



PASTABILITIES

How to Find a Super Sauce

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Quick. Cheap. Convenient. It's no surprise that pasta is one of the most popular meals in homes (and in restaurants).

That jar, can, or tub of tomato, Alfredo, rosée, or pesto sauce is partly what makes pasta so easy. Yet picking a pasta sauce can be anything but. Which has less salt? Little or no saturated fat? More flavour? Which claims on the label matter and which are just marketing blather?

Here's what you need to know.

Information compiled by Namita Davis in Toronto.

1. CHECK THE SERVING SIZE. The serving on Nutrition Facts panels is typically a half cup if it's a red (tomato) sauce and a quarter cup if it's an Alfredo or pesto. But watch out. Companies like Le Grand and Olivieri use just two level tablespoons (an eighth of a cup) for their pesto sauces. Seriously? Two tablespoons?

Even a quarter or half cup ain't much. But that's a reasonable serving, according to Health Canada. And it should be enough to cover Health Canada's serving (1½ cups) of cooked pasta, which is about half what you'd be served in a restaurant...more like a side dish than an entree. Solution: add enough veggies to bump the volume up to main-dish territory.

2. LOOK FOR LESS SALT. Sodium is the Achilles' heel of pasta sauces. Unless you can find a no-salt-added brand that you like (we didn't), that half-cup serving can get a rise out of your blood pressure. Sauces vary widely, as you can see from these typical sodium levels in some popular brands:

■ **200-300 mg:** Olivieri Nutri Wise, PC Blue Menu, Whole Foods 365 Organic

■ **300-400 mg:** Catelli, Healthy Choice, Neal Brothers, Prego, Walmart Wholesome Goodness

■ **400-500 mg:** Antico Organic, Ragú, Simply Natural Organic, Whole Foods 365

■ **500-600 mg:** Newman's Own, President's Choice, Primo

■ **600-700 mg:** Jamie Oliver, PC Organics, Walmart Great Value

Check our chart on p. 14. Best Bite pasta sauces have no more than 300 mg of sodium in every half cup (quarter cup for Alfredos and pestos), while Honourable Mentions have no more than 360 mg. For the best-tasting Best Bites, Honourable Mentions, and near misses, see the photos on this page and the next. And check out p. 15 for our recipes for making your own.

The Heart & Stroke Foundation's Health Check symbol can also help. In 2008, the foundation lowered the limit for pasta sauces from 480 mg of sodium in a half cup to 360 mg (and to 240 mg in a quarter cup of pestos and Alfredo sauces). While large brands like Catelli and Prego use the Health Check, the program is voluntary. So if a pasta sauce label doesn't have a check, it could still be fine. Check the Nutrition Facts panel.



3. IGNORE MOST CLAIMS. Taste aside, just about any tomatoey pasta sauce that doesn't have too much sodium is good for you. So you can ignore claims like these, which try to make some sauces sound healthier:

■ **Vegetables.** "2 servings of veggies in every ½ cup," boast Ragú's Old World Style pasta sauce labels. "2 servings of vegetables," trumpet Prego's labels.

Since each quarter cup of tomato purée or sauce is a serving of vegetables, according to the government, a half cup of just about any tomato-based sauce would qualify as two servings. There's nothing special about Ragú or Prego.



Classico Tomato & Basil. Rich, well-balanced tomato flavour. A classic.



Catelli Garden Select Zucchini Primavera. Thick, tasty chunks of zucchini and carrot.



Wholesome Goodness Marinara. A delicious, fresh-tasting sauce available only at Walmart.



Simply Natural Organic Tomato & Mushroom. If you're not a fan of chunky, this is the sauce to try.



Catelli Garden Select Garlic & Onion. A subtle blend that's surprisingly satisfying. May disappoint garlic junkies, though.



Prego Mushroom & Green Pepper. They're not kidding about the green pepper. The best-tasting Prego.



Classico Spicy Red Pepper. A pleasant sweet/tart balance, delivered with a generous zing.



Kirkland Pesto. Delicious but too many calories for a Best Bite. Cut some by thinning it with pasta cooking water.

Our advice: don't rely on a half cup of pasta sauce to supply two of the six daily servings of vegetables (plus five servings of fruit) that the healthiest diets have. Not when you could feast on a broccoli-mushroom stir-fry or a spinach-artichoke-heart salad or a grilled vegetable kabob instead.

■ **Fibre.** "Source of fibre," declares the front of most Primo and the back of most Prego pasta sauces. Yes, but you'd get the same three or four grams of fibre (a decent amount, by the way) in a half cup of any red pasta sauce.

■ **Fat.** Healthy Choice pasta sauces are "Fat Free" and have "No Added Oil." Catelli Garden Select and many President's Choice sauces are "Low in Fat."

Unless you're in the market for a (creamy) Alfredo, rosée, or vodka sauce or an oil-rich pesto, no pasta sauce has enough fat—or saturated fat—to matter. Most are either fat free or have, at most, a gram or two of fat.

For a while, it seemed as though a little fat in your tomato sauce might actually be good, at least for men. In the 1990s, studies suggested that lycopene, a pigment that's plentiful in tomatoes, could lower the risk of prostate cancer. And our bodies absorb more lycopene if there's some fat in the same meal. However, recent studies have found no lower risk of prostate cancer—especially the aggressive type—in men who have higher blood levels of lycopene.

■ **Olive oil.** "Our Wholesome Goodness Pasta Sauces are made from California grown vine-ripened tomatoes, combined with Italian olive oil and garlic," says the back of the Wholesome Goodness Roasted Garlic jar. (The brand is sold only at Walmart.)

Let's see. There are 4½ grams of fat in a teaspoon of olive oil, and a half cup of Wholesome Goodness has 1 gram of fat. So the "Italian olive oil" amounts to a quarter of a teaspoon. Antico Organic, which is "Prepared with Olive Oil," has no more than about half a teaspoon of olive oil per half cup. Wow.

Neal Brothers Organic and PC Organics also use a dribble of olive oil in their pasta sauces. They just don't boast about it. Take-home message: olive oil in the ingredient list doesn't make for a must-buy pasta sauce. A half cup of PC Organics sauces (except the Primavera), for example, has around 500 to 800 milligrams of sodium. Why swallow a third of a day's sodium or more for a fraction of a teaspoon of olive oil?

4. BEWARE OF SATURATED FAT. It doesn't matter if a pasta sauce has cheese or sausage or if it's bolognese (meat-based). As long as it's red and isn't a (creamy) vodka or rosée sauce, you don't have to worry about saturated fat.

But vodkas, rosées, and Alfredos can have enough cream, cheese, and/or butter to do some damage. A half cup of vodka

or rosée sauce, for example, ranges from a harmless one gram of sat fat (if, like Simply Natural Organic Vodka Cream, it has more tomato than cream) to six grams—a third of a day's worth (if, like President's Choice non-refrigerated Rosée, it has more cream than tomato). Most fall between three and four grams. Only Simply Natural Organic Vodka Cream sauce was low enough in sat fat and sodium to earn an Honourable Mention. But it didn't win any taste awards.

The saturated fat numbers on Alfredo labels look similar to the numbers on vodka labels: three to five grams per serving. But a serving of Alfredo sauce is a quarter cup, while a serving of vodka or rosée sauce is a half cup. So if you eat a half cup of Ziggy's Alfredo, for example, you'll end up with 10 grams of sat fat and 200 calories. Pour it over 1½ cups of pasta (330 calories), and it's like eating a McDonald's Big Mac.

Unfortunately, the two Honourable Mention Alfredos—PC Blue Menu Alfredo and PC Blue Menu Quattro Formaggi—were on the bland side. (There were no Best Bites.) But add some chopped fresh garlic, a bit of grated Parmesan, and a dusting of ground pepper to either one, and you may produce a winner.

5. GO EASY ON THE PESTO. A traditional pesto—made with basil, extra-virgin olive oil, pine nuts, Parmesan cheese, and garlic—packs 200 to 400 calories, 400 to 1,000 milligrams of sodium, and 2 to 7 grams of saturated fat in *every quarter cup*. While pesto's fat largely comes from heart healthy oils and nuts, there's little you (or your hips or blood pressure) can do about the calories and sodium.

Only Costco's Kirkland Signature Pesto was low enough in sodium—but not calories—for a Best Bite. Pesto gives new meaning to the phrase "use sparingly." Tip: stretch your pesto by thinning it with a couple of tablespoons of the pasta cooking water. You'll use less...and it will coat the pasta better.

6. POUR YOUR SAUCE OVER WHOLE-GRAIN PASTA. A ½-cup serving of white pasta is a decent source of protein (about 11 grams) and fibre (3½ grams). But whole-grain whole wheat pasta beats white hands down. While it has no more protein, it delivers more fibre (8 grams), magnesium, vitamin E, and zinc...and a more interesting taste. And companies like Catelli and Bionaturae Organic have found a way to make 100 per cent whole-grain whole wheat pasta that isn't gritty or gummy.

If you're on a gluten-free diet, try something whole-grain like Rizopia Organic Brown Rice Pasta, which is available in the health food aisle at Loblaws.

ON TOP OF SPAGHETTI...

BRAND-NAME RATING

Best Bites (✓✓) have no more than 300 milligrams of sodium, 200 calories, and (for tomato and creamy sauces) 1 gram of saturated fat in a serving. **Honourable Mentions** (✓) have no more than 360 mg of sodium, 200 calories, and (for tomato and creamy sauces) 2 grams of sat fat. Tomato sauces and pestos are ranked from least to most sodium, then sat fat, then calories. Creamy sauces (Alfredos, vodkas, and rosées) are ranked from least to most sat fat, then sodium, then calories.

TOMATO (½ cup—about 125 mL)

	Calories	Saturated Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)
✓✓ Eden Organic Spaghetti No Salt Added	70	0	10
✓✓ PC Blue Menu Primavera no salt added ^R	70	0.5	30
✓✓ Neal Brothers Organic Tomato & Basil	40	0	240
✓✓ PC Blue Menu—Mushroom & Garlic, Tomato & Basil, or Vegetarian Bolognese ¹	60	0.5	250
✓✓ Olivieri Nutri Wise Tomato & Basil ^R	60	0	280
✓✓ Catelli Garden Select—Country Mushroom or Mushrooms & Beef ¹	70	0.5	280
✓✓ Whole Foods 365 Organic—Classic, Fat Free, or Tomato Basil ¹	50	0	290
✓✓ Eden Organic Spaghetti	70	0	300
✓ Catelli Garden Select Zucchini Primavera	70	0	310
✓ Catelli Thick & Chunky Tomato Basil Blast	60	0.5	310
✓ Christine Cushing's ¹	60	0.5	310
✓ Classico Spicy Red Pepper	60	0.5	310
✓ Classico Tomato & Basil	60	0.5	320
✓ Olivieri Rustic Pomodoro ^R	60*	0.5	320
✓ Catelli Garden Select Diced Tomatoes & Basil	70	0	330
✓ Neal Brothers All Natural ¹	70	0.5	330
✓ PC Organics Primavera	70	0.5	330
✓ Classico Fire-Roasted Tomato & Garlic	50	0	340
✓ Simply Natural Organic Tomato & Mushroom	50	0	350
✓ Walmart Wholesome Goodness ¹	50	0	350
✓ Classico Roasted Garlic & Onion	60	0	350
✓ Catelli Garden Select—Fine Herbs or Garlic & Onion ¹	70	0	350
✓ Healthy Choice Garlic Lovers ¹	60	0	360
✓ Prego ¹	80	0	360
Healthy Choice Chunky Lovers Italian Style Vegetables	60	0	370
Classico Roasted Portobello Mushroom	70	0.5	370
Ragú Light Tomato & Basil	60	0	380
Neal Brothers Organic, except Tomato & Basil ¹	50	0.5	380
Classico Red Wine & Herb	60	0	390
Healthy Choice Traditional	60	0	400
Classico Tuscan-Style Olive & Garlic	70	0.5	410
President's Choice Roasted Red Pepper	60	0	420
Classico—Italian Sausage with Peppers & Onions, Sun-Dried Tomato, or Tomato & Pesto ¹	80	1	430
President's Choice 7-Vegetable Primavera	70	0.5	440
Ziggy's Marinara ^R	70	0.5	440
President's Choice Napoletana ^R	50	0	460
Whole Foods 365 ¹	50	0	460
Catelli Garden Select Parmesan & Romano	70	1	460
Simply Natural Organic, except Tomato & Mushroom ¹	50	0	470
President's Choice—Spicy Roasted Garlic or Sweet Basil ¹	80	0.5	470
Ragú Old World Style ¹	70	0	480
Classico Florentine Spinach & Cheese	80	1	480
Classico Beef & Pork	90	1.5	480
Antico Organic ¹	80	0	490

Classico Sweet Basil Marinara	70	0	510
President's Choice Spinach and Cheese	90	1	510
President's Choice Marinara	80	0.5	520
President's Choice Bolognese ^R	140	3.5	530
Olivieri Tomato & Herb ^R	60	0	540
Ragú Chunky Tomato Garlic & Onion	90	0	540
Newman's Own ¹	80	0	550
Catelli Meat	80	1	570
Primo Thick & Zesty ¹	60	0	580
President's Choice—Bolognese, Fire-Roasted Tomato, Quattro Formaggi, or Roasted Portobello Mushroom ¹	80	0.5	590
Classico Four Cheese	90	1	590
Walmart Great Value ¹	80	0	610
PC Organics, except Primavera ¹	70	0.5	630
Olivieri Classic Marinara ^R	80	0.5	640
President's Choice Italian Sausage	70	0.5	690
Jamie Oliver ¹	80	0.5	700
President's Choice Pasta Sauce with Mushrooms	90	0	710
Compliments Marinara ^R	100	0.5	800

VODKA or ROSÉE (½ cup—about 125 mL)

✓ Simply Natural Organic Vodka Cream	70	1	350
PC Blue Menu Rosée ^R	80	2	450
Classico Tomato Alfredo	100	2.5	360
Classico Vodka	120	3	510
Compliments Creamy Tomato Blush ^R	130	3.5	560
Olivieri Rosé ^R	110	4	410
President's Choice Rosée ^R	100	4	590
Antico Tomato Alfredo	120	4.5	540
President's Choice Rosée	170	6	620

ALFREDO (¼ cup—about 60 mL)

✓ PC Blue Menu Alfredo	50	1.5	220
✓ PC Blue Menu Quattro Formaggi ^R	70	2	230
Olivieri Herb Alfredo ^R	80	3	190
Classico Alfredo 25% Less Fat	60	3	340
Compliments Alfredo ^R	80	3.5	220
Olivieri Classic Alfredo ^R	80	3.5	250
President's Choice Alfredo	90	3.5	270
Classico Alfredo, except 25% Less Fat ¹	80	3.5	380
President's Choice Roasted Garlic Alfredo	100	4	230
Olivieri Four Cheese ^R	100	4	250
Ziggy's—Alfredo or 4 Cheese ^{1R}	100	4.5	290
Newman's Own ¹	90	4.5	410

PESTO (¼ cup—about 60 mL)

Costco Kirkland Signature ^R	290	5	290
Le Grand Garden ^R	220	2	430
Compliments ^R	260	3.5	470
Classico Sun-Dried Tomato	90	1	530
Ziggy's ^R or Classico Basil ¹	230	3.5	550
President's Choice Tomato	210	3	580
Olivieri Chef's Collection Basil ^R	360	7	720
President's Choice Basil	310	3.5	760
Jamie Oliver Green	400	6.5	800
Le Grand Sun-dried Tomato ^R	300	7	910
Olivieri Chef's Collection Olive Oil & Garlic ^R	460	10	1,060

✓✓ Best Bite. ✓ Honourable Mention. ¹ Average. ^R Refrigerated. * Estimate. Note: Best Bites and Honourable Mentions refer to calories, sodium, and saturated fat, not taste.

Daily Limits (for a 2,000-calorie diet): **Sodium:** 1,500 milligrams. **Saturated Fat:** 20 grams.

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