

The Origin of Pasta: A Factual Summary

Ancient Roots

- The earliest evidence of pasta-like food in Italy comes from the Etruscans, dating to around 400 BCE. ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta))
- In the 1st century CE, the Roman poet Horace wrote about **lagana**, thin sheets of fried dough that were an everyday food. An early 5th-century cookbook described layered **lagana** with meat stuffing, considered an ancestor of modern lasagna. ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta))
- The 2nd-century Greek physician Galen mentioned **ittrion**, a compound of flour and water. The Jerusalem Talmud records **itrium**, a boiled dough, as common in Palestine from the 3rd to 5th centuries. ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta))
- These early foods shared basic ingredients with pasta but were typically fried or baked rather than boiled and dried, so food historians distinguish them from true pasta as we know it today. ([Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/pasta))

The Marco Polo Myth

- A popular legend claims that Marco Polo brought pasta to Italy from China in the late 13th century. This story is widely debunked by food historians. ([National Geographic](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/daily-life-pasta-italy-neapolitan-diet))
- The myth stems from a misreading of a passage in Polo's **Travels**, where he described a tree producing a starch-like food (probably sago palm) that reminded him of Italian pasta, not the other way around. ([National Geographic](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/daily-life-pasta-italy-neapolitan-diet))
- Some scholars believe the Marco Polo story originated in a 1920s or 1930s advertisement for a Canadian spaghetti company. ([Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta))
- Even while Polo was traveling in the 1270s, a Genoese soldier's will from 1279 already listed a barrel of dried **macaronis**, clear evidence pasta existed in Italy before Polo's return. ([National Geographic](https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/daily-life-pasta-italy-neapolitan-diet), [Encyclopedia.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/pasta))

Arab Sicily and the Spread of Dried Pasta

- The key innovation that made pasta a distinct and durable food was drying, which allowed long-term storage and transport. This process was established by the 12th century in Arab-ruled Sicily. ([Encyclopedia.com])(<https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/pasta>))
- In 1154, the Arab geographer al-Idrisi, working for Norman King Roger II of Sicily, described a settlement called Trabia near Palermo where large quantities of *itriyya* (string-like dried pasta made from semolina) were produced and exported by shipload to Calabria and beyond. This is the first clear written record of a dried pasta industry. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>), [Encyclopedia.com])(<https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/pasta>))
- The Arabic word *itriyya* is the linguistic ancestor of several European pasta terms and reflects the Arab influence on early dried pasta production. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>))
- From the 13th century onward, references to pasta dishes, macaroni, ravioli, gnocchi, vermicelli, appear with increasing frequency across the Italian peninsula. Genoese merchants helped spread Sicilian pasta northward. ([National Geographic])(<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/daily-life-pasta-italy-neapolitan-diet>), [Encyclopedia.com])(<https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/pasta>))

Key Developments

1. ****14th,15th centuries****: Dried pasta became popular for its long shelf life, making it ideal for ship voyages and helping it spread globally during the Age of Discovery. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>))
2. ****Early 17th century****: Naples developed rudimentary pasta-making machines, later adding kneading machines and presses, which made production cost-effective. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>))
3. ****1740****: The first pasta factory license was issued in Venice. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>))
4. ****1790****: The first written recipe for pasta with tomato sauce appeared in Roman chef Francesco Leonardi's cookbook *L'Apicio Moderno*. Tomatoes, introduced to Italy in the 16th century, were initially considered too exotic. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>))
5. ****1800s****: Watermills and stone grinders enabled mass separation of semolina from bran, expanding the pasta market. Industrial drying and extrusion processes in the early 1900s allowed larger volumes and greater variety for export. ([Wikipedia])(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>))

Summary of What Is Confirmed vs. What Is Judgment

- ****Confirmed****: Pasta-like foods existed in ancient Mediterranean cultures (Etruscan, Roman, Greek, Arab). Dried pasta was produced at industrial scale in Arab Sicily by the 12th century. The Marco Polo origin story is a myth. Tomato sauce pairing with pasta dates to the late 18th century.
- ****Judgment/Debated****: Whether the Etruscan 4th-century BCE tomb reliefs truly depict pasta-making equipment is disputed by many food historians. The exact path by which dried pasta techniques reached Italy (Arab traders vs. independent development) remains a subject of scholarly discussion.

Sources

- [National Geographic, The Twisted History of Pasta](<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/history-magazine/article/daily-life-pasta-italy-neapolitan-diet>)
- [Wikipedia, Pasta](<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pasta>)
- [Encyclopedia.com, Pasta](<https://www.encyclopedia.com/sports-and-everyday-life/food-and-drink/food-and-cooking/pasta>)
- [PBS Food, Uncover the History of Pasta](<https://www.pbs.org/food/stories/uncover-the-history-of-pasta>)