

I Say Tomayto, You Say Tomahto...



When I think about fresh tomatoes the expression “feast or famine” is a great way to describe what happens each August. We spend 10 or 11 months of the year eating hard, tasteless red orbs from the supermarket and suddenly we get more “real” tomatoes than we can possibly use. It just doesn’t seem fair.

Don’t get me wrong. I’ll take any opportunity to enjoy these rich, sumptuous beauties and there’s no shortage of ways to put them to use. I just wish we could spread our supply out over most of the year but that may be exactly why we treasure them so when we do get them.

Botanists have long tagged tomatoes as a fruit, not a vegetable, and the history of tomatoes is as rich as a home-made Italian tomato sauce heaped over mounds of fresh pasta.

For many years tomatoes were considered a poisonous ornamental plant in Europe and only eaten by the very poor. As it turns out, during the 1500’s the well to do in Europe used plates and flatware made from pewter, which has a high lead content. Foods high in acid, like tomatoes, would cause the lead to leech out and would result in lead poisoning and death. Poor people used wooden plates and had no fear of tomatoes, which they enjoyed freely for hundreds of years especially in Italy.

Today, Americans eat more tomatoes than any country in the world, over 12 million tons each year. That’s an awful lot of catsup!

I recently attended a church function where I brought along a simple tomato salad that I would like to share with you. It only takes a few minutes to whip together and it’s a hit every time I bring it out.

Tomato & Mozzarella Salad

(serves 6 or more)



When you produce this combination think quality ingredients. The better the individual parts, the better the results. I use big, beefy tomatoes and like them fully ripe but firm taken directly out of the garden. You'll need enough tomatoes to provide 18 slices of about 3/8 inch thickness. Add to them:

½ cup coarsely chopped fresh sweet basil

18 slices Buffalo Mozzarella cheese, ¼ inch thick

¾ cup balsamic vinaigrette, use a good one like Paul Newman's

Sea salt

Fresh ground pepper

On a platter, alternate tomato and mozzarella slices to create an attractive display. Distribute basil evenly over all followed by your balsamic vinaigrette. Salt and pepper to your personal taste before serving. This salad is best made 30 minutes to an hour before serving and should be at room temperature when enjoyed.

One note about Buffalo Mozzarella cheese for those of you who have never purchased it in the past: This cheese traditionally comes in a shape similar to a tennis ball. It is held in a brine solution to keep it fresh and is very soft and easy to cut. The best of these are actually produced from Buffalo milk, which is very rich and flavorful. If at all possible avoid using the rubbery commercial Mozzarella that is typically sold at the super market. You will not get the same results.

Another version of this recipe is made by replacing the Mozzarella cheese with coarsely grated Pecorino Romano cheese sprinkled on each tomato slice. The result is a sharper, more intense cheese flavor, which marries beautifully with ripe tomatoes.

I love to enjoy simple tomato sandwiches during August involving nothing more than good bread, a thick tomato slice, a slice of a favorite cheese and a bit of mayo. I suppose

the bread, cheese and tomato combo goes back to Italy where it was used for pizza and bruschetta originally back in the 1880's. Here's a simple version of bruschetta:

Bruschetta with Garlic Cream

(serves 4 persons)

4 thick slices Tuscan or crusty Italian bread, lightly toasted

2 large heads garlic

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

4 slices provolone cheese

4 thin slices vine ripened tomato

4 pinches dried oregano

Wrap the heads of garlic in aluminum foil and roast for 40 minutes in a 400°F preheated oven. As soon as the heads have been allowed to cool long enough to be handled, squeeze the pulp from the cloves and blend it with a fork into the olive oil to make a paste.

Divide the paste between the four slices of toasted bread, top with sliced tomato, and a pinch of oregano. Finish off with a slice of provolone cheese and place into your 400°F oven just long enough to melt the cheese. Serve immediately.

A last suggestion while your tomatoes are in good supply is the value of a dehydrator system. Sliced tomatoes achieve a "sun-dried" consistency when preserved this way and can then be stored in jars of good quality olive oil until you are ready to use them. I can't stress strongly enough how delightful these preserved tomatoes are in a host of recipes later in the year. If you've ever bought sun-dried tomatoes from the market, you'll also be really pleased with the cost savings.

Tomatoes are a high acid food item and as such should not be paired with wines that also have substantial acid levels. One of the best pairings we've discovered is the 2002 Farnese Montepulciano D'Abruzzo from Italy. This soft, supple red has a well-balanced styling loaded with dark fruit and just a hint of spice in the finish. A glass with your bruschetta would be a great way to enjoy both and neither would conflict with the other. This has always been one of my favorite selections for value and quality. It is very affordable and a perfect red to have on hand.

If you'd like to step your wine selection up a notch the 2002 Pinot Noir from Louis Latour is a great Pinot that doesn't require a second mortgage every time you bring out your corkscrew. Unfortunately, if you want to find a great Pinot Noir produced in the U.S.A. that doesn't cost a ton it won't be easy. Most of the wine drinkers I talk to are not excited about opening up \$25+ wines on a daily basis.

This soft, succulent red will do very nicely for you and provide a lot of quality for the price. Our tasting notes show a touch of dry wild strawberries, a solid earthy foundation and pleasant floral notes in the finish. Latour is a fine producer and this red shows that he is bound and determined to bring you quality wines to match almost any budget.

Please call us if you need assistance with your food or wine questions or visit us online at www.winedog.com. Good luck to all of our youngsters with school starting and a prayer goes out to our teachers and bus drivers! Cheers.