of hot pepper flakes
1/3 cup extra-virgin olive oil
1/4 cup freshly grated aged pecorino cheese
Salt
1 pound penne rigate, gemelli, or fusilli

Place the almonds in a food processor and pulse until finely chopped. Add the tomatoes, capers, anchovies, garlic, basil, mint, and chile and puree until smooth. With the machine running, add the olive oil gradually.

Transfer the sauce to a bowl and stir in the cheese. Season to taste with salt.

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil over high heat. Add the pasta and cook until al dente. Set aside 1 cup of the pasta water, then drain. Put the pasta in a serving bowl and add as much of the sauce as you like—you may not need it all. Toss well, moistening with some of the reserved pasta water as needed. Serve immediately.

Serves 4 to 6.