

## DOMENICA COOKS

### SPAGHETTI WITH ZUCCHINI AND SAFFRON CREAM

An end-of-summer dish if ever there was one, with crispy pieces of pancetta, sliced zucchini slowly cooked down to a lovely soft sauce, richly tinged with red-gold saffron and cream. It's both elegant and easy to make, and you can serve it with homemade noodles or good-quality packaged pasta. Don't leave out the final touch: a shower of freshly grated Parmigiano cheese.

About saffron: You probably already know I'm partial to saffron from Abruzzo. The spice comes from the purple and white flowers of the *Crocus Sativus* plant and is said to have been brought to the region from Spain in the 13th Century by a monk, the son of a prominent family from Navelli, who carried bulbs in his robe pocket and planted them upon his return home. In 2005, saffron from the Navelli plain earned DOP (protected designation) status. To get saffron, the crocus flowers are hand-picked in fall, in the early morning before they open; the stigmas from each flower are plucked out, then dried over a very low fire. The whole rigamarole is arduous and must be done quickly before the stigmas lose their optimum color and aroma. Consider that each crocus flower carries three stigmas, and it takes 14,000 stigmas (4,600 flowers) to produce just an ounce of saffron. You can see why the spice is expensive.

You can find saffron from Abruzzo online at [Gustiamo](#). The [threads](#) cost \$45 for a 1-gram jar (see above). A less expensive alternative is [powdered saffron](#), which costs \$18.75 for a 30-mg packet, enough for this recipe. Normally I keep away from powdered saffron, which is easily doctored, but I've used the powdered saffron from L'Aquila for years (my mom used it for years before me) and have never had a problem with it.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

#### INGREDIENTS

Kosher or sea salt for the pasta water

Generous pinch of saffron threads, 1/2 to 1 teaspoon, depending on how forward you want the saffron flavor to be, or how much precious saffron you want to use

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

4-ounce (115 g) piece of pancetta, cut into dice

2 cloves garlic, lightly crushed

6 small to medium zucchini, quartered lengthwise and each quarter cut crosswise into 1/4-inch-thick pieces

Fine sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1/2 cup (120 ml) heavy cream

5 large basil leaves

1 pound (454 g) spaghetti  
Freshly grated Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese

## **INSTRUCTIONS**

1. Bring a large pot of water to a rolling boil and salt it generously. Pound the saffron threads with a mortar and pestle to reduce them to a powder. (Alternatively, use a heavy object like the smooth side of a clean mallet to break up the threads.) Scrape the saffron into a small bowl and stir in a tablespoon of hot, but not boiling, water. Let the mixture sit while you start the sauce.
2. Warm the olive oil in a large skillet over medium heat. Drop in the pancetta and sauté, stirring from time to time, for 8 minutes, or until the pancetta has rendered some of its fat and is slightly crispy. Lower the heat and stir in the garlic, cooking it for a couple of minutes, until it starts to sizzle (don't let it brown). Press down on the cloves to release their aroma into the oil. At this point you can either remove them or leave them in for a more garlic-enhanced flavor. Stir in the zucchini, coating them well with the oil. Season with a pinch of salt (the pancetta is salty so go easy) and a generous amount of pepper. Cook slowly over medium to medium-low heat, gently tossing from time to time, for about 30 minutes, until the zucchini is completely tender and some of the pieces take on a pulpy consistency.
3. Stir in the dissolved saffron (and all the liquid), and the cream and cook for a few minutes longer, until slightly thickened. Turn off the heat and tear the basil leaves over the sauce, stirring them in.
4. Drop the spaghetti into the boiling water and cook according to the package instructions until al dente. Drain in a colander, reserving about 1 cup of cooking water. Transfer the spaghetti to the skillet and gently toss with the sauce, adding a handful of grated Parmigiano cheese and a splash or two of cooking water if necessary to loosen the sauce. Serve with more cheese on the side.