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Pasta E Fagioli

Serves 4-6

Pasta e fagioli: simply "pasta and beans" in Italian. But for satisfying, earthy dishes easily and inexpensively made, this traditional peasant dish is hard to beat. Originally prepared as a homey way to use up leftovers, this typically meatless soup can range from a flavorful broth studded with small pastas and cannellini or borlotti beans, to a heartier soup-stew. The longer it sits, the thicker it gets.

1-1/2 cups dried white beans, such as cannelloni or Great Northern,
soaked overnight and rinsed
2 onions, 1 coarsely chopped, 1 finely chopped
1/2 cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus extra for serving
1 carrot, diced
1 stalk celery with leaves, diced
2 to 3 garlic cloves, minced
2/3 cup canned diced tomatoes with their juice
1 sprig of fresh rosemary, needles stripped from the stem and finely chopped.
About 5-1/2 cups boiling water or vegetable or chicken stock, or a combination
1/2 cup minced fresh Italian (flat-leaf) parsley
Salt and freshly ground black pepper
About 6 ounces ditalini, small shells, elbows, or ziti (roughly one third of a 1 pound package)
Freshly grated Pecorino Romano and/or Parmesan cheese, for serving

1. Place the beans in a large, heavy saucepan, add water to cover to a depth of 1 inch, and set over high heat. Add the coarsely chopped onion, bring the pot to a boil, and then turn down to a simmer and let cook until the onion has almost disintegrated and the beans are almost tender, about 1 hour.
2. Drain the beans and onions, reserving the cooking liquid. Transfer about a cup of the liquid and about a cup of the beans (with some of the cooked onions) to a food processor. Buzz smooth and set aside.
3. Toward the end of the bean cooking time, heat the oil in a large, heavy soup pot or Dutch oven over medium heat. Add the finely chopped onion and gently sauté it until it begins to get limp but not brown, about five minutes. Add the carrot and celery, and sauté until slightly tender, another 5 to 8 minutes. Add the garlic and sauté until fragrant, 1 minute more.

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4. Add the beans and their cooking liquid to the vegetables in the soup pot. Then add the tomatoes, rosemary, and pureed beans, as well as about 3 cups of the boiling water. Bring the pot to a boil, turn down to a simmer, and let cook, covered, until the beans are fully and meltingly tender and everything has gotten to know each other cozily, about another hour. Lift the lid from time to time, both to stir (the pureed beans may want to stick) and to add more boiling water as needed. The beans should be covered by 1 to 3 inches of simmering liquid at all times. (This range is so large because, as noted, the amount of liquid depends on whether you prefer a brothy or thick soup. Remember, too, that the pasta will cook in the liquids, thickening them.)

5. When the beans are pillowy and soft, add half the minced parsley, salt and pepper to taste, and another cup of boiling water to the pot. Bring back to a boil, uncovered, add the pasta, and cook, stirring frequently, until the pasta is tender, about 10 minutes. Remove from the heat. Taste again, adding more salt and pepper as needed.

6. Serve, hot, in warmed bowls. Garnish each bowl with a thread of olive oil, a shower of the remaining parsley, and some cheese. Pass additional cheese and a cruet of olive oil at the table.

VARIATION: Sardinian Chickpea & Fennel

Pasta e Fagioli: Substitute chickpeas for the cannellini, but in step 1, let them cook for 2-1/2 hours instead of 1 hour. In step 3, the vegetable sauté, replace the carrot and celery with 1 large bulb fennel, halved and very thinly sliced (remove and discard the stalk, stem, and most of the fronds; mince a few fronds to yield 2 to 3 tablespoons; set them aside). Sauté the sliced fennel starts softening, about 8 minutes. In step 4 add 4 or 5 peeled and diced small potatoes and the reserved minced fennel fronds to the soup pot along with the other ingredients. Proceed with the recipe as directed.