

Prep Time	20 minutes
Cook Time	10-12 minutes
Chill Time	2 hours minimum (overnight recommended)
Total Time	About 2 hours 30 minutes
Yield	10-12 servings
Difficulty	Easy
Cuisine	American (California-style)
Course	Side dish / Salad

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Why You'll Love This Recipe

California Spaghetti Salad is the ultimate crowd-pleaser. It combines thin spaghetti with a rainbow of crunchy vegetables, salty Parmesan, and a tangy homemade dressing that gets better the longer it sits. It's light enough for hot summer days yet satisfying enough to serve alongside grilled chicken, burgers, or steak. Best of all, it's make-ahead friendly—ideal for parties, meal prep, and lazy weekend lunches.

Ingredients

For the Salad

- 1 pound (454 g) thin spaghetti (or regular spaghetti)
- 1 pint (about 2 cups) cherry or grape tomatoes, halved
- 1 large cucumber, peeled, seeded, and diced
- 1 medium green bell pepper, diced
- 1 medium red bell pepper, diced
- 1 small red onion, finely diced (about ½ cup)
- 1 can (2.25 oz) sliced black olives, drained

- ½ cup grated Parmesan cheese (plus more for serving)
- 2 tablespoons fresh parsley, chopped (optional, for garnish)

For the Dressing

- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- ⅓ cup red wine vinegar (or white wine vinegar)
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice, freshly squeezed
- 1 packet (0.7 oz) Italian salad dressing mix (such as Good Seasons)
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ½ teaspoon dried oregano
- ½ teaspoon dried basil
- ¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes (optional, for heat)

- ½ teaspoon salt (adjust to taste)
- ¼ teaspoon freshly cracked black pepper

Optional Add-Ins

- ½ cup sliced salami or pepperoni, cut into strips
 - ½ cup crumbled feta cheese
 - 1 cup mozzarella pearls
 - ¼ cup sliced pepperoncini
 - 1 avocado, diced (add just before serving)
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Equipment Needed

- Large pot for boiling pasta
- Colander

- Large mixing bowl
 - Whisk
 - Small bowl or jar for dressing
 - Sharp knife and cutting board
 - Airtight storage container
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Instructions

Step 1: Cook the Spaghetti (10-12 minutes | Medium-High Heat)

Bring a large pot of generously salted water to a rolling boil over high heat. Add the spaghetti and cook according to package directions until al dente—firm to the bite but not hard. This usually takes 10-12 minutes for thin spaghetti. Stir occasionally during the first two minutes to prevent sticking.

Intensity: Medium-High — Maintain a steady rolling boil, but reduce heat slightly if the water threatens to overflow.

Step 2: Cool the Pasta (5 minutes | No Heat)

Drain the spaghetti in a colander and immediately rinse under cold running water for 1-2 minutes to stop the cooking process and cool it down. Toss gently to prevent clumping. Set aside to drain completely while you prepare the vegetables.

Tip: Rinsing is important here—unlike hot pasta dishes, cold pasta salads benefit from rinsed pasta because it removes excess starch and keeps the noodles separate.

Step 3: Chop the Vegetables (10-15 minutes | No Heat)

While the pasta cools, prepare your vegetables. Halve the cherry tomatoes, dice the cucumber (seed it first to avoid a watery salad), dice both bell peppers, finely chop the red onion, and drain the black olives. Add everything to a very large mixing bowl.

Intensity: Low — This is the relaxing part. Take your time and aim for uniform, bite-sized pieces so every forkful has a bit of everything.

Step 4: Make the Dressing (3-5 minutes | No Heat)

In a small bowl or jar, combine the olive oil, red wine vinegar, lemon juice, Italian dressing mix, sugar, garlic powder, oregano, basil, red pepper flakes (if using), salt, and black pepper. Whisk vigorously for 30-60 seconds until the dressing is emulsified and slightly thickened.

Intensity: Low-Medium — Whisk briskly to blend, but there's no heat involved. Taste and adjust: add more salt for brightness, sugar for balance, or red pepper flakes for heat.

Step 5: Combine the Salad (3-4 minutes | No Heat)

Add the cooled spaghetti to the bowl with the vegetables. Pour the dressing over the top and toss thoroughly with tongs or two large spoons until every strand is coated. Add the grated Parmesan cheese and toss again.

Intensity: Low — Gentle but thorough tossing ensures even distribution without breaking the pasta.

Step 6: Chill (2 hours minimum | Refrigerated)

Cover the bowl tightly and refrigerate for at least 2 hours, preferably overnight. This resting

period is essential—the pasta absorbs the dressing, and the flavors meld into something far greater than the sum of their parts.

Intensity: None — Patience does the work here.

Step 7: Finish and Serve (2-3 minutes | No Heat)

Before serving, give the salad a good stir. If it looks dry (pasta tends to drink up dressing), drizzle in 1-2 tablespoons of olive oil or a splash of vinegar and toss again. Taste and adjust seasoning. Garnish with fresh parsley and extra Parmesan. If using avocado, fold it in gently right before serving.

Intensity: Low — A quick refresh and it’s ready.

Time & Intensity Summary

Step	Time	Heat/Intensity
Boil pasta	10-12 min	Medium-High
Cool pasta	5 min	None
Chop vegetables	10-15 min	Low
Make dressing	3-5 min	Low-Medium (whisking)
Combine	3-4 min	Low
Chill	2 hrs+	None
Finish & serve	2-3 min	Low
Total	~2 hrs 35 min	Easy

Nutrition Information

Per serving (based on 12 servings, without optional add-ins). Values are estimates and will vary based on exact ingredients and portion size.

Nutrient	Amount
Calories	~215 kcal
Total Fat	~10 g
Saturated Fat	~2 g
Trans Fat	0 g
Cholesterol	~3 mg
Sodium	~320 mg
Total Carbohydrates	~26 g
Dietary Fiber	~2 g
Total Sugars	~3 g
Protein	~5 g
Vitamin C	~30% DV
Vitamin A	~10% DV
Calcium	~6% DV
Iron	~8% DV