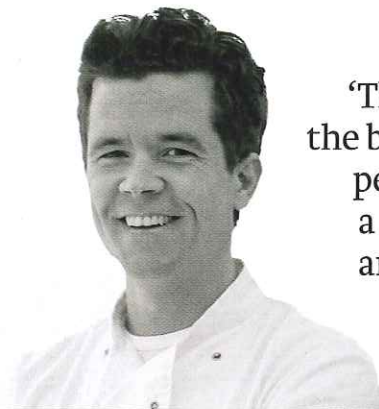




ANDREW
JEFFORD



Sam Harris



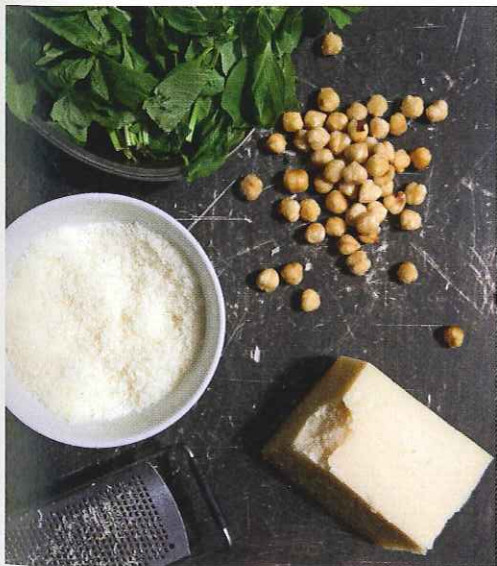
‘The crucial factor is the balance of flavours: pesto has to possess a palatable softness and a subtle crunch

Hey pesto

It is hard to believe that a small green herb most of us pick up in our local supermarket has an almost cult following in a certain area of northern Italy. Ligurian basil, found in the region north of Genoa, is famed for being what gourmets consider the best in the world. So much so that Italy has awarded this leafy herb DOP status (an EU system that protects the names of speciality foods from a specific region).

Every two years in March, Genoa hosts the Pesto World Championship where 100 competitors gather to see who can make the best pesto. The allotted competition time is 40 minutes, with the main rule being that the pesto can only contain seven ingredients: DOP Ligurian basil, local extra virgin olive oil, garlic, salt, pine nuts, Parmesan and pecorino cheese. Judges work on three principles when assessing the pesto: flavour, colour and texture. Once the 10 finalists are picked, the same rules apply, but this time they have only 20 minutes to make the pesto.

Pesto is considered the world’s most popular pasta sauce, but rarely is it made true to its origins. The pestos made in Genoa hold no comparison to the bitter, overly salty versions found on the shelves of our local stores. To gain an understanding of the Ligurians’ almost religious approach, one has to attempt to make one’s own at home.



Photography by Andy Sewell

Freshly made pesto is indeed a pleasure, but sourcing the specific basil type can be tricky and expensive, so be prepared to be flexible. At the restaurant we make our own version, which, although not 100 per cent authentic, bears some resemblance to the famed Genovese wonder. The crucial factor lies in the balance of flavours: pesto has to possess a palatable softness and a subtle crunch. One issue heavily debated in kitchens is the inclusion of raw garlic. We prefer to make our pesto without, as the intensity of raw garlic can overpower the delicacy of the other components, but I will leave that decision to you. The zest of a lemon can also help enliven the sauce and, rather controversially, we use a small quantity of unsalted butter, which we find marries the ingredients in addition to helping the sauce cling to the pasta.

Sam’s drinking choice

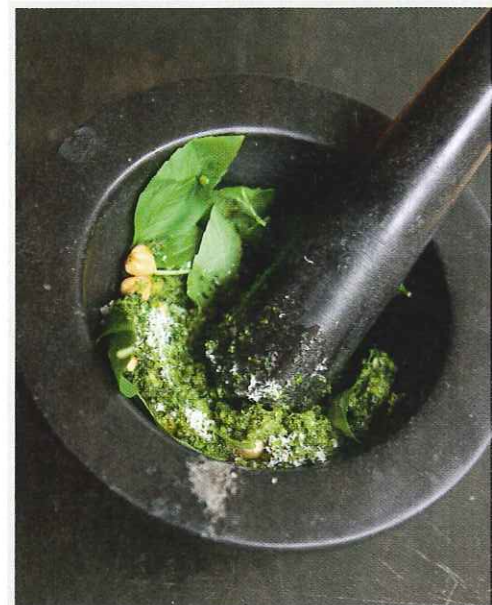
A light- to medium-bodied white such as an Italian Ribolla Gialla from Friuli or Chablis from Burgundy would work, both displaying that acidity needed to cut the richness and oily texture.



The final and most important element in creating your own pesto is how to combine those sacred ingredients. Using a pestle and mortar is by far the best way as you want to release the basil’s flavours into the sauce, rather than “stress” it too much. However, this does take time and a lot of effort. Using a food processor can work well, by simply adding the ingredients to the bowl and slowly pouring in the olive oil with the blade running to create an emulsion.

Then we are faced with the problem of which pasta to serve with it. The typical pasta choice would be *trofie*, a short eggless twisted shape. However, this is not easily made or found in the UK, therefore any dried eggless pasta of your choice would work well. And please, only use pesto to dress pasta, never to accompany fish or meat – an act that would bring tears to the eyes of the Ligurians. **FT**

Sam Harris is the chef at Zucca, 184 Bermondsey Street, London SE1. For a slideshow of this recipe, go to www.ft.com/foodanddrink. Rowley Leigh is away



Lemon and hazelnut pesto

Ingredients

500g dried linguine
200g fresh basil
100g toasted peeled hazelnuts
30g unsalted butter
80g grated Parmesan
30g grated pecorino
Zest of 1 lemon
A light extra virgin olive oil

Place all the ingredients except for the olive oil into a pestle and mortar (you may need to do this in two batches) and slowly pound, adding the oil as you go.

Boil the pasta in salted water until cooked, then tip into the pesto, stir and serve. You may want to add a ladleful of pasta cooking water to help slacken the sauce.

Poached peaches with basil sugar

Basil can play an

equally important role in desserts, notably with peaches. Whizz a handful of basil with a handful of caster sugar to make a basil sugar. To poach a peach, bring a pan of water to the boil and add a good cupful of sugar then taste – it should be sweet but not overly so. Make a small cross to one end of the peach, turn the heat off, drop in the peach and let stand for three minutes. Remove and let stand to cool, then peel. Sprinkle the basil sugar over a poached peach and some raspberries.

