Penne with Mushrooms, Butternut Squash & Pancetta

From the blog For Love of the Table

1 1/2 oz. pancetta, minced
olive oil
1 T. unsalted butter
6 oz. crimini mushrooms, trimmed and sliced 1/4-inch thick
1 1/2 cups diced (1/2-inch) butternut squash (about 7 oz. net weight)
1/2 T. chopped fresh thyme
1/2 T. chiffonade fresh sage
pinch red pepper flakes
2/3 c. chicken stock or low-salt canned broth
salt & freshly ground pepper
180 g./6.5 oz. Penne pasta (see note)
finely grated Pecorino

Cook the pancetta until crisp in a small amount of olive oil in a 9-inch sauté pan set over medium-low heat. Stir and scrape occasionally to make sure it cooks evenly. When crisp, transfer to a plate using a slotted spoon. Return the pan to the stove and increase the heat to medium high. If the pancetta was very lean, add enough olive oil so that the surface of the pan is coated with fat. Add the mushrooms and cook, shaking the pan occasionally, until the mushrooms are browned, tender and any liquid that they have given off during cooking has evaporated. Transfer to a plate and season lightly with salt.

Let the pan cool for about a minute before returning to the heat. Return the pan to the heat and add the butter. When the foam subsides add the squash and toss to coat in the fat. Sauté (tossing occasionally) until the squash begins to caramelize in spots—about 5 minutes. Reduce the heat to medium if the squash threatens to burn. Add the herbs and pepper flakes to the pan along with a sprinkling of salt and a few grindings of pepper. Toss to combine and cook briefly until fragrant—about a minute.

Add the reserved mushrooms and the stock to the pan. The stock should come up almost to the top of the vegetables—add more if the vegetables aren't almost covered. Gently simmer (uncovered and stirring every now and then) until the squash is just tender—about 30 minutes. As the liquid reduces, add a little water and continue to cook—there should be enough liquid in the pan to about half cover the vegetables when the "sauce" is finished.

Set the sauce aside and keep warm while you cook the pasta: Bring a large pot of water to the boil and salt well (it should taste salty) Add the penne and cook at a rolling boil until al dente. Drain. Add the pasta to the squash along with the reserved pancetta and toss to combine. If the pasta seems dry, add a splash of the pasta water and toss again. Taste and correct the seasoning. Divide the pasta between 2 plates or shallow pasta bowls and sprinkle with the pecorino. Serves 2.

Note: Most pasta sauce recipes are written for one pound of pasta. Since at home I am almost always cooking for two, I usually only make half of a recipe. But even this is a bit much for us. As it turns out, a fifth of a pound is about the right amount of pasta for a dinner portion for one at our table. Consequently when I am improvising a pasta recipe for dinner, I almost always just prepare enough sauce for two-fifths of a pound...or 180 grams. This is the reason for the "odd" amount of pasta in the recipe. You can of course make it with a half pound of pasta—but I would increase all of the other ingredients slightly if I did this. If you want to make a full (one pound of pasta) recipe, simply multiply all the other ingredients by about 2 1/2. And as mentioned above, be sure to choose a size pan that will accommodate all of the squash in a loose single layer.

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