

Traditional Southern Italian Cavatelli

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What Are Cavatelli?

Cavatelli are small shell-shaped pasta traditionally made with semolina flour and water. The name comes from the Italian word *cavato*, meaning “hollowed.”

Unlike northern egg pastas, Southern Italian pasta is typically made without eggs because semolina wheat was abundant and durable in warmer climates. That’s why this dough is simple – and perfect.

There’s something sacred about making pasta by hand. before mixers. before attachments. before shortcuts. it was just semolina flour, warm water, and your hands.

Cavatelli are one of the oldest and most beloved pastas from Southern Italy. They’re small, rustic, slightly chewy, and

designed to catch sauce in that beautiful little hollow. In many Southern Italian homes, this wasn't "fancy Sunday pasta." This was everyday pasta – made on a wooden board, shaped with two fingers, and served with whatever was growing or simmering nearby. No eggs. No fuss. Just tradition.

And once you make them once, you'll never be intimidated again.

Things to know about this Traditional Southern Italian Cavatelli recipe

Good to Know

- Fresh cavatelli freeze beautifully. Freeze on a tray first, then transfer to a bag. Cook from frozen – do not thaw.
- This pasta is meant to be slightly chewy (al dente), not soft like egg noodles.
- If your pasta feels too dense, your dough may have been too dry.
- If it falls apart, it may have had too much water.

How to Serve Cavatelli

Cavatelli pair beautifully with:

- Broccoli or broccoli rabe
- Italian sausage
- Simple tomato sauce

- Garlic and olive oil
- Butter and sage

One of the most classic pairings is:

Cavatelli e Broccoli – a Southern Italian staple.

Now that you've mastered homemade cavatelli, it's time to put them to work.

Make a full Southern Italian classic with my **Cavatelli with Broccoli Rabe & Italian Sausage** (link to that post), or keep it simple with a rustic **cacio and pepe Pasta**

If you love traditional pasta recipes, don't miss my **Lasagna Bolognese** and Authentic fettuccine alfredo (no cream) for more authentic Italian cooking inspiration.

Cook it. Taste it. Make it your own.

And if you make this recipe, leave a comment and tell me how your cavatelli turned out – I read every one.

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Cavatelli Dough

- 2 cups fine semolina flour (semola rimacinata preferred)
- $\frac{3}{4}$ –1 cup warm water
- Pinch of salt (optional)

Cavatelli with Broccoli & Garlic (Cavatelli e Broccoli)

- 1 lb cavatelli pasta
- 1 large head broccoli (cut into small florets)
- 3-4 cloves garlic, sliced
- $\frac{1}{4}$ – $\frac{1}{2}$ tbsp red pepper flakes
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup extra virgin olive oil
- salt
- Freshly grated Pecorino Romano
- Optional: Italian sausage (sweet or hot)

How to Make Cavatelli Dough

1. Form the Dough

Place the semolina flour on a wooden board or in a large bowl. Make a well in the center.

Slowly add warm water while mixing with a fork or your fingers until a shaggy dough forms.

2. Knead

Knead for 8–10 minutes until smooth and firm.

The texture should feel like:

Firm play-dough

Smooth but not sticky

Elastic but not soft

If too dry → add a few drops of water. If sticky → dust lightly with semolina.

3. Rest

Cover with plastic wrap or a towel and let rest 20–30 minutes.

Resting relaxes the gluten and makes shaping easier.

How to Shape Cavatelli

1. Cut off a portion of dough. Keep the rest covered.
2. Roll into a rope about $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch thick.
3. Cut into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch pieces.
4. Using two fingers, press and drag the dough toward you to create the hollow center.
5. You can:

Leave them smooth (very traditional)

Use a gnocchi board for ridges

6. Lightly dust with semolina as you work.

How to Cook Fresh Cavatelli

1. Bring a large pot of heavily salted water to a boil.

2. Add pasta and cook:

4–6 minutes total

They will float early, but continue cooking until tender

3. Always taste one before draining.

4. An easy, traditional way to serve **cavatelli** is simple, rustic, and full of flavor – just like it's done in Southern Italy. Here's a classic you'll love ☐

Cavatelli with Broccoli & Garlic (Cavatelli e Broccoli)

1. Boil the pasta

Bring a large pot of salted water to a boil. Add the broccoli first and cook 3–4 minutes.

Add the cavatelli to the same pot and cook until al dente. Reserve $\frac{1}{2}$ cup pasta water before draining.

2. Sauté the garlic

In a large skillet, heat olive oil over medium-low. Add sliced garlic and red pepper flakes. Cook until fragrant and lightly golden – don't burn it.

3. Combine

Add drained pasta and broccoli to the skillet. Toss well. Add a splash of reserved pasta water to help create a light sauce.

4. Finish

Taste for salt. Top with freshly grated Pecorino Romano and a drizzle of olive oil.