

# Taming Garlic Shrimp Pasta

Delicate shrimp, volatile garlic, and a whole mess of oil—what could possibly go wrong?

BY FRANCISCO J. ROBERT

In theory, garlic shrimp pasta has all the makings of an ideal weeknight meal. Toss a few quick-cooking ingredients—shrimp, garlic, oil, wine—with boiled dried pasta, and only the salad's left holding up dinner.

As with most theories, of course, reality has a way of rearing its ugly head. Delicate shrimp cooks fast, which translates to overcooked in a matter of seconds. Meanwhile, volatile garlic is all over the map: Like a high-maintenance friend, it can become overbearing or bitter (or simply disappear), depending on how it's treated. Add to that the challenge of getting a brothy sauce to coat the pasta, and this simple recipe turns into a precarious balancing act. But I still wanted it all: al dente pasta and moist shrimp bound by a supple sauce infused with a deep garlic flavor.

Before facing the garlic problem, I tackled the shrimp. Because most shrimp are frozen once caught—and the flavor and texture degrade quickly once thawed—the test kitchen prefers buying IQF (individually quick frozen) shrimp and thawing it ourselves (which takes only minutes in a colander under cold running water). We've also found that freezing deep-frozen, deveined shrimp sabotages flavor, so it's worth saving those tasks for home, too. I ruled out medium-sized shrimp because they cook too fast, as well as expensive extra-large and jumbo, landing on midpriced-but-meaty large shrimp (21 to 25 per pound).

In most shrimp pasta recipes, the shrimp are cooked separately, then tossed with the sauce and pasta at the end. But how to cook them? Searing quickly over high heat was too risky, yielding an overcooked texture. Poaching in a court-bouillon (water enhanced with wine and aromatics) kept the shrimp moist but didn't contribute much flavor. I tentatively settled on sautéing them gently in garlic and oil while building the sauce.

Starting with a basic working recipe, I sautéed the shrimp with three cloves of minced garlic in a modest amount of olive oil. Removing the shrimp, I added a pinch of red pepper flakes and a cup of white wine, reduced the sauce, then tossed it with the shrimp and boiled linguine. The results were just OK: weak garlic, moist but lackluster shrimp, and a thin sauce that dripped off the pasta.

Upping the garlic by increments until I reached six cloves gave me indisputably garlicky pasta. But

now I had a new problem: All that garlic cooked unevenly. Sautéed too little, and the pasta suffered that raw flavor that (literally) takes your breath away; too long, and random burnt granules impart a bitter taste. Turning the heat to the lowest setting and simmering the garlic longer yielded a sweet, nutty taste, but we missed the brasher notes.

Borrowing tricks from our recipe for Spanish-Style Garlic Shrimp (January/February 2008), I split the difference. First, I slowly simmered the oil with smashed garlic cloves (more effective in this task than minced) over low heat, discarded the toasted cloves, and built the sauce using the infused oil. Just before adding the wine, I quickly sautéed a smaller amount of minced garlic (just long enough to bloom the flavor). With sweet low notes from the infused oil and brasher high notes from the minced, I finally had the balanced, deeply layered garlic flavor I wanted. When tasters noted that the shrimp itself was still short on flavor, I marinated it for 20 minutes with additional minced garlic.

Next, I tinkered with the sauce. To deglaze the pan, I tried replacing the wine with sherry, Marsala, and Madeira, but tasters preferred the cleaner taste of vermouth or white wine. Bottled clam juice added after the vermouth contributed seaworthy complexity, bolstering the shrimp flavor. To get the sauce to cling to the pasta, I stirred a little flour into the oil as a thickener just before adding the liquid and added some cold butter to finish.

Presumably at the finish line, I served up my deep-flavored, luxurious-textured pasta. But tasters remarked that the shrimp stayed hidden in a tangle of linguine, and there simply weren't enough bites. Swapping out traditional linguine for a chunky tubular pasta (we liked *mezze rigatoni*) made it easy to find the shrimp, and cutting each shrimp into thirds before cooking ensured that nearly every bite boasted a tasty morsel.

## GARLICKY SHRIMP PASTA

SERVES 4

Marinate the shrimp while you prepare the remaining ingredients.

- 5 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 5 teaspoons), plus 4 medium cloves, smashed
- 1 pound large (21–25) shrimp, peeled, deveined, each shrimp cut into 3 pieces
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- Table salt

- 1 pound short tubular pasta such as fusilli, campanelle, or *mezze rigatoni*
- ¼–½ teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 2 teaspoons unbleached all-purpose flour
- ½ cup dry vermouth or white wine
- ¾ cup clam juice
- ½ cup chopped fresh parsley leaves
- 3 tablespoons unsalted butter
- 1 teaspoon lemon juice plus 1 lemon, cut into wedges
- Ground black pepper

1. Toss 2 teaspoons minced garlic, shrimp, 1 tablespoon oil, and ¼ teaspoon salt in medium bowl. Let shrimp marinate at room temperature 20 minutes.

2. Heat 4 smashed garlic cloves and remaining 2 tablespoons oil in 12-inch skillet over medium-low heat, stirring occasionally, until garlic is light golden brown, 4 to 7 minutes. Remove skillet from heat and use slotted spoon to remove garlic from skillet; discard garlic. Set skillet aside.

3. Bring 4 quarts water to boil in large Dutch oven over high heat. Add 1 tablespoon salt and pasta. Cook until just al dente, then drain pasta, reserving ¼ cup cooking water, and transfer pasta back to Dutch oven.

4. While pasta cooks, return skillet with oil to medium heat; add shrimp with marinade to skillet in single layer. Cook shrimp, undisturbed, until oil starts to bubble gently, 1 to 2 minutes. Stir shrimp and continue to cook until almost cooked through, about 1 minute longer. Using slotted spoon, transfer shrimp to medium bowl. Add remaining 3 teaspoons minced garlic and pepper flakes to skillet and cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Add flour and cook, stirring constantly, for 1 minute; stir in vermouth and cook for 1 minute. Add clam juice and parsley; cook until mixture starts to thicken, 1 to 2 minutes. Off heat, whisk in butter and lemon juice. Add shrimp and sauce to pasta, adding reserved cooking water if sauce is too thick. Season with black pepper. Serve, passing lemon wedges separately.

## All Clammed Up

We sampled three brands of bottled clam juice and found the fresh, bright taste of Bar Harbor boosted our pasta's seafood flavor best, keeping the shrimp from getting stranded in a sea of garlic. For complete tasting results, go to [www.cooksillustrated.com/december](http://www.cooksillustrated.com/december).



TOP CLAM JUICE

**COOK'S LIVE** Original Test Kitchen Video  
[www.cooksillustrated.com](http://www.cooksillustrated.com)

### HOW TO MAKE

- Garlicky Shrimp Pasta