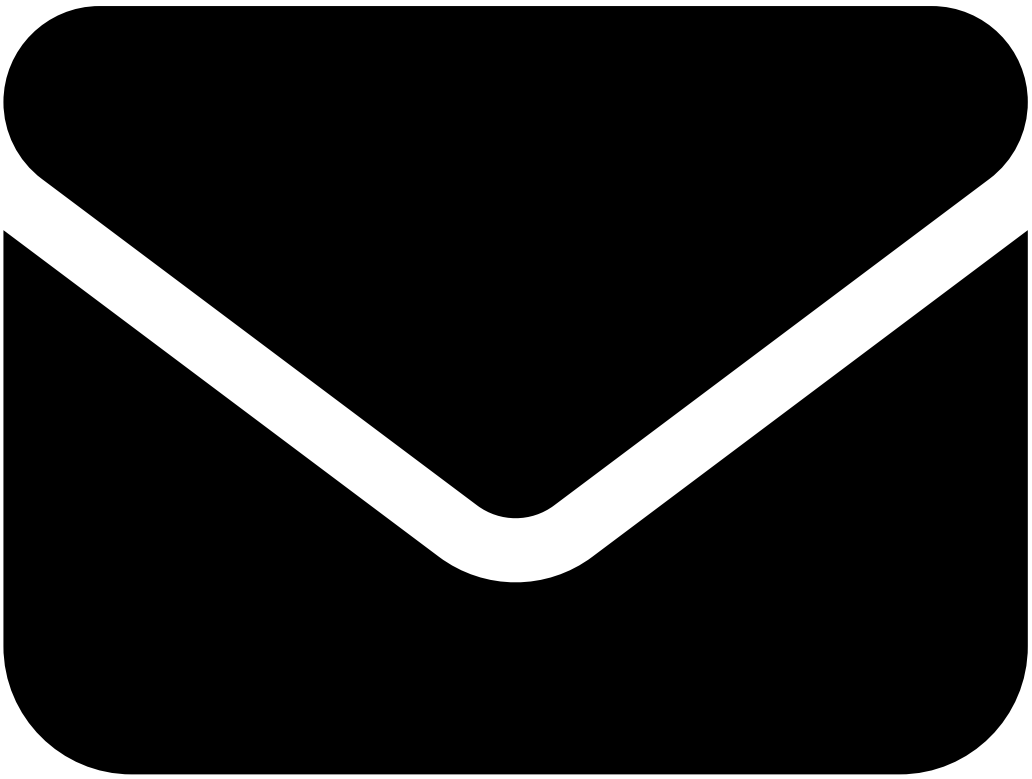
Creamy Cauliflower Pasta with Crispy Pancetta

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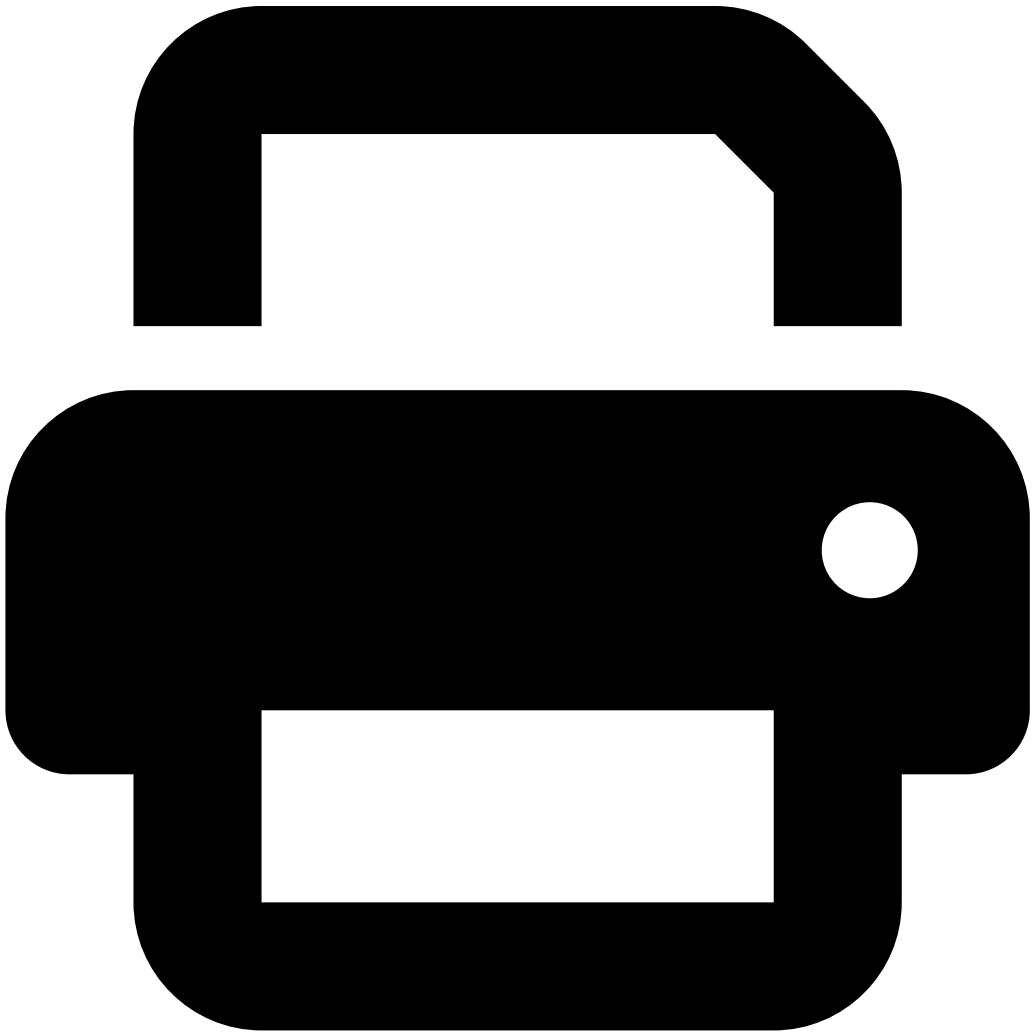
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This creamy cauliflower rigatoni is one of those pastas that tastes much more indulgent than it actually is. The cauliflower is cooked until tender and blended into a smooth, velvety sauce with garlic, Parmesan, olive oil, and pasta water.

Then there’s the pancetta. I cook it until golden and crispy, stirring some into the pasta and saving the rest for a crunchy topping. Every bite has that creamy cauliflower sauce with little salty, crispy pieces of pancetta.

It’s simple Italian-inspired comfort food that comes together with just a handful of ingredients.

Why You’ll Love This Cauliflower

Pasta

- **Creamy without heavy cream:** Puréed cauliflower and pasta water create a silky sauce.
- **Big flavor from simple ingredients:** Garlic, Parmesan, olive oil, and crispy pancetta do all the work.
- **Perfect pasta shape:** Rigatoni holds onto the creamy sauce and gives you plenty of crispy pancetta in every bite.
- **Easy enough for a weeknight:** Most of the prep can be done while the pasta water comes to a boil.

Things to know about this Creamy Cauliflower Pasta with Crispy Pancetta recipe

Don’t skip the pasta water. It helps loosen the cauliflower purée and turns it into a silky sauce that coats the rigatoni instead of sitting heavily on top.

Also, keep some of the pancetta separate until serving. That way you get both the savory flavor throughout the pasta and those crispy little bites on top.

Can I Make This Ahead?

The cauliflower sauce can be made a day ahead and refrigerated in an airtight container. When you’re ready to make the pasta, gently warm the sauce and loosen it with a little pasta water.

For the best texture, cook the rigatoni fresh and make the pancetta just before serving.

Storage

Store leftover pasta in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to **3 days**.

When reheating, add a splash of water or broth and warm gently on the stovetop or in the microwave. The sauce will thicken as it sits, so the added liquid helps bring it back to a creamy consistency.

What to Serve With Cauliflower pasta

This pasta is hearty enough to serve on its own, but it’s also delicious with a simple green salad and some crusty Italian bread.

For a lighter meal, serve it with roasted vegetables or a simple tomato salad.

Good to Know

Can I use frozen cauliflower?
Yes. Frozen cauliflower works well in this recipe. Cook it until very tender before blending.

Can I substitute bacon for pancetta?
You can, although pancetta gives the dish a more traditional Italian flavor.

Can I use spaghetti instead of rigatoni?
Absolutely. Spaghetti works beautifully with the creamy cauliflower sauce. Rigatoni is my favorite because the ridges and tubes hold onto the sauce.

Can I make it without the red pepper flakes?
Yes. Leave them out if you prefer a milder pasta.

Make It Your Own

Want to change things up? Add a handful of sautéed spinach, roasted broccoli, or toasted breadcrumbs. You can also finish the pasta with a little Pecorino Romano instead of Parmesan for a sharper, saltier flavor.

More Italian-Inspired Pasta Recipes

If you love easy pasta dinners, try some of my other Italian-inspired favorites:

- **Creamy Mushroom and Spinach Rigatoni**
- **Pasta alla Norcina with Mushrooms**
- **Classic Aglio e Olio**
- **One-Pot Pasta and Potatoes**
- **Chicken Fettuccine Alfredo**

Helpful Kitchen Tools

A few kitchen tools make this creamy cauliflower pasta even easier to prepare.

- Immersion Blender – Perfect for blending the cauliflower into a smooth, creamy sauce.
- Large Stock Pot – Ideal for cooking pasta and cauliflower.
- Large Skillet – Great for crisping pancetta and tossing the pasta with the sauce.
- Box Grater – For freshly grated Parmesan.

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Final Thoughts

I love recipes like this because they prove you don’t need a complicated list of ingredients to make a really satisfying

pasta dinner. The cauliflower creates the creamy sauce, while the pancetta brings the salty, crispy bite that makes you want to go back for another forkful.

It’s simple, cozy, and very much the kind of pasta I love making at home.

Creamy Cauliflower Pasta with Crispy Pancetta



This creamy cauliflower pasta with crispy pancetta is an easy Italian-inspired dinner made with tender cauliflower blended into a silky sauce with garlic, Parmesan, and olive oil. Tossed with rigatoni and finished with golden, crispy pancetta, this comforting pasta is full of flavor and simple enough for a weeknight meal.

- 1 lb. your favorite pasta shape
- 1 medium head cauliflower, cut into florets
- 4 oz. pancetta, diced
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 Tbsp. extra-virgin olive oil
- 1/2 cup freshly grated Parmesan cheese
- 1 tsp red pepper flakes, optional
- 1–1½ cups pasta water
- Fresh parsley and lemon zest , for garnish

- salt and pepper to taste

1. **Cook the pancetta:** Add the diced pancetta to a large sauté pan while the pan is still cold. Cook over medium-low heat for 8–10 minutes, stirring occasionally, until golden and crispy. Remove about half and place on a paper towel-lined plate for the topping.
2. **Start the pasta:** While the pancetta is cooking, bring a large pot of well-salted water to a boil. Once boiling, add the rigatoni and cook according to the package directions until al dente. **Reserve 1½ cups of pasta water before draining.**
3. **Cook the cauliflower:** Leave the pancetta drippings in the sauté pan. Add the olive oil and cauliflower. Season with salt and black pepper and sauté for 3–4 minutes. Add the garlic and red pepper flakes and cook for another 30 seconds.
4. **Steam the cauliflower:** Add ½ cup water or chicken stock to the pan. Cover and cook for 8–10 minutes, or until the cauliflower is very tender and easily pierced with a fork.
5. **Make the cauliflower sauce:** Transfer the cooked cauliflower, along with any liquid remaining in the pan, to a blender or food processor. Add the Parmesan and blend until completely smooth. Add reserved pasta water a little at a time until the sauce is silky and creamy.
6. **Bring it together:** Return the drained pasta to the sauté pan. Pour the cauliflower sauce over the pasta and half of the pancetta. Toss over low heat, adding more pasta water as needed until the sauce coats the rigatoni.
7. **Finish:** Divide among serving bowls and top with the reserved crispy pancetta and freshly grated Parmesan.

Garnish with fresh parsley and a little lemon zest, if desired. Serve immediately.



Don’t skip the pasta water. It helps loosen the cauliflower purée and turns it into a silky sauce that coats the pasta instead of sitting heavily on top.

Main Course

Italian

cauliflower pasta with pancetta