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Party 911: Pasta Salad To The Rescue

By Nicole Dean

Has this ever happened to you? You've been invited to a party and realize you don't have a meal to bring. Not only that, but the party starts in an hour. What should you do?

You have four options:

Don't go, and miss out on a really fun time.

Show up empty-handed and explain red-faced that you forgot.

Grab a casserole dish and head to the deli. Order your food and have them put it right into your casserole dish. Yes, I've gone this. It's expensive but it works. If you get asked for the recipe, just wink and say "It's Grandma's secret recipe".

Whip up a big batch of pasta salad for only a few dollars, and have plenty left over to eat for lunch during the week. You will save money and look good showing up at the party with a great dish.

Pasta salad is truly one of the easiest meals to prepare. All you need are noodles and salad dressing. You can use pretty much any salad dressing on the market - the standards like Italian, Ranch, or, if you're ambitious, your favorite homemade dressing.

Now for the fun part. Cook the noodles, following package directions and then drain. Pour the dressing on while the noodles are warm so they will absorb all that good oily flavor.

Look around your kitchen to see if you have any of the following ingredients:

Fresh veggies - carrots, broccoli, green onions

Frozen vegetables - frozen peas are wonderful in pasta salad

Cubed or shredded cheese

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Garbanzo beans (also known as Chick Peas)

Black Olives

Toss in whatever you can find. It's an 'everything goes' type of recipe. Bring more dressing with you in case you need to add it later, and voila! You're done.

If you're feeling fancy, you can bring some cherry tomatoes, parmesan cheese, bacon bits or sunflower seeds as toppings. It's all good.

The next time you are invited to a party, don't panic. Just grab these instructions and whip up a meal in minutes. Enjoy!

Are you a mom who'd rather play than cook? If so, you won't want to miss

<http://www.freequickrecipes.com>

. And, if frugal cooking is your thing, then check out

<http://www.freequickrecipes.com/frugal-cooking.php>

Save Time in the Kitchen. Cook Pasta the way Restaurant Chefs Do

By Skip Lombardi

Have you ever wondered how a restaurant can get a dish of pasta to your table in about four minutes when you know it takes ten minutes just to cook the pasta? Does the water on their stoves boil at a higher temperature than the water on yours? Do they know a trick that you don't? As a matter of fact, they do.

They parboil, or partially pre-cook their pasta; so when an order comes in to the kitchen, a cook can turn out a dish of perfectly 'al dente' pasta in a minute or two. Pre-cooking is a worthwhile technique for home cooks, because it enables them to pull together a great sit-down meal in practically no time, no matter how busy their day may have been.

It's also a great method to use when you plan to serve pasta for a crowd. I once catered a party for fifty, where I had a "pasta bar." With the assistance of one helper, and two propane burners, I served fifty portions of freshly cooked pasta (al dente) without holding anyone up in the buffet line.

To parboil pasta at home, bring a large pot of salted water (at least six quarts) to the boil. Add one pound of pasta and stir until the pasta wilts (in the case of spaghetti or linguine) and becomes submerged. When the water returns to a full, rolling boil, cook the pasta for exactly two minutes, then

Party 911: Pasta Salad To The Rescue

drain, shock in ice water, and drain again. Note: Strand pasta like spaghetti or linguine will be brittle, so handle them with care.

Place the pasta in a container large enough to hold it, then add enough olive oil to just coat each strand. Cover and refrigerate until needed. Parboiled pasta will keep, refrigerated, for four to six hours.

Note: Coating pasta with olive oil flies in the face of conventional wisdom that says, "Never coat pasta with olive oil. The sauce won't adhere to the pasta." Well, conventional wisdom aside, sauce sticks to parboiled pasta like glue. What else can I say?

When it's time to cook dinner, bring a large pot of salted water to the boil, add the pasta (You'll note that the pasta has softened over the time you've had it refrigerated. This is perfectly fine.), cook for one or two minutes, then drain in a colander. Be sure to taste after a minute or so. The pasta cooks quickly. Serve as you would any pasta that you had cooked for eight to ten minutes.

Again, this is a great, worthwhile technique to use at home, because you can parboil the pasta at a time of day when you're not juggling three or four other tasks, like preparing a sauce, or a salad. And when it's time to prepare the rest of dinner, you'll feel more confident in the outcome, because you can focus more of your attention on the other parts of the meal.

Try this technique once, and you could be hooked. You may not be serving fifty or sixty people per night, but you'll be cooking just like a chef in a neighborhood Italian restaurant.

Skip Lombardi is the author of two cookbooks: "La Cucina dei Poveri: Recipes from my Sicilian Grandparents," and "Almost Italian: Recipes from America's Little Italys." He has been a Broadway musician, high-school math teacher, software engineer, and a fledgeling blogger. But he has never let any of those pursuits get in the way of his passion for cooking and eating. Visit his Web site to learn more about his cookbooks.

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