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KITCHEN ISSUE

Come for the Trails,
Stay for a Beer
IN NORWAY,
OXFORD, AND
PARIS

5 STANDOUT KITCHENS

In Kennebunkport,
Falmouth, Rockport,
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And Why They Work

A Winter Pasta
Recipe from
SOLO ITALIANO

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SOLO ITALIANO/FEAST

PASTA PAIRING

Solo Italiano co-owners Paolo and Mercedes Laboa share a recipe from their “story of us”

words by
KATHRYN WILLIAMS



photos by
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Corzetti, like Chef Paolo Laboa, hail from Liguria.



Paolo Laboa cooks northern Italian cuisine inspired by the abundance of Maine's land and sea.

CORZETTI *con* PESTO *di* PINOLI

SOURCE: SOLO ITALIANO,
PAOLO AND MERCEDES LABOA

It's a common reality of the connubial condition that couples remember things differently. Which makes for the kind of low-grade marital discord that makes dinner parties that much more entertaining. For Paolo and Mercedes Laboa, co-owners of Portland's Solo Italiano restaurant—Paolo is executive chef, and Mercedes handles front-of-the-house business—that divergent memory is the story of their first shared *corzetti* stamp, the one carved with an *F* for Farina, the San Francisco restaurant where the husband and wife met. How, when, and from where the stamp arrived in their possession is disputed, but one thing they do agree on is that the

traditional Ligurian pasta dish helps tell their "story of us."

Mercedes met Paolo in 2006, when she was hired, at an interview mediated by a translator, as his sous-chef. She was to teach the Genoese chef enough English to help him run the kitchen. "She teach me English," Paolo says in an entirely unaffected Italian lilt. "How is this going to work?" Mercedes remembers thinking.

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The short of it is that, three years later, their first child was born. Followed by a second and, several East Coast gigs later (Mercedes grew up in Gloucester, Massachusetts), their own restaurant. Since 2016, Solo Italiano has been a thriving farm-to-table addition to Portland's Old Port, occupying a cavernous and warm but previously unlucky spot on Commercial Street. Through large plate-glass windows, diners watch the hustle and bustle of a northern port town known for its gastronomic abundance. In many ways, it reminds the couple of the restaurant and city where they met. "It's weird how we've gone all the way back," says Mercedes.

But the *corzetti*.... Thin, toothsome circles of pasta are hand-embossed with carved wooden stamps—in the Middle Ages with a coin called a *corzetto*, from which the pasta derives its name. The pasta's elaborate indentations allow for better adhesion of sauce, traditionally a mushroom *tocco* or pine nut pesto.

below Solo Italiano's traditional *corzetti* stamps were handcrafted of oak, walnut, and olive wood in Varese Ligure, Italy.



It was one day before the couple were a couple that Mercedes found herself, on a trip home, making the regional dish with her brother and his then-partner, also, oddly enough, Genoese. She found herself thinking of Paolo back in San Francisco and sent him a photo with a note: *We should make these at Farina.* (Here's where memories deviate—Paolo recalls having brought the stamp from Italy already.) And so, they did. Side by side, "we made a lot of *corzetti*," recalls Paolo.

Today, the dish is more often one the Laboas make at home, though it occasionally appears on the Solo Italiano menu. It's a favorite of the couple's daughters, Violet and Evelina, who are learning to cook alongside their accomplished parents. *Corzetti* is a dish that has tradition and "soul" to it, Mercedes says. On this, the partners and chefs can agree.



"In Italy, we take our time to do things right," says Laboa. While a pasta roller will get you there quicker, a rolling pin is the old-fashioned way to sheet pasta.

The coin-shaped pasta stirs special memories for the chef and his wife.



INGREDIENTS

600 grams (roughly 3 cups) "00" flour (ideally, unbleached, non-GMO)
3 farm eggs
1 tablespoon grass-fed butter, melted
1 tablespoon chopped fresh marjoram
1 cup water, room temperature
Semolina flour for dusting

PESTO

1/3 cup European pine nuts
1 small clove garlic, skinned
1/2 cup mild extra-virgin olive oil
1/2 cup freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano, plus more for serving
1/4 cup freshly grated Pecorino Sardo
1 tablespoon chopped fresh marjoram
Coarse sea salt, to preference

For the pasta:

On a clean surface, mound the flour into a shape like a volcano with a crater in the center. One by one, crack the eggs into the crater, beating with a fork. Add melted butter and marjoram and slowly add water, while continuing to beat. (The amount of water needed will vary slightly based on ambient humidity.) Start to incorporate flour from the sides of the mound until a dough forms. Knead gently until smooth, somewhat elastic, and consistent in texture. Wrap the dough in a damp towel and let it rest, at room temperature, for 30 minutes.

Once your dough is ready, you will need some strength and a rolling pin or a pasta roller attachment for a standing mixer. When the sheet of pasta is about a millimeter thick (but no less than!), lay it on a working surface dusted with flour and stamp your corzetti. The bottom stamp cuts the circle that will fit between both stamp pieces for the final, intricately designed pasta "coin." (These stamps can be purchased online.)

Store your corzetti in the fridge in a manner that doesn't force them to touch one another while you prepare your pesto. A sprinkle of semolina flour helps with sticking to a pan or to one another.

For the pesto:

Add pine nuts, garlic, and olive oil to a blender, or, for a chunkier pesto, to a food processor and blend to a creamy consistency. Next, add both cheeses and marjoram and blend to the same consistency. Taste-test. Salt to preference, if necessary. Briefly warm a pan on the stove, turn off the heat, then let the pesto sit in the warm pan while you cook the pasta.

When the pesto is ready, cook your pasta *al dente*, approximately two to five minutes depending on thickness, in boiling water salted generously with kosher salt (properly salted water should taste like the sea!). Remove the pasta from the boiling water (dripping pasta water will help the sauce emulsify) and toss with 1 heaping tablespoon of pesto per 6 corzetti. Serve with grated Parmigiano-Reggiano.

Serves 4–6

CHEF'S NOTES: When making pasta, it is important to develop your sense of touch. You want ingredients sufficiently integrated but the dough still soft and not sticky. Knead with your hands, but always be careful not to overwork the dough or it will get tough, especially when it comes to sheeting and stamping. Practice! Remember that Italian food culture came to be by virtue of patience and humility. For the pesto, Chinese pine nuts are less expensive but less creamy and also bitter—get Spanish or Italian!



In some ways, the Laboas feel they've come full circle with this restaurant, which reminds them of the San Francisco kitchen in which they met.