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Is pasta a type of noodle? The surprisingly serious debate over two beloved carbs

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Certain taxonomic debates resurface time and again.

When does a pond become a lake, or a sea an ocean? When does a cup become a bowl? And when does a dialect become a language?

Similar debates rage on in the food forums, including the age-old question: what's the difference between pasta and noodles? Can you really compare ramen with spaghetti, or penne with pad thai?

At first glance, "noodles versus pasta" might seem like a frivolous variant of the East–West power struggle. But it turns out a lot of people have a lot to say on the matter.

When foods defy categorisation

As food around the world globalises, the link between authentic and fusion food continues to blur.

In many contemporary recipes, "pasta" and "noodles" can be used interchangeably. This fluidity has allowed for the emergence of a kind of third-culture cuisine.

The language we use can also blur these lines. For example, "vermicelli" (which translates to "little worms" in Italian) was originally the name given to a certain shape of pasta made from durum flour and water (and sometimes eggs). But it's now also used to refer to noodles made from rice flour, or "glass" mung bean flour noodles – both of which feature in various Asian dishes.



Vermicelli can be made from a variety of starches and is eaten by many different cultures, including in India and Vietnam. Getty Images

And let's not forget other cultures that have their own types of noodles, such as Germany's EU-protected Swabian spätzle.

Marco Polo: the myth, the man, the misinterpreted

Perhaps it's a matter of origin stories – a simple case of which one came first?

Physical evidence for noodles can be traced back traced to ancient China, as far back as 4,000 years ago.

Pasta came much later, with a flurry of myths surrounding its origins. Arguably the most famous of these is that Marco Polo came across noodles in China and brought it back to Italy as pasta in the late 13th century.

This confusion partly arose from a misinterpretation of his book, The Travels of Marco Polo, in which he references a tree that produces a starchy food akin to pasta. Historians now think this was the sago palm, and that he mentioned it because it reminded him of pasta, which already existed back in Italy.

The myth is also attributable to a 1929 American marketing campaign in a trade magazine called The Macaroni Journal. It claimed one of Marco Polo's sailors named Spaghetti obtained dough from China and turned it into pasta by cutting it into thin ribbons and boiling it in seawater.

This entire story is false. The first use of the word spaghetti was only recorded in the 19th century.

Instead, it's likely Mediterranean trade routes from North Africa introduced *itriya* – the Arabic word for dried dough strips made from semolina – to Sicily in the mid-12th century, after which the Sicilians began to produce and export pasta.

Durum against the world

Even within Italy, the way pasta is classified has been contested.

In 1967, the Italian government passed a "purity law" that required pasta – including pasta imported from other countries – to contain only hard durum wheat. Durum wheat, which can be milled into semolina, yields a firmer dough that's perfect for *al dente* pasta.

Durum is a type of wheat used to make pasta, as well as cous cous and bulgur. The inner part (endosperm) is used to make semolina, pictured above. Getty Images

But these strict import restrictions were loosened following a 1988 legal battle, in which the European Court of Justice ruled Italy could not block the import of mixed-wheat pasta legally produced elsewhere.

Still, the Italians retained their commitment to using durum domestically. While fresh Italian pasta can now be made from bread wheat, all dry commercial pasta must still be made from durum.

Why do we care about labelling our food?

On one hand, it can be fun and amusing to engage in friendly debates like "is a hot dog a sandwich?". Well, if you subscribe to the "cube rule" in the tweet below, you could even argue it's a taco.

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@Phosphatide · **Follow**

are you unsatisfied with current debates regarding what is or is not a sandwich? you should try using the cube rule for identifying what you're eating!

examples:
- pizza is a toast
- lasagna is a multi-decker sandwich
- pie is a calzone
- pie served as a slice is a taco

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These taxonomic topics can get serious, though, like in 1893 when the US Supreme court ruled tomatoes to be a vegetable – and therefore subject to tariffs. Australia's own tariff classification system agrees.

These debates can also influence our understanding of culture, identity and belonging — including which cultures command higher status and economic value.

In Australia, influential food awards are more likely to bestow accolades upon Italian cuisine, compared to Asian.

This feeds into a greater food hierarchy that allows restaurants with certain cuisines to charge higher prices than others.

Even with the introduction of Michelin-recognised ramen shops and hawker stalls in Australia, people are all too ready to drop $35 on a bowl of handmade Italian pasta, while still expecting cheap hand-pulled Chinese noodles.

Which cuisines reign supreme?

Perceptions are changing, however. High-end Chinese food in particular is having a moment, with restaurateur "Big" Sam Young awarded Gourmet Traveller's 2026 Restaurant Personality of the Year.

Both pasta and noodles require artistry and skill. Ingredients are expensive for everyone, and restaurants nationwide are going through tough times. Both should be equally deserving of our dollars and recognition.

Be it pasta or noodle, the alchemy of flour and water produces something undeniably delicious.

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