

Bottarga

While strolling along the beach in Sardinia I stumbled upon a very humble taverna, with plastic tables and chairs nestled under the trees, it seemed to be serving only spaghetti bottarga. The combination of bright sunshine, golden sand and turquoise water and this deliciously simple pasta was quite intoxicating. *What was it? Dried mullet roe. Veramente?*

In Southern Italy bottarga has pasta as its soul mate; pasta that is kissed by the sea or rather smothered in kisses with a liberal grating of bottarga with some extra virgin olive oil as matchmaker. Bottarga creates a beautiful emulsion with extra virgin olive oil and a little hot pasta water, so there is a reason it is sometimes called the carbonara of the sea. This bottarga oil emulsion is delicious dressing pasta on its own but also enhances the flavour of calamari and shellfish, like clams or scallops. It adds a bit of umami and beautiful colour.

I was recently delighted to discover that bottarga is produced in Australia from Northern NSW red mullet. The Northern Rivers and Pilu brands of bottarga are available in Melbourne from gourmet grocery, The Essential Ingredient and select seafood outlets. It keeps for ages in the fridge, giving you plenty of time to experiment.

To get familiar with this product peel away the thin skin (like you would a salami) and cut a very thin slice and eat it. It will be a bit tacky, sticking to your teeth and then taste surprisingly sweet, very slightly salty with just a hint of the sea. To really get the feel of how to cook with this weird ingredient I suggest you do a simple exercise. Place 2 tablespoons of extra virgin olive oil and 1 table spoon hot water (in lieu of pasta water) and 2 heaped tablespoons of grated (use a cheese grater) bottarga in a bowl and give it a good stir. You should create a lovely emulsion which will form the basis of a sauce to coat the spaghetti along with other

liquid ingredients like a dash of white wine or a few cherry tomatoes. Get the idea? This is what you are wanting to create in the pan with your ingredients, the thicker the better, so try not to add too much pasta water.



creating an emulsion with grated bottarga, olive oil and hot water

Avoid raw or too much cooked garlic as it dominates too much. In this spaghetti with calamari and bottarga dish I've added whole garlic cloves to the hot oil to infuse and then removed them. The chilli lifts the flavour a touch but overall it is nicely balanced.

Spaghetti Calamari and Bottarga

for two

- 200g spaghetti
- tsp salt

- extra virgin olive oil
- 3 cloves garlic
- 1 long red chilli
- 1 medium calamari, cleaned and cut into thin slices
- dash of white wine
- approximately 100-120 g grated bottarga, extra for garnish

Heat a large pot of water for the pasta. When the pasta water is on a rolling boil add a teaspoon of salt and the pasta. While that is cooking cover the base of a fry pan with extra virgin olive oil and heat it over medium heat. Add 3 lightly crushed whole garlic cloves to infuse the oil with. When the garlic cloves start to colour discard them. Split and de-seed the chilli and slice it. Add the chilli to the oil and cook for 2 minutes. Check your pasta timing and do the next steps when you have about 3 minutes left to cook. Raise the heat under the fry pan and add the calamari, tossing well for no more than a minute. Add a dash of white wine, the grated bottarga and stir well. With tongs pull out the spaghetti and add it directly to the pan. Toss well to coat the pasta evenly and plate. Grate the pasta liberally with the golden bottarga and serve.

