

Pasta with Tomato ~ Almond Pesto and Croutons

¾ cup blanched slivered almonds - toasted
12 ounces gemelli pasta
Reserved pasta water – about ½ - ¾ cup (see below)
Kosher salt and ground black pepper to taste
4 medium garlic cloves, smashed and peeled
½ cup lightly packed fresh basil, torn if large
2 pints cherry tomatoes, divided
8 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil, divided, plus more to serve
3 ounces crusty white bread, cut into rough ½-inch pieces (about 1-¾ cups)

Directions:

In a large pot, bring 4 quarts water to a boil. Add the pasta and 2 tablespoons salt, then cook, stirring occasionally, until al dente. Reserve about ½ - ¾ cup of the cooking water, then drain the pasta.

Meanwhile, in a food processor, process ½ cup of the almonds, the garlic and sea salt to taste until finely chopped, about 30 seconds. Add the basil and half of the tomatoes, then pulse until chopped and well combined, 5 to 6 pulses. Add the remaining tomatoes and 4 tablespoons of oil (more to taste, if necessary), then pulse just until the whole tomatoes are broken up, about 3 pulses. Transfer to a serving bowl, add the pasta and ½ cup of the reserved cooking water, then toss. Let stand, tossing once or twice, for 10 to 15 minutes to allow the pasta to absorb some of the sauce. Add more pasta water only if necessary.

While the pasta stands, in a large skillet, toss the bread, remaining 4 tablespoons olive oil, with salt and pepper to taste. Cook over medium, stirring frequently, until the bread is crisp and golden brown, 5 to 7 minutes.

Scatter the toasted bread and the remaining ¼ cup almonds over the pasta. Drizzle with additional olive oil and sprinkle with pepper.

Serves: 4