



Edible Paradise: Fresh Picks at the Market

By Andrew Cohen, MBCFM Chef In Residence

July 2007

■ **Featured Produce:** *Tomatoes*

■ **Recipes:** *Tomato Bread, Small Tomato Salad, Slow Roasted Caramelized Tomatoes*

Tomato, to-mah-to—call it what you will—it’s still a fruit! Native to the Americas, at one time feared as poisonous due to its family ties (nightshades), the tomato is now one of the most popular of foods. Quick, how many things can you think of that feature tomatoes? Starting with just ketchup, pizza, and spaghetti, think about how popular the tomato is. There seem to be dishes without number that use tomato, whether in a starring or supporting role. Not bad considering it wasn’t until the late 1700’s that tomatoes began to find their way into the dining room in any quantity.

I came to tomatoes late in life. With the exception of ketchup, tomatoes were a nuisance to my childhood self, something to pull out of sandwiches, dodge around in salads, that sort of thing. It wasn’t until college when I tasted my first homegrown, fully ripe, slightly misshapen tomato that I figured out what the fuss was about. I now love tomatoes, as long as they are fully ripe and grown in the right conditions, which seems to eliminate all grocery store tomatoes.

For me, it just seems the ones at the big chain stores are always pale imitations of, or worse, insults, to the tomato. Frankly, if making pasta sauce and forced to choose between canned tomatoes and “fresh” grocery store tomatoes, I’ll take the cans thank you. (Look for San Marzano brand or plum tomatoes, without corn syrup, and with a minimum of anything else for that matter. These tomatoes make excellent sauce. Different than fresh, but excellent none the less.)

There are tons of articles out there on tomatoes describing the types and how best to use them. Following are a few of my thoughts (by no means exhaustive) on choosing and using tomatoes. Remember this—tomatoes are a fruit! When selecting them, thinking “fruit” may help you choose better. Also, when playing in the kitchen with tomatoes, thinking fruit could lead to some great ideas.

When selecting tomatoes, look for ones that feel heavy for their

size, with a tight skin that doesn’t wrinkle as you run a finger lightly over the skin. Look for skin that is unblemished, neither spotted nor sunburned, and avoid tomatoes that are white and almost leathery on the bottom. These sat on the ground as they grew and may be uneven in flavor. Some scarring around “cracks” is okay, you just cut these out. Some folks say that these signs of stress yield a sweeter tomato, a theory I fully intend to test this summer. Use your nose—give the tomatoes a sniff at the stem end. Smell like a tomato? Good bet it will taste like one as well. Use your hands to gently check that the tomato is not rock hard. If it is, it is probably not ripe. I have to say, it makes me crazy when I watch people pick up a tomato, and then decide it is not the one they want and they just toss it back onto the other tomatoes. This is damaging to the tomatoes, and to the farmers’ livelihoods.

When buying tomatoes, also consider what you want to do with them. Some are better suited to cooking and some are best raw. Tomatoes are a balance of acid and sweetness, with various other elements that give each type its character. For long cooking, I like a more acidic tomato with the right amount of natural sugar to balance it. For salads, I try to pair the tomato with the accompanying ingredients. For light lettuces and delicate sprouts, I’d use a less acidic, fruitier tomato. For assertive greens like mizuna, arugula, and spinach, I like a stronger flavored tomato. These are also the ones for pairing with cheese. The way to learn this pairing is, of course, through tasting. Grab a few tomatoes, some lettuces and dressings, and taste away.

I find tomatoes can balance a dish in the same way that salt or sugar or an acid like vinegar or lemon juice does. Case in point is the BLT. Without tomatoes you just have some crunchy and fatty bits together. Put the tomatoes in and the acid of the tomato offsets the richness of the bacon, and the sweetness points up the sweetness of the bacon at the same time it acts as a counterpoint to the faint bitterness found in lettuces. Now a word about tomatoes in sandwiches -- I find that thin slices of tomato are best in BLTs, or in most sandwiches. Thinly sliced and interleaved with the bacon allows the tomato to work with the bacon to cut the fattiness. It also keeps the big thick

[Continued page 2]

Andrew Cohen’s culinary career spans over thirty years. A graduate from the esteemed California Culinary Academy in San Francisco, Andrew interned at Chez Panisse with celebrity chef Alice Waters. Chef Andrew writes a monthly column for the Monterey Bay Certified Farmers Market newsletter, Edible Paradise and is a featured columnist for the Santa Cruz Sentinel. To sign up for the free newsletter, go to www.montereybayfarmers.org.

slices from pulling out of the sandwich and causing all the rest of the sandwich to fall out as well. I also think you get a better flavor this way. With the thick slices, the acid of the tomato can sometimes be quite pronounced.

One of the simplest ways I know to enjoy tomatoes is this quick and very traditional Mediterranean snack. I first made this when inspired by a description I read in a book by Lawrence Durrell if I recall correctly. I have since seen it in many other places.

TOMATO BREAD

Grill or toast a thick slice of coarse sturdy bread. Rub with a clove of garlic that has been sliced to present a flat surface. Rub the bread with a tomato that has been sliced in half through the “equator” and has had the seeds knocked out. The bread will absorb the tomato! Drizzle with good olive oil and sprinkle a few grains of coarse salt (my favorite is Maldon salt for this) and eat immediately. This is not a dish that can sit around for any length of time—excellent on hot afternoons with a glass of chilled dry wine.

This next dish is really versatile. When snipping the herbs, use sharp scissors to make it easy. If you don’t have little leaves, use the scissors to mince the smallest leaves you can find. The name “small salad” comes from the fact that the first couple times I made it I only made a cup or so of the salad, and when asked “What’s for dinner?” I replied, “Sturgeon with a small tomato salad.”

SMALL TOMATO SALAD

This can be used on its own on grilled bread, as a topping on grilled fish (I use it with seared sturgeon with a little white truffle oil sauced with a reduction of white wine, tomato liquor, dark chicken stock, thyme, shallots, and truffle oil), or it can be part of a salad with baby arugula or micro-greens. To make it more substantial, add the little balls of fresh mozzarella known as *boccancini*. It goes well in an omelet when chilled—the contrast of the hot eggs and cold salad is nice with the tang of the tomato and the smoothness of the eggs.

Halve and seed tomatoes, and cut into 1/2 inch dice. Toss with coarse salt and fresh ground pepper, some light vinegar (I like rosé or champagne vinegar), and some tiny leaves of oregano or marjoram from the tips of the branches. Drizzle with some flavorful olive oil and allow to marinate, tossing occasionally, for up to an hour. Drain the tomato salad just before use or serve using a slotted spoon.

Many recipes call for peeled and seeded tomatoes. To do this, bring a pot of water to the boil, get a bowl with ice water ready, cut a little “x” at the bottom of the tomato and pop it into the boiling water for 10-15 seconds. Immediately dunk it into the ice water to arrest the cooking and then slip off the skin. You might need a paring knife to help. Be sure not to leave the tomatoes in the hot water too long or you run the risk of cooking them. To seed them, the easiest method is to slice the tomato across the equator and then shake the seeds loose over the sink, and use a fingertip or skinny wooden spoon tip to get at

the stragglers.

I am known for putting sweet things in savory roles, like using fruit for sauce to put on meat. The reverse holds also. How about some candied tomatoes for dessert?

SLOW ROASTED CARAMELIZED TOMATOES

Peel tomatoes (plum or other meaty red tomatoes with a bit of acid) and halve through the stem, then seed. I usually make this with at least 8 tomatoes as the recipe takes some time and the end result is really good and will keep in the frig for a day or two.

On a non-stick mat or parchment paper that has been lightly oiled, place the tomato halves so there is space between them and they are flat side down. Lightly brush with neutral flavored oil such as grapeseed, and sprinkle with a pinch of sugar (around 1/8 teaspoon) per tomato. Sprinkle with a little kosher salt and some fresh ground black pepper, and a few leaves of thyme, and bake in an oven at low heat (150°F) for 2-3 hours (or more) until the tomatoes are dry and look candied. This can sometimes take longer, but pay attention and avoid burning. Once you have done this it will seem very easy. You can play with the seasoning: add more sugar, or use reduced balsamic vinegar, eliminate sugar, etc.

These slow roasted tomatoes are very surprising and drive home the fact that tomatoes are a fruit! They can be used to accompany meats, served with toasts as a starter, go with a tart or tangy soft cheese, or if you want to throw someone for a loop, serve them with a dollop of vanilla ice cream. For giggles, reduce some tomato liquor to a syrup (balance with sugar if need be) and top the ice cream with the tomato and syrup for dessert.

What are those two things money supposedly can’t buy? Love and homegrown tomatoes. Well, they may not be “homegrown” at the market, but they might as well be. Heh. In my case, they’re better as I don’t have the right conditions for growing tomatoes.