



Bigoli in salsa
Thick spaghetti with sauce

Serves 4
200 g / 7 oz white onion, finely sliced
75 ml / 2½ fl oz Tuscan olive oil
75 g / 3 oz salted anchovies
and/or tinned sardines, boned
400 g / 14 oz bigoli
(thick wholewheat spaghetti)
salt and pepper
1 litre / 1¾ pints water

During the time of the late and much-lamented Venetian Republic, this was a very common dish during Lent. A type of thick, dark spaghetti made from whole wheat, *bigoli* have a name that is misleadingly like that of the *bigolanti*, boatmen who used to transport drinking water to the various islands of the lagoon because the wells in the *campi* (squares) of Venice and the other islands never held sufficient volumes of fresh water. In fact there is even a canal in Venice called the Rio dell'Acqua Dolce, which takes its name from the fact that it was the landing-stage for the boats that brought fresh water from the mainland for Venetian wells. When they constituted a guild in the fourteenth century, these water-carriers took as their patron saint San Costanzo, because – it was said – the lamps before images of this saint burned on water alone, without any need for oil or other fuel.

Obviously, Venice's water requirements nowadays are met by the mains... and just like the *bigolanti*, *bigoli* themselves have become rather hard to find.

To prepare the sauce, lightly brown the finely sliced onion in the oil; then add a little water (which boils away) to complete the cooking, leaving the onions very soft. Mix in the boned sardines cut into pieces and mash them up some more with a wooden spoon as you stir the mixture over a moderate heat. Add a little pepper (but no salt) and cook until the sardines break up almost completely.

Cook the *bigoli* in boiling, salted water until they are *al dente*. Drain in a serving bowl with the warm sauce. But if you have a particularly large frying pan, first mix the *bigoli* with the sauce over medium heat for a minute or two; this maximizes the flavours.

I prefer the so-called winter version of this dish, which includes a handful of raisins and pine nuts in the anchovy salsa. A bayleaf in the pan while the ingredients cook also adds flavour to this extremely rich and satisfying dish.

