

Classic Slow-Cooked Tomato Sauce

For a thick, old-fashioned sauce with an intense tomato flavor, there's no substitute for time

BY ELAYNE ROBERTSON DEMBY

Proust had his madeleine, a bite of which brought back a flood of childhood memories. For me, it's tomato sauce. The aroma of it takes me back to my childhood, when it seemed there was always a pot of my grandmother's sauce simmering on the stove. Like my parents and grandparents and their parents before them, I have never bought tomato sauce in a jar. Instead, every year at summer's end, when my garden is overflowing with ripe tomatoes, I make as much sauce as I can and fill my house with the unmistakable perfume of tomatoes cooking on the stove.

WHY SLOW-COOK?

Many people disparage long-cooked tomato sauces in favor of quicker-cooking recipes, arguing that the sauce tastes fresher if the tomatoes aren't overcooked. But the two styles aren't mutually exclusive. Quick-cooked and slow-cooked tomato sauces are distinctly different, and each should be savored on its own terms. Like sun-dried or roasted tomatoes,

slow-cooked tomato sauces have a deep, concentrated flavor. Long hours of cooking enhance the tomatoes' natural sugar and allow their water to evaporate, leaving behind a thick sauce with an intense tomato flavor.

THE FRESHEST INGREDIENTS FOR THE BEST-TASTING SAUCE

Don't bother to make sauce from fresh tomatoes unless they're perfectly ripe and fresh from the vine. Supermarket tomatoes are flavorless and bland, and a sauce made from them will taste the same. Traditionally, plum tomatoes are used for making sauce. Sometimes called "sauce tomatoes," they have a higher proportion of flesh to seed and are less watery, more meaty than regular slicing tomatoes. Because plum tomatoes have relatively few seeds, I never bother to seed them. Of course, if you have a surplus of ripe slicing tomatoes from your garden, by all means use them for sauce. Just be sure to remove all their seeds, or your sauce will be watery and bitter.

A cast-iron or aluminum saucepot is best

In many Italian American families, one pot was traditionally set aside for the exclusive purpose of making sauce. Popular lore had it that over time the pot became "seasoned," making for a better sauce. Nothing but tomato sauce could be made in the pot or the

seasoning would be ruined. The pot had to be washed with great care so that hard-earned seasoning wasn't scrubbed away.

My relatives' saucepots were always heavyweight aluminum or cast iron with an enamel lining. Years ago I found out why.

My first "good" pots were stainless steel with copper bottoms. Every time I made tomato sauce, I found a scorched crust on the bottom of the pot. Since I acquired an enameled cast-iron pot, I haven't scorched a batch.

Cast iron and aluminum distribute heat evenly, keeping the sauce from burning during the long cooking process. Stainless steel's inferior heat-conducting properties don't stand up to long hours on the stove.

Photos: Julie Biswell



When using fresh tomatoes, the first step is to remove their skins. Tomato skins are tough and, if left intact, can make your sauce unattractive as well as unpleasant to eat. If you have a food mill, simply pass the tomatoes through it. The mill will trap the skins and seeds and purée the pulp beautifully. Otherwise, see the instructions for peeling and seeding on p. 46. After the tomatoes are peeled, chop them coarse before puréeing them in a blender or food processor.

If your tomatoes are less than perfect, use tomatoes from a can. There are many brands of canned tomatoes, but they're not all created equal.

Plum tomatoes imported from Italy are not necessarily superior to domestic brands. Experiment to see which you prefer. Don't use canned puréed tomatoes: they'll change the taste of your sauce for the worse. Buy canned whole tomatoes, drain off some of the liquid, and purée them yourself. I use an immersion blender to purée the tomatoes right in the can.

Your onions and garlic should be fresh, too. Don't substitute dehydrated onion flakes or jarred minced garlic. If the garlic is old and pithy, remove the green core, which can make your sauce taste bitter.

Peak-of-the-season tomatoes make the best sauce, but with good-quality canned tomatoes, you can make great sauce all year round.

Use a good olive oil, but not extra-virgin. The flavor of expensive, first-pressed oil is lost when heated.

FOR HERBS, FRESH ISN'T NECESSARILY BEST

In my family, tomato sauce was always made with dried herbs. Unless I'm making a sauce where all the ingredients come from the garden, I prefer dried herbs, both because it's traditional and because, to my taste, dried herbs give the sauce better flavor.

(Parsley is an exception, however; fresh parsley is always best.) Regardless of the season, I always use dried oregano. Its flavor is just too pallid when fresh.

I find many store-bought "fresh" herbs actually taste rather bland. The longer they're away from the garden, the more their flavor fades. Smell your herbs, fresh or dried, before you use them. A strong aroma hints at a strong flavor. Dried herbs that have

been kept on the shelf for longer than a year have probably lost their potency. Date bottles and throw out any that are older than one year.

If you use dried herbs, add them at the beginning of the cooking process so their flavors can soften and perfume the sauce. The taste of fresh herbs is more fragile. Stir them in just before you remove the sauce from the stove, as cooking diminishes their flavor.

SLOW SIMMERING: THE SECRET TO THE SAUCE

Time is the key to a flavorful tomato sauce, and this applies to sautéing the onions as well. Cook the onions slowly over low heat and they'll be mild and sweet, a delicate complement to your sauce. Sautéed quickly over medium-high heat, the onions will have a more robust flavor and so will your tomato

sauce. But take care not to let the onion or garlic burn. Sauté the onion first; then add the garlic and cook just until it releases its aroma before adding the remaining ingredients.

Cook the sauce at a constant simmer—never let it boil. If your sauce insists on boiling no matter how low the heat, remove the pot from the stove and let it cool for 15 to 20 minutes before continuing the cooking.

A sweeter sauce. There are three schools of thought on the acid balance of tomato sauce. Some people like an acidic-tasting sauce, while others like a sweet sauce with no trace of acidity. A third group seeks a balance between the two extremes.

Jarred sauces in this country tend to be sweet; any acidity is cut by copious amounts of corn syrup. Home cooks who like a sweet tomato sauce can add sugar to theirs. Since personal taste varies widely and so does the acidity of tomatoes (even between batches of the same canned variety), there is no exact amount of sugar to add. Taste your sauce when it has finished cooking. If you find it too acidic, add sugar, one teaspoon at a time, until the flavor suits your taste.

Determining just when the sauce has finished cooking is again a matter of taste. When you're happy with the flavor and consistency, consider it done. I cook my sauce until it's quite thick and reduced by at least one-third of its original volume; this can take 2½, sometimes 3½ hours. And of course the sauce freezes wonderfully, with little loss of flavor. The recipe is so simple that I make as much as I can when tomatoes are at their peak. A freezer full of fresh tomato sauce helps me make it through the winter.

Elayne Robertson Demby, a food writer in Weston, Connecticut, is a new mother who's preparing to pass on her tomato sauce recipe to another generation.

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Peeling and seeding tomatoes



1 Coring. The first step in peeling tomatoes is to remove the cores and score an X in the bottom of each one.



2 Blanching. Plunge the tomatoes into boiling water. When the skins start to pull away, they're ready to peel.



3 Peeling. Transfer the tomatoes to a cold-water bath to stop the cooking; then simply peel away the skins.



4 Seeding. Halve the tomatoes and gently squeeze out the seeds. Coax out remaining seeds with your fingers.

Try the classic sauce, pure and simple, or one of a trio of variations

Slow-cooked tomato sauce is delicious served on top of pasta without any adornment other than a dose of freshly grated Romano cheese, but it's also a terrific base for making other classic tomato sauces.

All these variations make enough sauce for about 1½ pounds of pasta, enough to serve about eight people.

Classic Fresh Tomato Sauce (Salsa di Pomodoro Fresco)

Feelings about tomato sauce run strong among Neapolitans. I'm sure it would be impossible to find two who agree on the recipe. My recipe is much like the one I learned from my grandmother, although I've adjusted it over the years to suit my own taste and style of cooking. *Yields 1 quart.*

3 Tbs. olive oil
1 small yellow onion, sliced thin
3 cloves garlic, minced
¼ cup red wine
3 lb. fresh plum tomatoes, peeled and puréed (about 6 cups purée)
2 tsp. dried oregano
Salt
3 Tbs. minced fresh basil
¼ cup minced fresh parsley
Freshly ground black pepper

In a large saucepan, heat the olive oil over medium-high heat. Sauté the onion until it begins to wilt, about 5 min. Add the garlic and sauté just until fragrant. Stir in the wine. Add the tomatoes, oregano, and ¼ tsp. salt.

Bring the sauce to a simmer, reduce the heat to low, and let cook until reduced by at least one-third, 2½ to 3½ hours. Stir occasionally, taking care that the sauce never boils. Stir in the basil and parsley. Taste for seasoning and add salt and pepper as needed.

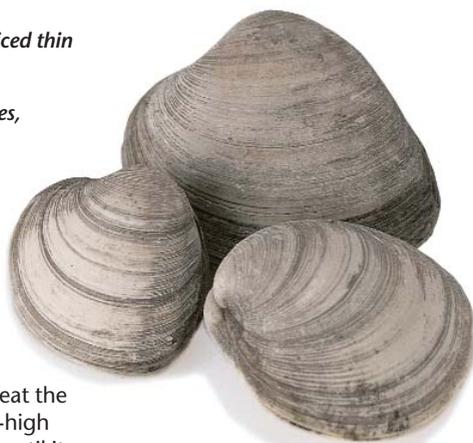


Puttanesca-Style Sauce

Though the real *puttanesca* is actually a fast-cooking sauce, I like to make this version when I have some of my slow-cooked sauce in the freezer.

3 Tbs. olive oil
5 anchovy fillets, rinsed and chopped
1 qt. Classic Fresh Tomato Sauce (see recipe at left)
⅓ cup drained capers
½ cup pitted, chopped black olives
½ tsp. red pepper flakes, more to taste

In a large frying pan, heat the olive oil over medium heat. Add the anchovy fillets and cook, stirring, until they begin to dissolve. Add the tomato sauce and bring to a simmer. Stir in the capers, olives, and red pepper flakes and cook until heated through, 2 to 3 min.



Red Clam Sauce

For a variation on the variation, add ¼ cup drained capers at the same time you add the clams.

1 qt. Classic Fresh Tomato Sauce (see recipe at left)
4 lb. fresh littleneck clams (about 30 clams), rinsed well

In a large saucepan, bring the tomato sauce to a simmer. Add the clams, cover, and cook just until the clams open their shells, 5 to 10 min.



Tomato Sauce With Dried Porcinis

Try serving this rich sauce over a mound of creamy polenta.

2 oz. dried porcini mushrooms
1 qt. Classic Fresh Tomato Sauce (see recipe at left)

Cover the mushrooms with 2 cups warm water and let soak until softened, about 45 min. Drain the mushrooms, reserving ⅓ cup of the mushroom soaking water. Gently squeeze the mushrooms dry and chop them. Strain the reserved soaking liquid through a coffee filter.

In a large saucepan, combine the mushrooms, reserved mushroom liquid, and the tomato sauce. Bring to a simmer and let cook until thick and not at all watery, 15 to 25 min. ♦