

Did Marco Polo Bring Spaghetti (Pasta)

To Italy from China?

By

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I remember hearing stories about this in school from the time I was a child—but my grandmother wouldn't believe it!! Italy was too important a source for all the work she did in her kitchen most of her life---work she learned at an early age from her own family predecessors.

It was not at all unusual for her to spend all day on Saturdays making her own pasta (ravioli, lasagna, etc.) to feed the family (eight children, numerous spouses and grandchildren) on Sundays after Church. But my teachers at that time, said it was so, and I believed it! Until I went to Italy myself on a Fulbright Scholarship to Florence after college.

It was there that the fantasy was totally obliterated from my mind. It seems that pasta existed in Italy from at least 400 BC, before Caesar converted the Roman Republic into an Empire! Etruscan frescos from that time currently on display in several locations in Tuscany and elsewhere in Italy, depict people using rolling pins and cutting wheels similar to the tools used until recently to flatten dough and slicing it into various types of pasta. So, considering this long tradition regarding pasta making, I doubt my grandmother

would have enjoyed eating dried spaghetti from a box, boiled in hot water—even with a few drops of olive oil to keep it from sticking---as we do today.

But how did this myth take hold? And why did so many people believe it over the centuries??

Well, for one thing, the Chinese did make noodles when Marco Polo visited Kublai Kahn in 1274, something he called “vermicelli” in his memoirs, but not from the kind of wheat grown in Italy. They used gluten free millet or barley to make their noodles, not durum wheat, which at the time was widely grown only in Italy (including Sicily and Sardinia).

There is even some evidence that Arabs may have imported some variations of pasta production into southern Italy and Greece, especially Naples, along with spinach and eggplant. But one had to wait until tomatoes were imported from South America to arrive at the type of dish so popular in Italy (and America) today.

Even so, around the early fourth century AD, the famous Roman cookbook by Apicius, described how pasta was made from finely ground wheat cut into squares similar to lasagna called laganum—a dish that Cicero was said to be especially fond of, more than a millennium prior to Marco Polo’s trip to China!

So, Marco, we love and admire you for all the great things you’ve done and places you’ve visited! But we’ve been loving Italian pasta long before you were born.

