

Bacon Lover's Cacio e Pepe: A Smoky, Cheesy Twist on a Classic

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TIME
8-10 min

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INGREDIENTS

8 ounces pasta (spaghetti or bucatini are traditional, but linguine or rigatoni also work)
6-8 slices thick-cut bacon, diced
1 tablespoon olive oil (if needed)
1 teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper, plus more for serving
1 cup finely grated Pecorino Romano cheese, plus more for serving
1/2 cup finely grated Parmesan cheese
Salt to taste (be mindful of the salty bacon and cheese)
Reserved pasta cooking water (about 1.5 - 2 cups)
Optional garnish: fresh parsley, chopped

DIRECTIONS

- 1. Cook the Bacon:** In a large skillet or Dutch oven (one that's big enough to hold the pasta later), cook the diced bacon over medium heat until it's crispy and the fat has rendered. This will take about 8-10 minutes. Remove the crispy bacon bits with a slotted spoon and set them aside on a paper towel-lined plate. Leave about 2-3 tablespoons of bacon fat in the skillet. If you have less, add a bit of olive oil to make up the difference.
- 2. Cook the Pasta:** While the bacon cooks, bring a large pot of heavily salted water to a rolling boil. Add the pasta and cook according to package directions until it's very al dente (about 2 minutes less than the package suggests). This is crucial: Before draining, reserve at least 1.5 - 2 cups of the starchy pasta cooking water. Drain the pasta and set aside.
- 3. Bloom the Pepper:** Add the freshly cracked black pepper to the skillet with the bacon fat (and olive oil, if added) over medium-low heat. Toast the pepper for about 30 seconds to 1 minute, until fragrant. This "blooming" step releases its full aroma and flavor.
- 4. Create the Sauce Base:** Ladle about 1/2 cup of the reserved hot pasta water into the skillet with the pepper. Whisk vigorously until the water and fat emulsify into a light, milky liquid.
- 5. Add Pasta & Cheese:** Add the drained, still warm pasta to the skillet. Immediately begin adding the grated Pecorino Romano and Parmesan cheese in small handfuls, tossing continuously with tongs. Gradually add more pasta water, a tablespoon or two at a time, as you toss, until a creamy, glossy sauce forms that clings to the pasta. The key is to keep tossing and

adding water little by little until you achieve the desired consistency.

6. **Combine : Bacon & Serve:** Once the sauce is perfect, stir in most of the reserved crispy bacon bits, saving some for garnish. Taste and adjust seasoning if necessary (remember the bacon and cheese are salty!). Serve immediately, garnished with the remaining crispy bacon and extra freshly cracked black pepper and Pecorino Romano cheese.

SWAPS & NOTES

Bacon: Thick-cut bacon works best as it renders more fat and provides satisfyingly crispy bits.

Pancetta or guanciale can be used for a more authentic Italian flavor.

Pasta: Spaghetti or bucatini are traditional for Cacio e Pepe, allowing the creamy sauce to cling perfectly.

Any long pasta or even a short, sturdy pasta like rigatoni will work.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS

Freshly Grated Cheese: Do not use pre-grated Parmesan or Pecorino Romano.

They often contain anti-caking agents that prevent them from melting smoothly, resulting in a clumpy sauce.

Starchy Pasta Water is Gold: This starchy water is absolutely essential for creating the emulsified, creamy sauce.

It's what binds the cheese and fat together.

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