



INVESTIGATIONS | DEC. 28, 2020

What the Hole Is Going On? The very real, totally bizarre bucatini shortage of 2020.

By Rachel Handler [@rachel_handler](#)

Photo: Melissa Hom

Part I: The Mystery

Things first began to feel off in March. While this sentiment applies to everything in the known and unknown universe, I mean it specifically in regard to America's supply of dry, store-bought bucatini. At first, the evidence was purely anecdotal. My boyfriend and I would bravely venture to both our local Italian grocer and our local chain groceries, masked beyond recognition, searching in vain for the bucatini that, in my opinion, not to be dramatic, is the only noodle worth eating; all other dry pastas might as well be firewood. But where there had once been abundance, there was now only lack. Being educated noodle consumers, we knew that there was,

more generally, a pasta shortage due to the pandemic, but we were still able to find spaghetti and penne and orecchiette — shapes which, again, insult me even in concept. The missing bucatini felt different. It was specific. Frightening. Why bucatini? Why now? Why us?

We began to talk about it, quietly and carefully, in May. “Are you guys having trouble finding bucatini? We haven’t found any in a while,” said my friend Dan, one of my most bucatini-headed friends, during an otherwise innocuous Saturday-evening Zoom session. I felt a chill, like I’d seen a ghost, perhaps the ghost of Pietro Barilla, founder of the Barilla pasta empire. “We actually ... haven’t been able to find it either,” I said. The conversation halted as dramatically as if we’d just seen someone stabbed to death with a bucatini noodle inside one of the little Zoom windows.

Our other friends stared at us in horror. “I *also* haven’t been able to find any bucatini, actually,” said another friend, slowly. “Maybe it’s just a temporary thing, and maybe it’s just in our neighborhoods,” I said, feeling the fear rise like pasta water in my throat. “I’m sure the bucatini will come back.”

But it did not come back. Spring turned to summer (allegedly; there is no hard proof of time actually moving forward). Summer turned to fall. All the while we searched high and low for bucatini, at Whole Foods and Russo’s and New York Market and Key Food, our friends searching at City Acres and Food Town and Brooklyn Harvest, stumbling upon it only occasionally and then panic-buying it, then feeling bad for panic-buying it, then repeating the cycle. As Dan’s partner, Chanan, recently recalled, “All I know is, once it ran out, it stopped being replaced. We’ve had to compromise and eat spaghetti, fusilli, and rigatoni. It’s an added layer of uncertainty during an uncertain time.” Still, we pressed forward, pretending things were fine, forcing smiles when we knew deep down all we wanted was to wring our hands and scream into the dark sky. Our only solace was that we assumed this was likely a New York-specific problem, one that, if we really wanted to solve, we could do so by traveling discreetly to another state.

Would it be worth renting a car to drive to a store in New Jersey, or possibly Pennsylvania, to buy bags of dried pasta? For bucatini, we considered it. Bucatini is spaghetti but thicker and with a hole in it, meaning it absorbs 200 percent more sauce than its thinner, hole-free brethren, due to math. When asked via email for comment on bucatini’s allure, New York City pasta magnate Frank Prisinzano simply told me, “Lol it’s spaghetti with a hole in it. Who doesn’t like that?” In 2018, *Bon Appétit* deemed it the “best long pasta,” citing its powerful sauce-absorption capabilities and its general slurpiness. Bucatini Head Dan put it thusly: “There’s something about the hole. It feels more luxurious.”

I’d like to go a step further and praise its innate bounciness and personality. If you boil bucatini for 50 percent of the time the box tells you to, cooking it perfectly al dente, you will experience a textural experience like nothing else you have encountered in your natural life. When cooked correctly, bucatini bites back. It is a responsive noodle. It is a self-aware noodle. In these times, when human social interaction carries with it the possible price of illness, bucatini offers an alternative: a social interaction with a pasta.

But the problem, I would learn, was not limited to New York. In the fall, I was speaking with my mother, a longtime resident of suburban Chicago, and, as it often does, the conversation quickly turned to pasta. “Rachel,” my mother said gravely. “I haven’t been able to find bucatini anywhere at home. Do you have any in New York?”

My heart stopped.

“Mom, slow down. What are you telling me right now?” I asked, trying to keep my voice level. “I am telling you,” she said, “that I have not been able to find any bucatini in months.” She had even taken the step of writing an (extreme mom energy) email to the head of customer service at De Cecco, her preferred bucatini brand:

I am a HUGE fan of Bucatini pasta. I have not been able to find it for many weeks at any store. It is my favorite pasta to cook.

ARE YOU STILL MAKING IT????

Please tell me how to get some.

Bucatini HQ had replied to her in Italian: “BUONGIORNO SIG. Si sono sempre in produzione. Mi potete fornire il paese.” (“GOOD MORNING SIR. Yes, they are always in production. Can you supply me with the country.”) My mother had explained where she was, then shortly thereafter had received a phone call from a man named Brian who was, apparently, her regional De Cecco sales executive. He left a voicemail: “I did get your message that you’re seeking bucatini,” said Brian. “Bucatini is on FDA hold. We are still producing it, but there were some issues, some hiccups with the FDA. Unfortunately, it’s not likely we’ll have bucatini until January at best. I’d look for it in February back on shelves.”

I instantly decided that as a serious journalist, it was my duty to figure out what the literal fuck was going on. I Googled “bucatini shortage” and found only one article on the topic from April 2020, wherein SNL star and Vulture alum Bowen Yang lamented to *W* magazine, “There’s more of a bucatini scarcity problem than there is a toilet-paper issue, I think.” Bolstered by Bowen’s confirmation, I then pitched this very story you’re now reading at the next *New York Magazine* brainstorm and instantly received a frantic chat from my co-worker Matthew Schneier: “Just have to say a huge THANK YOU. My sister and I have been plagued by this mystery for months.” When I mentioned the story to other friends in other cities, almost all of them confirmed that they, too, had been unable to find the noodle in their various urban and rural settings. I also found a bunch of tweets like this.

I felt more determined than ever to solve this mystery, not just for myself but for the cast of *Saturday Night Live* and also the rest of the people of the United States of America, who had been through too much for too long to then have insult added to injury via the spontaneous and inexplicable disappearance of the best noodle.

Part II: The Investigation

I began my inquiry by reaching out to De Cecco, sending several messages to the Italian email address that had replied to my mom, then calling poor Brian and leaving him multiple messages. After a week, I had still received no reply, confirming my suspicion that something extremely insane was going on. My natural next stop was the National Pasta Association, which I was pleased to discover actually does exist and is not just a fever dream I once had. I knew that if anyone would know what to do, it would be the NPA. Quickly, it set me up for a phone interview with Rosario Del Nero, a whimsically charming chef and spokesperson for the organization. When I

asked if he had heard about the bucatini shortage, he laughed wildly and replied in a thick Italian accent: “Of course! It’s me! I have bought them all! Bucatini is the most sensual of the pastas!”

After ten minutes of conversation about why bucatini is sexy and which sauces go best with bucatini, we got down to business. Rosario told me that he’d heard nothing about a bucatini shortage, but suspected bucatini had just gotten caught up in the larger churn of the pasta shortage. “Dry pasta is typically extruded, pushed through a big die made of bronze. Spaghetti, you push it through once and it just comes out. Bucatini is much more complicated, because of the hole, the center.” Chef Rosario continued: “It’s a specialty shape, and it’s trendy — there was a bucatini craze even before the pasta shortage,” he explained, attributing its relatively newfound popularity in part to Alison Roman’s shallot [pasta recipe](#) (which, in its purest form, calls for bucatini) and what he called the “[Amatriciana craze](#)” of the past few years (another recipe that generally calls for bucatini). Despite these dual crazes, he explained, bucatini is “not as popular” as your spaghettis and your pennes, and *that* fact, combined with its complex creation process, meant that it was likely one of the first shapes to suffer during the shortage. “If you have a difficulty making pasta, first you make the [types] with the most demand,” he said, sounding reasonable enough.

But I sensed something more sinister was afoot, specifically regarding De Cecco-brand bucatini and its alleged skirmish with the FDA. Rosario expressed surprise at this, telling me he hadn’t heard anything about any kind of *situazione* with the FDA. “Maybe we’ll find some conspiracy, some worldwide thing,” he said, delighted. “That would be phenomenal. You would be remembered as the whistle-blower of the bucatini world crisis.” When I told him that De Cecco’s rep had been ignoring me, he gasped. “Maybe he’s been silenced!” he said. Rosario said he’d get back to me when he’d done his own internal investigating — and he did, mere moments later.

“Rachel!” he roared. “I’ve touched closely to the reason. Because of the environment, people have been using bucatini as straws, instead of a plastic straw.”

“I’m sorry, what?” I asked.

“Yes. You can buy them. There are a couple of companies making them. You can have your soda and then eat your straw,” he said. “It’s like eating your fork or knife.” My mind reeled as it tried to understand and accept this information as true. “But pasta is not a ready-to-eat product,” Rosario added. “You have to cook it. So when you use pasta to drink sodas, you’re drinking and eating a not-ready-to-eat product. You put yourself at risk because that product has never been pasteurized or killed. And the only pasta cut affected is bucatini because of the hole.”

This made both perfect sense and absolutely no fucking sense at all, the sort of demented-timeline event that could only happen in 2020, when everything is, metaphorically, an innocent piece of pasta turned into a straw in a bid to help the environment that actually ends up being fatally dangerous. I confessed to Rosario that every time I made bucatini, I ate several raw strands per minute as I cooked it, as a sort of barometer of al dente-ness. I wondered if I was now going to die because of it, and I made peace with this instantly.

After a pause, Rosario replied, “I think the risk is probably one in a billion. I wouldn’t worry too much.” Even so, he seemed nearly certain that the pasta straws were the reason behind the FDA “hiccup” and promised that we would “get to the bottom of it.” We still weren’t sure: Did the FDA hold apply to *all* bucatini, or just De Cecco — and if it *was* just De Cecco, and the issue *was* pasta straws, why was De Cecco being singled out as a pasta-straw perpetrator?

To gather more information on the ever-deepening noodle mystery, Rosario directed me to Carl Zuanelli, the chairman of the National Pasta Association and CEO of Nuovo Pasta. But before I spoke with Carl, I sent an email to the FDA asking, in as professional a tone as I could muster, what the ever-loving hell was going on. Then I did a deep dive into the FDA website, where, to my great shock, I found a buried couple of jargon-y paragraphs published on March 30, 2020, that did indeed mention De Cecco bucatini.

F.lli DE CECCO di FILIPPO FARA SAN MARTINO S.P.A

Vila F. De Cecco , Zona Industriale , Fara San Martino, Abruzzo ITALY

04 A - - 01 Macaroni Enriched

Desc: Bucatini

Notes: The article is subject to refusal of admission pursuant to Section 801(a)(3) of the FD&C Act in that it appears to be misbranded within the meaning of: Section 403(g)(1) of the Act [21 U.S.C. 343(g)]. The product appears to be represented as a food for which a definition and standard of identity have been prescribed by regulations as provided by section 401 and the food does not appear to conform to such definition and standard in accordance with 21 CFR 139.115(a)(1). Specifically, the product was analyzed for Iron (Fe) and found to contain 10.9 mg/lb which is below the level of 13-16.5 mg/lb as required by the standard of enriched macaroni.

04 A - - 02 Macaroni

Desc: Bucatini

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04 A - - 05 Spaghetti

Desc: Bucatini

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As someone who is not actually a food reporter by trade, and by law am not allowed to read sentences with this many numbers in them, I had no idea what any of this meant. When I got on the phone with Carl, the NPA chairman, I read the FDA paragraph out loud to him; he seemed just as surprised as Rosario had been. “You informed me about this,” he said. He then broke down the jargon for me, explaining that “many years ago” the U.S. government had mandated that pasta — which they call “macaroni,” like they’re the Sopranos — be made with “enriched flours,” with certain minimum and maximum criteria for various sorts of vitamins and nutrients (which is why pastas in the U.S. are labeled as “*enriched* macaroni products”). In Europe, which houses the grand nation of Italy, where De Cecco is made, the standards of identity are different. (“Not better or worse,” Carl explained, “just different.”) So while the De Cecco bucatini might have been “in balance” for the E.U., the U.S. had found its iron levels lacking — specifically by 2.1 milligrams. This, to me, seemed both petty and confusing. Why had the FDA singled out De Cecco in the first place to test its iron levels? Why were they quibbling over such a small number? And if the issue was specific to De Cecco, why were we all experiencing a shortage of bucatini more generally?

I continued my campaign to reach someone, anyone, at De Cecco for an explanation and timeline for resolution. I asked Carl for a contact, and he said he assumed they would reply soon. “I don’t see why they wouldn’t. I would think they’d want to and get more bucatini press.” Carl’s contact did not reply, and when I called them, their phone number did that fuzzy-dial-up thing where it sounded like someone signing into AOL in 1995.

I emailed Dave De Cecco, who I imagined to be the heir to the De Cecco empire, by guessing his email address multiple times. He did not reply, and later I realized he may not be at all related to the De Ceccos, which is another investigation for another time.* I emailed De Cecco’s export department, which replied simply, “First of all thank you for your interest in De Cecco brand. With reference to your kind email I inform you that your request has been forwarded to our department in charge. In case of interest they will put in touch directly with you. Thank you once again for contacting us and remain at your disposal for further assistance.” But they were not at my disposal for further assistance. I finally got Brian, the midwestern De Cecco sales executive, on the phone by calling him anonymously, and he seemed startled and displeased by my call. “Oh gosh, I’m probably the worst person to talk to about that,” he said. “I don’t have any more insight into it.” He gave me the email and phone number of a supply-chain guy named Marco, who never replied to my messages and whose voice mailbox has been full for a month.

In the meantime, the FDA finally replied to me, despite the fact that it was very busy approving a life-saving vaccine for billions of people. “Unfortunately, due to scheduling conflicts, we are unable to participate in a phone interview at this time,” wrote a spokesperson named Courtney, with more politeness than I deserved, as I was, again, bothering her with questions about noodles during an unprecedented express vaccine effort. “However, on March 30, 2020, De Cecco bucatini was placed on import alert because it was misbranded as it failed to meet the required standard of identity. Specifically, the iron level in De Cecco bucatini was below the designated level as required by the standard of enriched macaroni.” When I asked whether De Cecco was trying to fix this issue or how the FDA had even discovered the issue in the first place, Courtney replied, “It’s an extremely busy time for us at FDA.”

Seeing that Courtney was not going to give me all of the answers I needed, I decided to file an FOIA with the FDA requesting access to, and copies of, all documents related to the import alert for De Cecco’s bucatini product. I also requested a rush on the documents, writing by way of explanation that “people deserve to know.”

Part III: The Historic Pasta Beef and the Resolution (Sort of)

As I waited impatiently for the FDA’s FOIA reply, I got another call from Carl from the NPA, who blew my mind with a tale that sounded so Coen brothers–y I could not believe it. The reason behind De Cecco’s fall from FDA grace, he said, could potentially be traced all the way back to the early 1900s and the beginning of what was once called the “National Association of Macaroni and Noodle Manufacturers of America.”

Around World War II, Carl explained, the established noodle industry (henceforth referred to as Big Pasta) was “upset” by the introduction of Nissin’s ramen noodles into the country, which were “completely out of spec” with what the United States then recognized as noodles — specifically because the ramen was being sold for a lower price and with what Carl called “lower standards” of nutrition. “They were really pressed,” said Carl. That’s when the “standards of identity” were created: Big Pasta made sure that all noodles had to meet certain specifications to be considered “enriched macaroni products” and sold in the United States. As time went on, it would seem, the petty beef spun out into a juicier beef, with the main agitators of Big Pasta turning on each other. Nearly 120 years after the Macaroni and Noodle Manufacturers’s inception, that beef finally came for De Cecco. Weeks after

we were first in touch, Courtney replied to tell me that De Cecco's products were "collected as routine surveillance of imported products," but Carl had a more intriguing theory: "It sounds as if someone was not happy with De Cecco's product coming in and looked at it and saw that it was out of spec," he said. "The FDA doesn't typically go around looking. They've got plenty of other things to do."

Thrilled by the *There Will Be Blood* of it all, I reached out to a legal source who asked not to be named but who has deep knowledge of the inner workings of Big Pasta. The legal source, whom I will call Luigi for fun but whose real name is very different from that, confirmed Carl's suspicions. "FDA is quite slow to take action involving standards violations. I'm speculating that a competitor put some heavy pressure on FDA," he said. "It's not the only way this happens, but for the FDA to put any resources into this, it would have to be somebody who really cared with some clout. Maybe a competitor who brought in a member of Congress to pressure the agency."

When I told Luigi that De Cecco was dodging me, he laughed. "That doesn't surprise me," he said. "I suppose they just don't want to comment." But he reiterated that there was no real reason the FDA would "sample a macaroni product for enrichment levels at the border unless they got some info and received some pressure to go after it." Luigi also told me that this was entirely legal and absolutely kosher. With regards to my FOIA, Luigi told me that it would likely be declined on the basis of "documents related to an ongoing enforcement action — but that tells you something."

Invigorated, I reached out to several pasta manufacturers to see if they would speak to me about the greater bucatini shortage. The only one that hopped on the phone with me was Barilla. A representative for the company — who was an extremely good sport and discussed the significance of sauce coverage with me for several minutes — confirmed that Barilla had, in fact, pruned its bucatini SKU, along with several other shapes, solely owing to the sheer demand of pasta during the pandemic. She also told me they'd seen an increased demand for bucatini owing to its elegance and restaurant-like quality, and that this combination had, indeed, created a mild Barilla bucatini shortage. She did comfort me mildly by saying that the company had started to slowly increase production back in July and that we'd begin to see it back in normal quantities sometime soon. "We still have to ration it throughout the country so everyone gets a little bit of their favorite shape," she explained.

I asked casually if she was at all familiar with De Cecco's bucatini shortage. "No. I'm not aware," she said. "Have you had any FDA kerfuffles?" I asked, twirling my hair around my finger even though she could not see me because we were on the phone. "No," she said, clarifying that Barilla pasta has always contained "adequate levels" of enrichment. "We've never had that issue."

Carl, who was by now becoming audibly exhausted by me, confirmed that he'd heard from several pasta manufacturers, some of whom were on the list of those that did not reply to me (including Ronzoni, Prince, and Treehouse), that they were, similarly, "severely pruning back the different cuts in order to have longer runs of the most popular cuts, just to produce it as efficiently as they can." Carl added, "I'm not saying there's a bucatini shortage. I'm saying the less popular SKUs, of which bucatini is one, have been on their cut list." He also told me, sighing, that, "frankly, due to your investigatory work," he was now working to standardize the standards of identity between countries. "What had been an issue in our legal-affairs committee is now anecdotal, based on the info you're giving me, affecting negatively some members of our association, i.e., De Cecco," he said. "I am working behind the scenes on this."

Carl didn't say it, but I was pretty sure he thought about calling me "the Bernstein of Bucatini" and that my work will now help to fix the standards-of-identity issue that has long plagued our fair continents. I had confirmed that the bucatini shortage was real and understood that the bucatini shortage was a combination of factors: the pandemic's pasta demand, how hard it is to make bucatini because of its hole, De Cecco's strange and untimely barring from the U.S. border. But these victories felt lacking.

Ultimately, I had more questions than I did answers. I did not, for example, understand who from Big Pasta had targeted De Cecco and why. I was also slightly worried that I had inadvertently made *myself* a target of Big Pasta. And more importantly, I did not know if I would get to taste De Cecco's brilliant, sentient noodle ever again. At time of press, I am still waiting for the fruits of my FOIA request, as well as for literally anyone from De Cecco to reply to me. De Cecco, if you're reading this: Please contact me immediately, then also put 2.1 milligrams of iron into your freaking bucatini and help rescue us from this national nightmare.

This post has been updated because I can't remember who told me about Dave De Cecco but upon further reflection he seems entirely unrelated to the De Cecco family.