

Spaghetti With Mussels

2 pounds mussels	Black pepper to taste
1 leek	1 cup dry white wine
1 shallot	6 tablespoons olive oil
4 cloves garlic	½ cup fresh chopped oregano
¼ teaspoon peperoncino	28-ounce can Italian tomatoes
½ cup minced parsley, plus stems	Sea salt to taste
6 thyme sprigs	1 pound spaghetti
1 bay leaf	

Trim the tough green leaves from the leek, slice off the root end, and cut a cross through the light green part. Spreading open the cross, thoroughly wash any sand from the leek, and dry on paper towels

Mince the leek, the shallot, and the garlic cloves. Put 3 tablespoons of the olive oil in a saucepan with the minced leek, shallots, and peperoncino, and cook over low heat until the vegetables are tender, but not browned at all. Add the minced garlic and cook for 2 more minutes, being certain not to let the garlic color. Set aside.

Drain the tomatoes (setting aside the liquid for later), and roughly chop them.

Scrub the mussels with a stiff brush, and pull off any beards. Discard any mussels that are open and will not close when tapped on the shell.

In a large kettle, place 2 tablespoons of the olive oil with the bay leaf, at least 8 parsley stems, the thyme sprigs, the wine, and a few grindings of black pepper. Turn on the heat to low, and simmer for about 10 minutes. Cover the kettle, turn up the heat to high and boil for 2 minutes.

Add the mussels to the kettle, stir, and cook covered over high until they open, which should take no more than 4 or 5 minutes. Check frequently during the cooking process, and remove any mussels that have already opened to a bowl. You don't want to overcook them. Recover the kettle, and keep removing open mussels, until all have opened. Any mussel that does not open is dead and should be discarded.

Remove most of the steamed mussels from their shells using a mussel shell as a tong, place them in a bowl, and keep warm. Leave about 4-5 mussels per serving in the shells to use as a garnish for serving.

Line a sieve with damp paper towels, and place it over a bowl. Strain the mussel liquid from the kettle through the sieve to remove all the herbs and any sand from the mussels. Add the strained liquid to the saucepan with the minced leeks, shallots, and garlic, and boil until the liquid is reduced by about one half.

In the same kettle in which you steamed the mussels, add the chopped tomatoes, the leek-shallot-garlic mixture, most of the parsley and chopped oregano. Cook over medium heat for about 8-12 minutes. Taste for salt and pepper. If the mixture has become too dry, add some of the reserved tomato juices. You don't want the mixture to become too liquidy.

In another kettle, cook the pasta in salted water according to the package directions. When the pasta is nearly done remove about 1 cup of the pasta cooking water and reserve. Drain the pasta about 2 minutes before the package's indicated *al dente* cooking time because it will cook a bit more with the mussels and sauce.

Add the shucked mussels and the ones still in their shells to the tomato sauce. Stir in the drained pasta, the last tablespoon of olive oil, and cook a minute or so to heat through, mixing everything thoroughly. If the pasta seems too dry, you can add some of the pasta cooking water and/or more of the reserved tomato water.

Distribute the pasta into warm serving bowls. Attractively arrange the unshucked mussels, and sprinkle the remaining chopped parsley and oregano over the top of each portion. Serve with plenty of hot crusty bread. Serves 3 or 4 people.