

Muscadine and Broccoli Pasta Salad with Poppyseed Dressing

This colorful, filling salad is a confluence of four things I love: crunchy broccoli salad, a well-made and non-soggy pasta salad, old-fashioned poppyseed dressing, and muscadine grapes. The earthy sweetness of the muscadines put this combination over the top. This salad travels well and makes a great addition to a covered dish (aka potluck) buffet. It holds nicely for up to two days, although over time the broccoli loses its bright green color.

Bacon adds smoky flavor and heartiness, but this salad is still delightful and filling if you prefer to keep it meatless. When I omit bacon, I often replace the regular pecans with a sweet-and-salty candied variety, just to change things up and replace a bit of the saltiness the bacon provides.

I'm using the term muscadine to cover all the varieties and colors of these native grapes, including scuppernongs. Mini muscadines are a new hybrid variety that's started showing up in well-stocked grocery stores in parts of the South. They are seedless and have thin skins, unlike their full-size cousins, which makes them quick and easy to throw into a recipe.

Makes 4 entrée or 6 to 8 side servings

6 thick-cut bacon slices, cut crosswise into thin strips (about 6 ounces)
8 ounces cavatappi pasta or another short, hollow shape
12 ounces fresh broccoli florets cut into bite-size pieces (about 4 cups)
2/3 cup mayonnaise
1/4 cup sugar
1/4 cup sherry vinegar
1 tablespoon poppy seeds
2 teaspoons mustard powder (such as Coleman's) or 1 tablespoon wholegrain Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon kosher salt
1/2 teaspoon ground black pepper
1 1/2 cups seedless mini muscadines or halved and seeded regular-size muscadine or scuppernong grapes
1/3 cup thinly sliced shallots
1/2 cup pecan pieces

1. Cook the bacon in a skillet over medium heat until well-browned and crisp, about 15 minutes, stirring often. Transfer with a slotted spoon to drain on paper towels. Save the bacon fat for another use.
2. Follow package directions to cook the pasta in a large pot of generously salted water. About 2 minutes before the pasta will be done, add the broccoli florets and continue cooking until the pasta is al dente and the broccoli is crisp-tender. Drain and let stand to steam dry and cool a bit while you make the dressing.
3. Stir together the mayonnaise, sugar, vinegar, poppy seeds, mustard powder, salt, and pepper in a large bowl. Taste to ensure the dressing is balanced and boldly flavored. Sometimes it needs a bit more mustard.

4. Stir in the pasta mixture, while still warm. Let stand to absorb the dressing for about 10 minutes, and then stir in the grapes and shallots.
5. Cover and refrigerate until chilled, at least 2 hours.
6. Just before serving, stir in the reserved bacon and the pecans, and check the seasoning.

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