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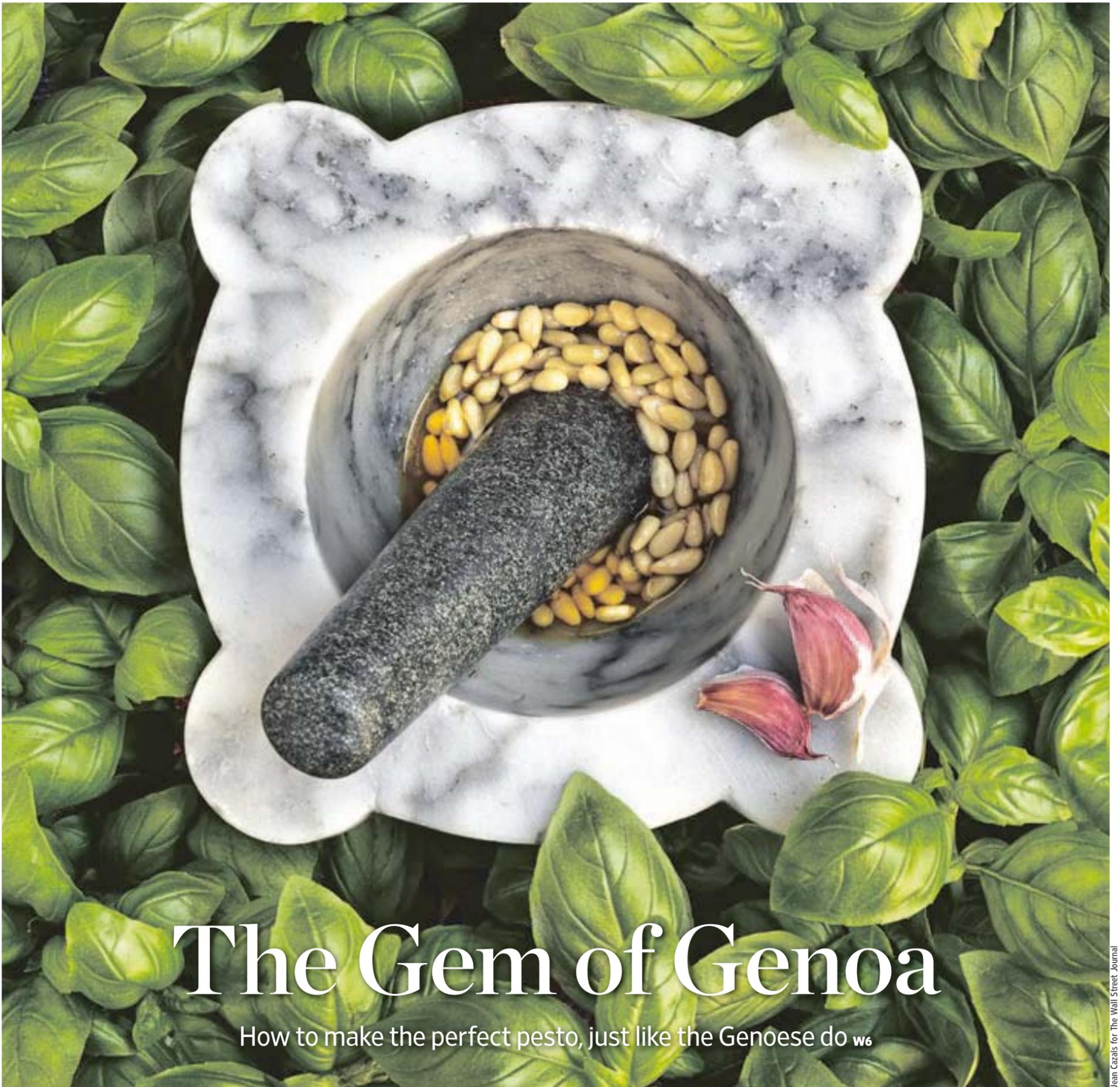
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The Gem of Genoa

How to make the perfect pesto, just like the Genoese do **w6**

Jean Cazals for The Wall Street Journal

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EATING & DRINKING

BY J.S. MARCUS

Not all pesto is created equal. The cherished amalgam of basil, garlic, salt, grated cheese and olive oil has its origins in the northwest of Italy, around the port of Genoa, the undisputed pesto capital, and the surrounding region of Liguria. The pesto here tastes different wherever you choose to eat—but just about always right.

As you learn in Liguria, true pesto—or pesto alla genovese, as Italians usually call it in deference to its origins—requires a lot more effort than just opening a jar.

The first step is sourcing the ingredients. And the first ingredient that everyone worries about in Genoa is the basil—which isn't just any basil, but "basilico genovese," an especially sweet variety of sweet basil grown in the center and west of Liguria.

As it turns out, what's so special is not just the variety but also the age of the basil, says Roberto Panizza, Genoa's pesto impresario, who owns a local trattoria, Il Genovese, and helps to organize the Genoa Pesto World Championship (held biannually).

"Basil can have different flavors," he says. "It can taste of mint, or lavender or lemon." But young basil, no more than a few weeks old, with leaves the size of a fingernail, has the purest basil taste.

Pesto is traditionally made with Ligurian olive oil—a mild, buttery product a world away from the fruity, peppery oils in the rest of Italy. Good garlic is also essential.

Salt should be coarse, and its abrasion is key in breaking down the basil leaves when pesto is made by hand. The grated cheese is a matter of taste and temperament. Mr. Panizza, like many in Genoa, prefers a combination of 24-month

Pesto purists use marble mortars and wooden pestles for grinding the basil leaves into a paste

old Parmigiano-Reggiano and stronger fiore sardo, a pecorino cheese from Sardinia.

When combining, pesto purists reach for a mortar and pestle. The mortar should be marble and the pestle should be wood. Mr. Panizza says you should plan on 10-15 minutes of grinding time.

Meanwhile, many home cooks in Genoa take out the blender. The result is clearly different—mortar-and-pestle pesto has visible bits of basil leaves whereas the machine-made versions are often a homogeneous green. A key advantage in the mortar-and-pestle method is that the whirl of the blender will heat up the ingredients, affecting the taste. Local cooks make sure to avoid this by chilling the blender pitchers before preparation.

Fresh pesto belongs with pasta. In Liguria, unlike much of the rest of Italy, fresh pasta is made without eggs—the result can be oddly bland on its own, but that blandness turns out to be the perfect vehicle for pesto.

Classic fresh-pasta accompaniments to pesto include hand-rolled and dumpling-like trofie; and mandilli, a Ligurian-style variant of lasagna that is served like pappardelle rather than in layers.



IN SEARCH OF

Perfect Pesto

The basil paste, a speciality of Genoa, is giving the tomato a run for its money as the default pasta sauce



LA BOSSA DI MARIO, CAMOGLI

Many restaurants specializing in pesto are traditional to a fault—for variation, head to La Bossa di Mario on Camogli's quaint main drag, Via della Repubblica, where locally sourced ingredients are featured in a wine-bar setting. Many pesto lovers down the pasta in sauce, but trofie al pesto at La Bossa takes another route. The scant amount of homemade pesto, with noticeable basil flecks, lets the homemade al dente pasta shine. Plan on half an order as a first course, before moving on to a Ligurian main dish such as an earthy stew of mackerel and peas, or an elegant presentation of locally-caught shrimp sautéed in brandy and served with an asparagus cream. Dinner for two, €70; labossa.it



RISTORANTE ROSA, CAMOGLI

Camogli, an upscale beach town 25 kilometers east of Genoa, is an accessible entry point to the Portofino peninsula. You can match great pesto with superlative coastal views at the elegant old-fashioned restaurant, Rosa. The classic way to prepare fresh trofie is to boil it with green beans and potatoes, then mix it together with pesto—in Italian, trofie al pesto con fagiolini e patate. The pesto here has a buttery richness, thanks to the prime Ligurian olive oil, which suits the competing starchiness of the ingredients. Camogli is also known as a fishing village, so let the pesto be a first course before moving onto a mixed grill of local fish and seafood. Trofie al pesto con fagiolini e patate, €8; rosaristorante.it



IL GENOVESE, GENOA

Ask the locals where to find the best pesto and most of them will send you to Il Genovese, where the pesto is made by hand every day. This no-nonsense, two-story trattoria, surrounded by the grandiose architecture of Genoa's late 19th-century building boom years, fills up fast, especially at lunch. Pesto is the star here, and pasta foils include fresh troffiate, a variation on trofie, and gnocchi. The pesto has perfectly balanced flavor—you can't pick out the basil or the garlic, for instance. Have a full portion as a main course and combine it with a green salad. Troffiate al pesto, €9; ilgenovese.com



MANGIABUONO, GENOA

Genoa's old town is known for retaining a medieval egalitarianism—rich and poor still live cheek-by-jowl here. For authentic pesto, and a dip into ordinary Genoese life, you can't do better than Mangiabuono, a bare-bones trattoria across from the 16th-century Palazzo Salvo. The no-plastic rule only applies to credit cards in this cash-only, English-free zone. (Expect plastic table clothes and plastic cups containing fantastic homemade tiramisu.) Pesto here is served with primitive pasta called testaroli—a crêpe-like Ligurian concoction that is rolled out and pan-fried, then cut up in spongy diamonds and boiled. It soaks up the homemade pesto, creating more of an infused dough than a sauced pasta. Testaroli al pesto, €8; +39 010 253 0501



PESTO

Inspired by the recipe at Genoa's Il Genovese

TOTAL TIME: 10-15 minutes | SERVES 4-6

- 4 bunches of fresh PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) Genoese basil, which guarantees high-quality flavor (this is equivalent to about 280 g of leaves)
- 30 g pine nuts
- 50-60 g aged Parmesan cheese, grated
- 20-40 g fiore sardo cheese (Sardinian pecorino), grated
- 1-2 garlic cloves from Vessalico (in the Ligurian province of Imperia)
- 3 g coarse salt
- 60-80 mL PDO extra-virgin olive oil from "Riviera Ligure"

Preparation
A marble mortar and wooden pestle are the tools traditionally used to make pesto. Wash the basil leaves in cold water and dry them on a tea towel without rubbing. In a mortar, finely crush the garlic and pine nuts until they are smooth. Add a few grains of salt and the basil leaves, then pound the mixture using a light circular movement of the pestle against the sides. Repeat this process. When the basil drips bright green liquid, add the cheeses. Pour in a thin layer of olive oil, and lightly blend the ingredients. The preparation must be done as quickly as possible to avoid oxidation.

Recipe courtesy of the Genoa Pesto World Championship