

# Basic Formula for a Perfect Pasta Salad

**One pound pasta serves 12–16 as a side dish, 8 as a main course.** Using this formula, you can create your own pasta salad, drawing from the following choices. The cooking and cooling technique guarantees flavorful pasta and bright vegetables every time, and the dressings are designed to coat the pasta lightly.

Under ideal circumstances, pasta salad tastes best when made, dressed, and served with little delay. If that's not possible (and it's usually not), prepare the individual salad ingredients up to the point of dressing them and refrigerate for up to 2 hours. Although not at its peak of perfection, leftover pasta salad is good for at least a couple of days.

## ADVANCE PREPARATION

1. **MAKE DRESSING** and refrigerate until needed.

[Creamy Buttermilk Dressing](#)  
[Creamy Vinaigrette](#)  
[Soy-Sesame Dressing](#)

Servings			Ingredients (See also <a href="#">Combinations That Worked Well</a> )
2	3	8	
2 quarts	2 quarts	4 quarts	Water (for perfectly cooked pasta, don't use less)
4 ounces	6 ounces	16 ounces	Bite-size pasta, such as macaroni, shells, farfalle (bow-ties), ziti, penne, fusilli (corkscrews), or rotelle (wagon wheels)
2 tblsp OR 1 1/2 tblsp OR 1 tblsp	2 tblsp OR 1 1/2 tblsp OR 1 tblsp	1/4 cup OR 3 tblsp OR 2 tblsp	Diamond Crystal kosher salt, OR Morton's kosher salt, OR table salt
8 ounces	12 ounces	2 pounds	<a href="#">Major flavorings: Vegetables</a> and <a href="#">Proteins</a>
			<a href="#">Flavor enhancers</a>
			<a href="#">Herbs and/or zests of choice</a>
1/8 (XX oz) OR 1 medium	1/6 (XX oz) OR 1 large	1/2 (XX oz) OR 3 large	Small red onion, cut into small dice, OR scallions, thinly sliced
4 tablespoons	6 tablespoons	1 cup	Choice of dressing (above)

1. **TO COOK THE PASTA**, bring water to a boil in a large pot. **ADD PASTA and SALT.** Cook until just tender, adding any **vegetables that need to be cooked during last 1–1/2 minutes of cooking (below).**

**DRAIN.**

**SPREAD OUT** in a **shallow baking pan**, and let cool to room temperature.

4 quarts water

Bite-size pasta, such as macaroni, shells, farfalle (bow-ties), ziti, penne, fusilli (corkscrews), rotelle (wagon wheels)

1/4 cup Diamond Crystal kosher salt,

OR 3 tablespoons Morton's kosher salt,

OR 2 tablespoons table salt

[Vegetables that need to be cooked with the pasta during the last 1–1 1/2 minutes](#)

A shallow baking pan or jellyroll pan, lightly oiled

2. **TRANSFER** pasta, vegetables, and remaining ingredients, except dressing, to a large bowl. (**Pasta salad without dressing can be covered and refrigerated for up to 2 hours.**)

3 **WHEN READY TO SERVE**, add dressing and toss to coat. **LET STAND** for **15 minutes**, and serve.

**CONTINUED →**

# Major Flavorings (For 1 pound of pasta, use 2 pounds of Major Flavorings)

[\(Top\)](#)

## VEGETABLES THAT DON'T HAVE TO BE COOKED

*Artichoke hearts (canned), drained and cut into bite-size pieces*  
*Avocados, halved, pitted, peeled, and cut into bite-size pieces*  
*Bean sprouts, rinsed and dried*  
*Bell peppers, trimmed, cored, and cut into bite-size pieces*  
*Celery, trimmed and sliced 1/4 inch thick*  
*Cherry tomatoes, halved and sprinkled with salt*  
*Cucumbers, preferably seedless, quartered lengthwise, cut into bite-size pieces, and sprinkled with salt*  
*Fennel, trimmed, halved, cored, and thinly sliced*  
*Green peas (frozen), thawed*  
*Mushrooms, thinly sliced*  
*Tomatoes, seeded, cut into medium dice, and sprinkled with salt*  
*Zucchini, halved lengthwise if small, quartered lengthwise if large, then thinly sliced*

## VEGETABLES ADDED TO BOILING PASTA DURING LAST MINUTE OR SO OF COOKING

[\(Top\)](#)

*Asparagus, trimmed and roll-cut into bite-size pieces (medium-thick: 1 1/2 minutes)*  
*Broccoli florets, cut into bite-size pieces; stems peeled and cut into 1/4-inch-thick coins*  
*Carrots, peeled and cut into 1/4-inch coins*  
*Cauliflower florets, cut into bite-size pieces*  
*Green beans, trimmed and cut into bite-size lengths*  
*Snow peas, strings removed*  
*Sugar snap peas, strings removed*  
*Zucchini, halved lengthwise if small, quartered lengthwise if large, and sliced 1/4 inch thick*

## VEGETABLES THAT CAN BE GRILLED OR BROILED

[\(Top\)](#)

Brush these vegetables with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper before grilling or broiling.

*Bell peppers, stemmed, seeded, and quartered, then cut into bite-size strips after grilling*  
*Eggplant, cut into 1/2-inch thick rounds, then cut into bite-size pieces after grilling*  
*Fennel, trimmed, halved, core left intact, and cut into wedges (remove core after grilling)*  
*Mushrooms, large, left whole; sliced or quartered after grilling*  
*Zucchini, cut on the diagonal into 1/2-inch-thick slices*

## VEGETABLES THAT CAN BE SAUTÉED

[\(Top\)](#)

*Bell peppers, cut into bite-size pieces (season with a little salt and pepper and sauté in a little oil over medium-high heat until crisp-tender, 3–4 minutes)*  
*Celery, trimmed and sliced 1/4 inch thick*

# Other Major Flavorings – Proteins

[\(Top\)](#)

*Chicken breasts, grilled, sautéed, or steamed, cut crosswise into thin bite-size strips*  
*Chickpeas and kidney beans (canned), drained and rinsed (most white beans are too mushy)*  
*Crabmeat (pasteurized lump)*  
*Ham, sliced 1/4 inch thick and cut into bite-size strips*  
*Italian sausage, steam-sautéed and sliced thinly on a slight bias*  
*Lobster, cooked and cut into bite-size pieces*  
*Mozzarella and other mild cheeses, cut into 1/2-inch cubes*  
*Shrimp, peeled, then steamed or grilled*  
*Tuna (canned, drained, or grilled fresh)*

**CONTINUED →**

# Flavor Enhancers (Add as desired)

[\(Top\)](#)

## CANNED / JARRED

*Capers, drained*  
*Olives, pitted and coarsely chopped*  
*Pepperoncini, drained and thinly sliced*  
*Roasted peppers, cut into strips*  
*Sun-dried tomatoes packed in oil, cut into small dice*

## MEATS

[\(Top\)](#)

*Bacon, fried and crumbled*  
*Prosciutto, thinly sliced and cut into small dice*  
*Smoked salmon, thinly sliced and cut into thin strips*

## CHEESES

*Feta, crumbled*  
*Goat cheese, crumbled*  
*Parmesan, shaved with a vegetable peeler or ribbon microplane*

## NUTS AND SEEDS

*Cashews, roasted, coarsely chopped*  
*Peanuts, roasted, coarsely chopped*  
*Pine nuts, toasted*  
*Sesame seeds, toasted*  
*Sunflower seeds*

# Herbs and Zests (Fresh or dried)

[\(Top\)](#)

*Basil, stemmed and torn into pieces*  
*Cilantro, stemmed and coarsely chopped*  
*Dill, stemmed and coarsely chopped*  
*Mint, stemmed and coarsely chopped*  
*Parsley, stemmed and coarsely chopped*  
*Rosemary, stemmed and minced*  
*Tarragon, stemmed and coarsely chopped*  
*Lemon zest, finely grated*  
*Orange zest, finely grated*

---

[\(Top\)](#)

**MENU IDEAS.** Serve as a side salad without a protein or as an entrée salad by adding leftover meat, poultry, seafood, cheese, or tofu.

**Sides for:**  
[Pick-A-Rub Grilled Beer Can Chicken](#)  
*Any barbecue specialty*  
**Add leftovers from:**  
[Pick-A-Rub Grilled Beer Can Chicken](#)  
[Grilled, Dry-Rubbed Beef Steaks \(Weber\)](#)

**DRESSINGS →**

# Dressings

(For 1 pound pasta, use 1 cup dressing)

[\(Top\)](#)

The lower acidity of these dressings will not affect the color of the green vegetables. Balsamic vinegar is not used here because even a quality balsamic will stain the pasta an unappetizing light brown color.

*(For everyday salads, I use Hellmann's Light mayonnaise and Breakstone's 30% Reduced Fat sour cream — not bad at all, especially when combined with assertive flavors in the salad. — rdy)*

## CREAMY VINAIGRETTE

[\(Top\)](#)

**Makes about 1 cup, enough for 1 pasta salad.** If you don't have a small whisk, you'll need to mix the dressing in a heavy bowl rather than the suggested Pyrex measuring cup. Use the mayonnaise in the dressing for milder pasta salads and Dijon for those more assertively flavored. (Vinaigrette can be made and refrigerated **1 day in advance**.)

**1/4 cup (60g either) rice vinegar OR fresh lemon juice (60g)**  
**2 tablespoons (30g either) mayonnaise (for milder pasta salads) OR Dijon mustard (for those more assertively flavored)**  
**1 large garlic clove, minced**  
**A big pinch of salt (I use 3/4 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt)**  
**A couple of grinds of freshly ground black pepper**  
**2/3 cup (144g) olive oil or extra-virgin olive oil**

1. **TO USE AN IMMERSION (STICK) BLENDER**, place all ingredients EXCEPT MAYONNAISE in a tall container. Process until emulsified. Whisk in the mayonnaise by hand.

2. **OR, TO USE A WHISK**, put vinegar or lemon juice and mustard or mayonnaise in a 2-cup Pyrex measuring cup. With a small whisk, stir in garlic, a big pinch of salt, and a couple of grinds of pepper.

Slowly whisk in oil, first in droplets, then in a slow, steady stream, to make an emulsified vinaigrette.

• • •

## CREAMY BUTTERMILK DRESSING

[\(Top\)](#)

**Makes about 1 cup, enough for 1 pasta salad.** Use this dressing for tossed salads as well. (Dressing can be made and refrigerated **up to 3 days in advance**.)

**1 large garlic clove, minced**  
**1/3 cup mayonnaise (80g Hellmann's Light mayonnaise)**  
**1/3 cup sour cream (83g Breakstone's 30% Reduced Fat sour cream)**  
**1/3 cup (2.9 oz, 82g) buttermilk**  
**3 tablespoons (1.6 oz, 46g either) lemon juice or rice vinegar**  
**Salt and freshly ground black pepper**

Mix all ingredients in a small bowl. Set aside or refrigerate until ready to toss with salad.

• • •

## SOY-SESAME DRESSING

[\(Top\)](#)

**Makes about 1 cup, enough for one pasta salad.** This dressing is sweet, salty, sour, hot, and aromatic. If you don't have a small whisk, you'll need to mix the dressing in a heavy bowl. (Dressing can be made and refrigerated **a day in advance**.)

**1 tablespoon (8g) minced garlic**  
**1 tablespoon (6g) minced, peeled ginger**  
**6 tablespoons (108g) soy sauce**  
**1 tablespoon (15g) rice vinegar**  
**1 tablespoon (12g) sugar**  
**1 tablespoon (12g) sesame oil**  
**3/4 teaspoon hot red pepper flakes (try Sriracha sauce or hot bean sauce instead)**  
**1/4 cup (54g) vegetable oil**  
**2 tablespoons mayonnaise (30g Hellmann's Light mayonnaise) — whisk in by hand if using a stick blender**  
**1 teaspoon Szechuan peppercorns, toasted and finely ground, optional (my addition, another layer of flavor — rdy)**

1. **TO USE AN IMMERSION (STICK) BLENDER**, place all ingredients EXCEPT MAYONNAISE in a tall container. Process until emulsified. Whisk mayonnaise in by hand.

2. **TO USE A WHISK**, mix garlic, ginger, soy sauce, vinegar, sugar, sesame oil, and pepper flakes in a 2-cup Pyrex measuring cup. Using a small whisk, vigorously whisk in mayonnaise.

Slowly whisk in oil, first in droplets, then in a slow, steady stream, to make an emulsified dressing.

