

# Noodles!

## History

by Daniela Weil

**A Twisty**  
SLURP! Another delicious  
noodle snakes its way into  
a hungry mouth.

Children in Italy playfully suck in stringy spaghetti. In China, chopsticks grab fat noodles in sauce. The Japanese noisily slurp their soba. People all around the world have enjoyed noodles for thousands of years. But did you ever stop to think: who ate the very first noodle?

To make noodles and other pasta, all you really need is flour and water. In fact the word *pasta* means “flour paste.” People first started growing wheat and making flour in the Middle East around 10,000 years ago. But no one had ever found a prehistoric noodle—until recently.

Before noodles, mac and cheese was...

...cheese?



### Noodles East

In 2002, scientists were digging in the ruins of an ancient Chinese city. They saw an upside-down clay bowl. When they lifted it, inside was a 4,000-year-old noodle! This very stale leftover was perfectly preserved. Because there was no air under the bowl, it hadn't rotted. Sadly, when it was handled, the ancient noodle soon crumbled. But scientists tested the remains of the “mummy” noodle. They discovered it was made from millet, an ancient grain.

Traders first brought wheat to China about the time this ancient noodle was cooked. The Chinese soon began to grow wheat too. They liked the springiness of wheat dough. They gave a new word, *mian*, to

Still looks good to me!



anything made from wheat.

The Chinese mastered the art of stretching wheat dough into long noodles. To make *la mian*, or hand-pulled noodles, a chef starts with a ball of dough, stretches it out, brings the ends together, and stretches again, over and over. Today, an expert chef can turn a ball

The world's oldest noodle—cooked in China about 4,000 years ago and found by archaeologists.





These extra-long Chinese noodles are

## The Myth of Marco Polo

There is a famous story that around the year 1300, the Italian explorer Marco Polo brought pasta to Italy from China. The tale says that when Polo visited China, he tried noodles for the first time. He liked them so much that he took the recipe home with him, and Italians fell in love with the slurpy strings.

But this story is probably not true! In fact, it was likely made up by an American magazine called the *Macaroni Journal* in 1929, to try to get Americans to eat more pasta.

Like any good explorer, Polo kept a journal of everything he saw in China—including the many delicious noodles. He wrote that they reminded him of the Italian *lagana* (a flattened sheet of dough—lasagna). He also wrote that in China, wheat was used

for making vermicelli, not bread. Vermicelli are thin Italian noodles. Since Marco Polo described Chinese noodles by comparing them to Italian noodles, it's clear that in Polo's Italy, noodles were already on the menu.

## Traveling Food

So, if Marco Polo did not bring noodles to Italy, who did?

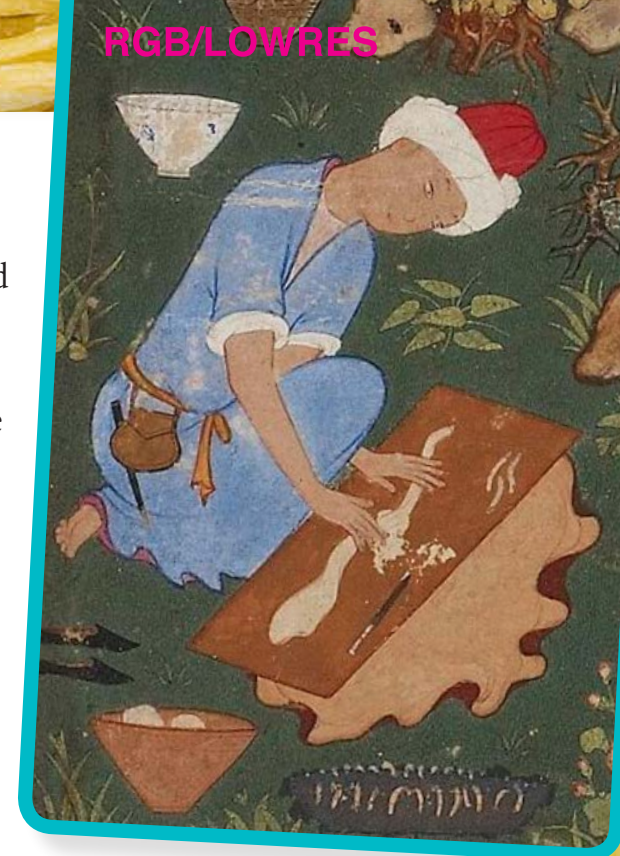
The oldest written mention of pasta outside Asia comes from the Middle East, about 1,600 years ago. A book on Jewish law includes rules for eating *itriya*, or dried noodles.

*Itriya* was a popular travel food in the Middle East and Central Asia. Dried pasta was perfect for long trips. It was tasty, easy to carry, and

never went bad. And anyone could cook it.

Some historians believe that pasta spread out from the Middle East or Central Asia. Traders packed their *itriya* and traveled to Italy and east to Asia.

Some of these traders may have taken wheat to China—though the Chinese were already making noodles from millet. Other traders sailed south to Africa. And the rest is pasta history.



This Iranian picture from 1540 shows a chef rolling noodles.

of dough into strings of 9 foot (3 m) noodles in just minutes.

The Chinese made wide noodles by cutting sheets of dough into strips. For some noodles they used other kinds of flour, made from ground-up rice, mung beans, or yams. In Asia, it is not weird to eat noodles for breakfast—and lunch, and dinner. The Chinese munch on crunchy noodles as snacks and fry noodles for dessert.

Hey!



## Noodles West

Wherever they got the recipe, Italians have been eating pasta since at least 1138, long before Marco Polo went to China. In that year, an Arab map-maker named Muhammad al-Idrisi sailed to the island of Sicily, in the south of Italy. He reported that Sicilians made oodles of dried noodles. Shiploads of *itriya* traveled to countries near and far. In fact, in Sicily, pasta is still called *tria*.

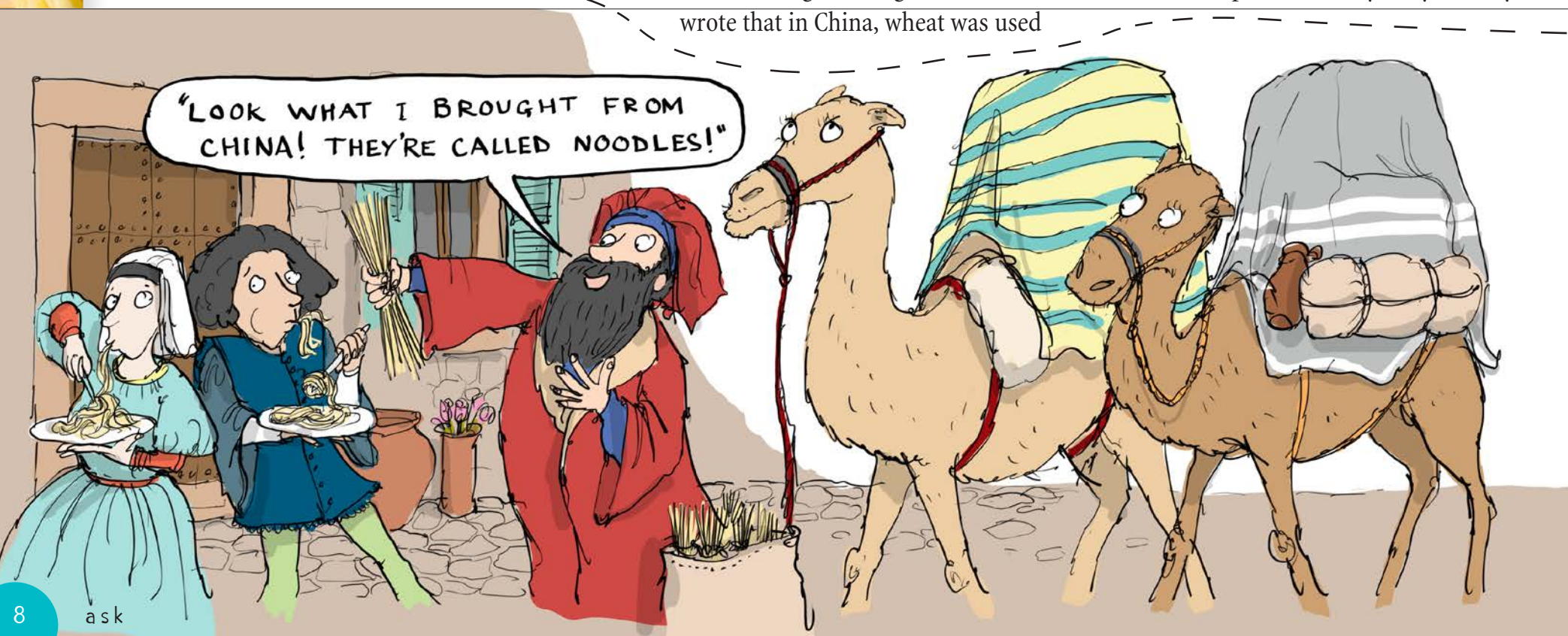
Now that's a long noodle!



Slurp!



"LOOK WHAT I BROUGHT FROM CHINA! THEY'RE CALLED NOODLES!"





Italians make pasta in many shapes. Vegetable juice or squid ink makes different colors.

Tomatoes come from South America and were unknown to Italians in Marco Polo's time. Back then, Italians ate their noodles with nuts, herbs, butter, and cheese. When explorers brought the first

tomatoes to Italy in the 1500s, many people were afraid to eat them—they thought they might be poisonous. Tomatoes belong to the same plant family as deadly nightshade, which IS poisonous, and the leaves look similar. So tomato sauce took awhile to catch on.

So who REALLY invented noodles? We may never know—the



RGB/LOWRES

Noodle helpers in Naples around 1900. Or maybe they're off to lunch?

So many noodles, so little time



Eventually, the Italians discovered that one kind of wheat made especially good pasta. This wheat, called durum, has hard seeds with lots of gluten, the protein that makes dough stretchy. Millers ground the grains into a coarse flour called semolina.

Semolina feels more like sand than powder, and it's great for pasta.

To keep for a long time, noodles have to dry for several days in just the right conditions—not too hot, not too dry. Sunny Naples, in southern Italy, had perfect weather for drying pasta. It soon became a noodle-making center. Macaroni drying racks filled the streets and public squares. Noodles hung from balconies and from poles. Naples was pasta heaven.

Playful Italian cooks learned to make pasta into many different shapes. They made long thin noodles, short fat noodles, bow ties, tubes, twists, and shells. They stuffed pasta with cheese and baked it into casseroles.

But until almost 1800, Italians did not eat their noodles with tomato sauce!

history of pasta is as twisted as a bowl of spaghetti. Perhaps noodles were first made in China. Maybe they were born in the Middle East and spread. Or maybe noodles were invented many times, in many different countries. No one knows for sure. But whoever invented them, we're sure glad they did!



### Yankee Doodle's Macaroni

Have you ever wondered about the line in the song "Yankee Doodle" that goes, "stuck a feather in his hat and called it macaroni"? Is this just pure nonsense, or does it mean something?

In the 1700s, it was fashionable for rich young Englishmen to travel to Italy to see the sights. There they often developed a taste for noodles. Back then, "macaroni" meant any kind of noodle. Pasta was rare outside Italy, so eating macaroni became a way to show off that you had traveled. And "macaroni" became a slang word for these fashionable young people and the silly fashions they followed.

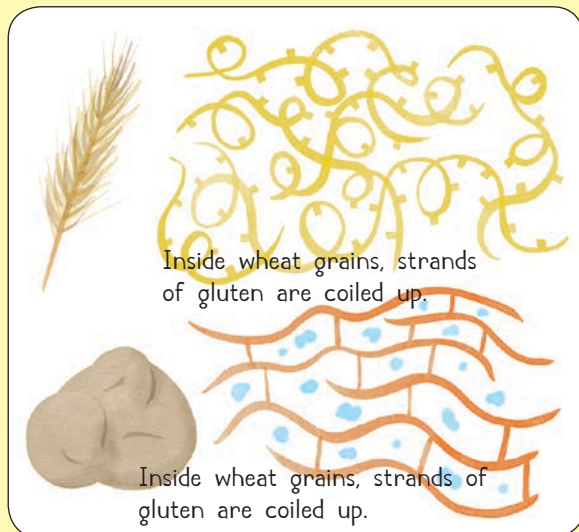


# What Is Gluten?



Pasta is often made with wheat flour, the ground-up seeds of wheat plants. Gluten is a mix of tangly proteins. It's a natural part of wheat seeds. Gluten is also found in other grains, like barley and corn.

Gluten is what makes pasta and bread dough stretchy and springy. When a chef kneads (mashes and stretches) dough, the tangly bits of gluten in the flour link up into a stretchy net. The net traps water and makes the dough springy. The more gluten the flour has, the more stretchy it will get. The best flour for noodles has lots of gluten.



Inside wheat grains, strands of gluten are coiled up.

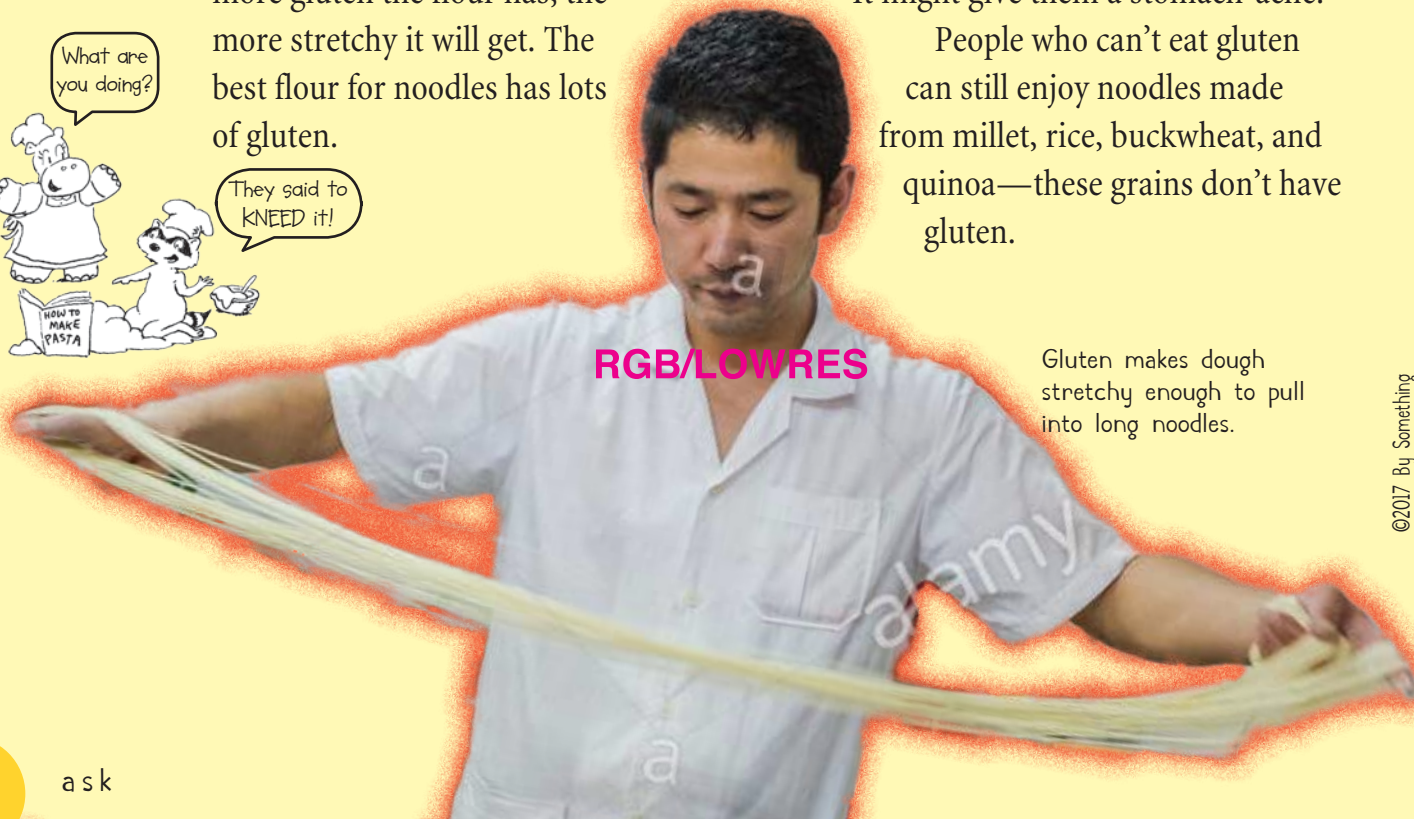
Inside wheat grains, strands of gluten are coiled up.

## Why Can't Some People Eat Gluten?

Gluten is a natural part of wheat and is not usually harmful. But some people (about 1 in 133) suffer from a sickness called celiac disease. Their body's germ-fighting cells mistakenly attack gluten as if it were a dangerous germ. People with celiac disease can't eat any gluten—it can make them very sick. There are also some people who just don't digest gluten very well. It might give them a stomach-ache.

People who can't eat gluten can still enjoy noodles made from millet, rice, buckwheat, and quinoa—these grains don't have gluten.

Gluten makes dough stretchy enough to pull into long noodles.



RGB/LOWRES

In Japan, it is polite to SLURP your noodles loudly. That's a compliment to the chef!



It's also OK to slurp in China. For less messy soup eating, use your chopsticks to lift some noodles into your spoon.



# Pasta Polly's Guide to Polite Noodle Eating



In Thailand, do not slurp! Slurping is considered rude. You can use chopsticks for noodles in soup, but for noodles on a plate, use a fork or spoon. Shh—eat quietly!



Eating noodles together is a great way to make new friends anywhere in the world. But be sure you watch your noodle manners!

In America, it is not polite to slurp. Also, do not fling macaroni at your brother, or put spaghetti on the dog.

## GLOBAL EDITION

When stylish Italians want to keep their spaghetti on the fork, they twirl each fork full of noodles on the plate or a spoon. The twirling keeps the sauce neat too.



But wherever you go, it's always polite to say "Thank You! That was delicious!"

Every country has its own favorite sauces and recipes for noodles. What's yours?

The

# Noodles I Love Best

art by  
Amanda  
Shepherd

**Lizzie,  
America**

The yummiest dinner in the world is mac and cheese! I love how that creamy, yellow sauce gets inside all those little pasta tubes. My brother puts peas in his—some people are just strange.



**Paola,  
Italy**

We have lots of fancy sauces—but I think pasta is best just buttered with Parmesan cheese.



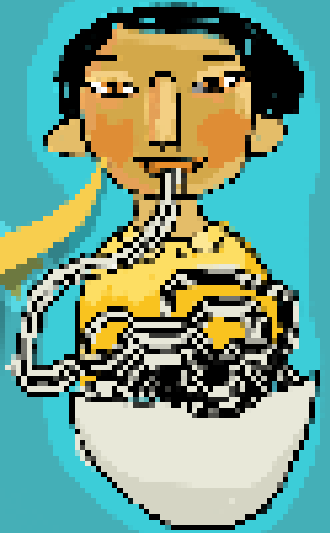
**Emil,  
Germany**

My favorite dessert is kugel, a sweet noodle casserole with raisins and cheese. And lots of cinnamon!



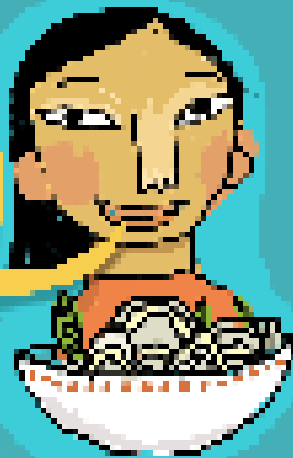
**Jun,  
China**

On birthdays we eat long noodles for luck and a long life. Don't cut them—slurp them up whole!



**Keiko,  
Japan**

I love thick, soft udon noodles. I eat them in a soup with seaweed and fishcake. They get all wet and slippery, then they're super fun to eat. Mmmm!



**Pedro, Peru**

There's nothing more delicious than a bowl of hot tallarin saltado. First we stir-fry noodles—Chinese immigrants taught us how. Then we add peppers and tomatoes.



PERU

**Aleka,  
Greece**

Pastichio is the best pasta dish EVER! It's like lasagna, but the layers are macaroni instead of flat noodles.

**Amin,  
Afghanistan**

This is manti, flat pasta rolled up with stuffing inside, like ravioli. My favorite is filled with spicy lamb.



**Yasmin, Morocco**

Try some couscous with raisins and nuts! It looks like rice, but really it's tiny little beads of pasta.



**Tan,  
Vietnam**

I love pho (say "fuh"). It's a noodle soup with meat, veggies, and all sorts of tasty things. Every chef makes their own. My mom's is the best, with ginger and sliced chicken.



UNITED STATES

MOROCCO

AFGHANISTAN

CHINA

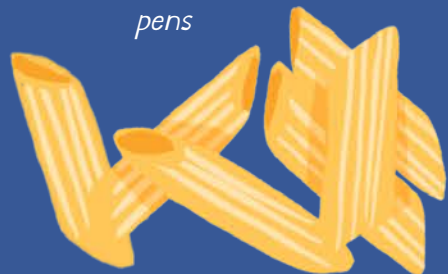
AFGHANISTAN

art ©2017 by Amanda Shepherd

# Know Your Noodles

Italian noodles are all made from wheat dough, but they come in lots of different shapes. We still call these shapes by their Italian nicknames.

Penne  
*pens*



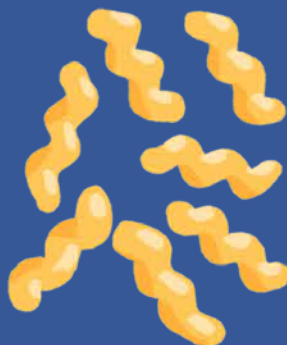
Orzo  
*barley (they look like barley grains)*



Fettuccini  
*little ribbons*



Cavatappi  
*corkscrew*

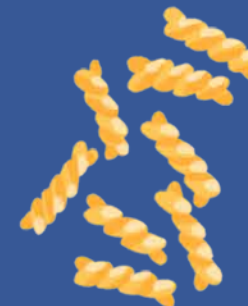


Conchiglie  
*conch shells*

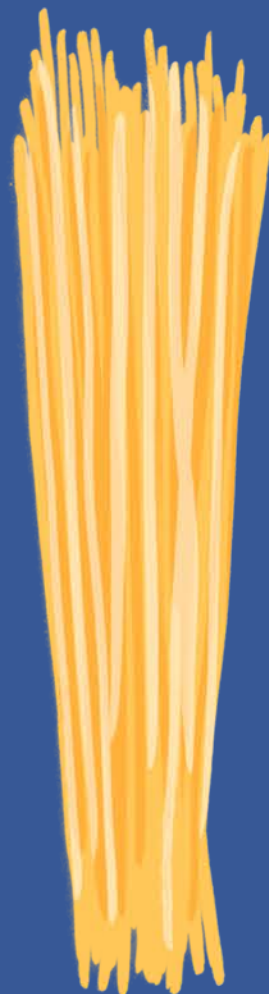


Pappardelle  
*eat hungrily*

Gemelli  
*twins*



Spaghetti  
*little strings*



Farfalle  
*butterflies*



Rotini  
*spirals*



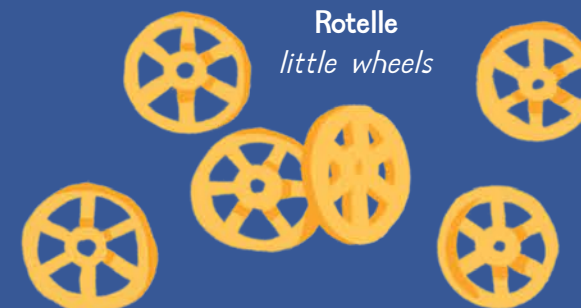
Macaroni  
*made from barley*



Alfabeto  
*can you guess what?*



Cannelloni  
*large reed*



Rotelle  
*little wheels*

These are NOT worms!



Vermicelli  
*little worms*



Linguini  
*little tongues*



Orechiette  
*little ears*



Ziti  
*bridegrooms*