



Nasturtium Pesto Pasta Salad

FRESH 🌿 | PEPPERY 🌸 | GREEN 🥗 | ALIVE ✨

*Like your herb garden accidentally learned
how to throw a dinner party.*

Vibes

Where it comes from

Pesto traces back to Liguria in northern Italy, where cooks have long crushed herbs, nuts, cheese, garlic, and olive oil into sauces designed to stretch flavor across simple ingredients. Pasta salads evolved later as a more portable, room-temperature cousin built for gatherings, picnics, and long tables meant for sharing.

What it explores

This version explores edible flowers through nasturtium leaves and petals, which bring a naturally peppery flavor somewhere between arugula and watercress. Instead of aiming for a perfectly smooth classic pesto, this one leans rustic, fresh, and visually alive with bright herbs, soft mozzarella, juicy tomatoes, and little bursts of color throughout the bowl.

Vibes

Why it works

Nasturtiums naturally carry enough sharpness and bitterness to keep the pesto from feeling heavy once it coats the pasta. Walnuts bring richness without overwhelming the greens, while mozzarella softens the sharper edges while tomatoes bring freshness and acidity to keep the whole dish feeling balanced and refreshing.

Ways to play

Swap walnuts for pine nuts, pistachios, almonds, or sunflower seeds depending on budget and vibe. You can also push the salad brighter with extra lemon, greener with more herbs, creamier with additional cheese, or heartier with white beans, roasted vegetables, or grilled chicken.

Grandpa Bill's Lab Notes

Grandpa Bill didn't cook by recipes — he cooked by paying attention. He watched how food reacted to heat, salt, and time, and he trusted his senses more than instructions. These notes exist to capture that way of cooking: not as rules to follow, but as observations worth remembering.

Pesto is honestly one of the more forgiving sauces you can make as long as you keep tasting and adjusting. The biggest thing people underestimate is that the flavor softens once it gets spread across a whole bowl of pasta, so the pesto itself should taste a little stronger and punchier than your final target.

The Lab Notes that follow aren't meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive. They're here to highlight the moments that matter — the parts of the process where slowing down a little, or doing less on purpose, leads to better food and a calmer cook.

Grandpa Bill's Lab Notes

On the nasturtium

Nasturtiums are all over San Francisco once you start noticing them, which is part of why I wanted to use them here. They grow aggressively, taste great, and are one of the easiest edible flowers to actually find and experiment with locally. If nasturtiums aren't common in your area, other edible plants with a similar vibe include arugula flowers, mustard flowers, radish flowers, pea shoots, or even dandelion greens depending on what grows near you.

On the walnuts

Walnuts are less buttery than pine nuts, but they bring earthiness and structure while costing dramatically less. Toasting them lightly helps soften bitterness and wake up their flavor without making the pesto feel heavy.

Grandpa Bill's Lab Notes

On the pasta

Short pasta shapes with ridges or curves hold pesto especially well here, which is why I used fusilli. Save a little pasta water before draining since the starch helps the pesto cling to the noodles instead of pooling sadly at the bottom of the bowl.

On the balance

If the pesto tastes too sharp or grassy, add more olive oil or nuts. If it starts feeling heavy, acid usually fixes it fast.

On the assembly

This salad is happiest after a short rest so the pesto has time to settle into the pasta, but it still wants freshness. Save a few petals, herbs, or spoonfuls of pesto for the finish so the final bowl still feels bright and alive when it hits the table.

Ingredients

Serves 8-10 as a side

Produce

- 2 cups lightly packed nasturtium leaves
- 1 cup nasturtium flowers/petals
- 1 lemon
- 2-3 cloves garlic
- 1 cup cherry tomatoes
- 1 packed handful fresh basil

Dairy

- 1/2 cup parmesan or pecorino
- 8 oz ciliegine mozzarella

Pantry

- 1 cup walnuts
- 1 lb fusilli pasta
- olive oil
- salt
- black pepper

Cooking Instructions

Total Time ~ 25 min

Prep ~ 15 min

Toast the walnuts lightly in a dry pan or oven until fragrant, then let them cool. Cook the fusilli in heavily salted water until just past al dente, saving a little pasta water before draining. Halve the tomatoes and mozzarella if needed, and roughly chop the nasturtium leaves if they're especially large.

Build ~ 10 min

Blend, pulse, or mash the walnuts, garlic, cheese, basil, nasturtiums, olive oil, salt, pepper, and lemon until the pesto feels bright and loose enough to coat pasta comfortably. Toss with the pasta while it's still slightly warm, using a splash of pasta water if needed to help everything come together smoothly.

Finish ~ 5 min

Fold in the tomatoes, mozzarella, and reserved nasturtium petals once the pasta has cooled slightly. Taste and adjust the balance before serving, then finish with extra petals, herbs, cheese, olive oil, or flaky salt if the bowl needs a little extra life.