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# OUR FRIEND THE PLUM TOMATO!

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BY IRENE COSTELLO

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Overlooked in summer when heirloom tomatoes reach their peak and command all of our attention, our friend, the plum tomato sits on the sideline. However, when summer ends, and the exotic heirlooms have all disappeared, the plum tomato emerges as a food staple that carries us through the next few seasons. Of all the tomato varieties, the plum is best for preserving whether roasting, blanching, drying or freezing. Its meaty texture and few seeds, and its ability to withstand a few knocks and pings make it ideal to extend past their growing season.

Interesting that tomatoes, integral today in all aspects of American cuisine, actually had a slow start in this country. According to the Department of Agriculture, commercial production of tomatoes did not even begin in this country until 1894. Odd since it is a New World food whose cultivation began in Mexico and then taken to Europe by the Spanish. There it expanded rapidly throughout southern Europe, the Mediterranean and into France. However the British did not embrace the plant as a food item. In part, probably due to the climate, but also because it falls into the poisonous nightshade family of plants. As the British settled the thirteen original colonies, it comes as no surprise that they did not include the tomato in their list of cultivating plants to transport to the American colonies.

According to Andrew Smith who has done extensive research on the tomato in America, the plant made its first appearance in South Carolina. Most likely it spread north from Florida, still held by the Spanish. It spread west toward Mississippi and its river ways and slowly made its way north. By 1797 a Salem resident planted seeds that he purchased in South Carolina. In 1802 an Italian painter, Michel Corne, tried, without success, to entice Salem residents to eat his beloved po-

modoro. Still, the Puritan town considered the plant “too rich in appearance and only to be cultivated as ornamentation.” Another two decades passed before residents in Haverhill discovered how delicious tomatoes were in a salad dressed with cucumbers.

Jan Longone from the University of Michigan has assembled a wonderful online resource, “Feeding America: The Historic American Cookbook Project.” A quick survey that examines the references and recipes for the tomato gives a fun and insightful look at America’s growing tomato infatuation throughout the 19th century.

In 1798 Amelia Simmons of Hartford, CT wrote the first truly American cookbook entitled *American Cookery*, or the art of dressing viands, fish, poultry, and vegetables, and the best modes of making pastes, puffs, pies, tarts, puddings, custards, and preserves, and all kinds of cakes, from the imperial plum to plain cake: Adapted to this

country, and all grades of life. Longone points out that this work was the first written by an American for Americans. Earlier books were reprints from the British publications. Simmons' book recognized and used American products, specifically corn, cranberries, turkey, squash and potatoes, all uniquely indigenous to the New World. Interesting for our purposes and the starting point for the tomato in American cuisine is that the book contains zero references to tomato - not once is it mentioned.

Decades later *The Frugal Housewife* was first published in Boston in 1829. The strong emphasis on the virtues of thrift and self-reliance and on frugality was a continuing theme in American cookbooks and reflected its author’s New England heritage. Tomatoes make a humble appearance in this



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edition. Following are the only references that suggest their early popularity in American cookery.

“Tomatoes should be skinned by pouring boiling water over them. After they are skinned, they should be stewed half an hour, in tin, with a little salt, a small bit of butter, and a spoonful of water, to keep them from burning. This is a delicious vegetable. It is easily cultivated, and yields a most abundant crop. Some people pluck them green, and pickle them.”

“The best sort of catsup is made from tomatoes. The vegetables should be squeezed up in the hand, salt put to them, and set by for twenty four hours. After being passed through a sieve, cloves, all-spice, pepper, mace, garlic, and whole mustard-seed should be added. It should be boiled down one third, and bottled after it is cool. No liquid is necessary; as the tomatoes are very juicy. A good deal of salt and spice is necessary to keep the catsup well. It is delicious with roast meat; and a cup full adds much to the richness of soup and chowder.”

By the 1840's tomatoes were an important part of American cookery according to Smith. In 1845 another regional cookbook devoted to economy and frugality, *The New England Economical Housekeeper, and Family Receipt Book*, starts to include the tomato as a basic ingredient. The book offers simple recipes for ketchup, tomato sauce and preserves that will accompany other dishes.

By the mid-19th century new technologies such as the cast iron stove, early refrigeration and canning were introduced. In 1852, *The Ladies' New Book of Cookery: A Practical System For Private Families In Town And Country; With Directions For Carving, And Arranging The Table For Parties, etc. Also Preparations Of Food For Invalids And For Children* was published in New York. This book addresses the needs of a growing urban middle class for knowledge in the art of entertaining and updated methods of household management. Tomatoes appear regularly as a basic ingredient in many food preparations from soups and sauces to meats, fish, and poultry. It offers several methods of using tomatoes from stewing to baking with bread-crumbs, and stuffing with forcemeats. By this time Americans were traveling abroad and bringing back recipes from countries they visited. We start to see variations of tomato sauce recipes with French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese influences.

In 1864 a hugely popular book, *Dr. Chase's Recipes, or, Information for Everybody*, Tenth Edition, extols the virtues of the tomato. According to Longene at this time there still was no place to easily find information on human health, diet and cooking; animal health and care; household helps and "how to's." Dr. Chase provides a

concise yet comprehensive encyclopedia of helpful topics to care for the home and family. He heartily promotes the healthful aspects of the tomato, gives advice on cultivation and care, suggests it as a food source for cattle, and even gives a recipe for tomato wine!

Two decades later, Mrs. Lincoln's *Boston Cook Book: What To Do and What Not To Do in Cooking* was written in plain, sensible language that housewives could understand instantly making it the standard kitchen companion. The book reorganizes recipes with a listing of ingredients first followed by step-by-step instructions. Tomatoes figure prominently throughout the book. Most recipes are repeats from earlier cookbooks such as directions for stewed, baked and stuffed tomatoes, sauces, ketchups, canning, etc.. However, we also see more tomato-specific dishes as well as the tomato used in stocks elevating it from cookery to cuisine.

Finally by the end of the 19th century, *The Boston Cooking-School Cookbook* by Fannie Farmer Merritt became the bible for American housewives well into the 20th century. This extensive body of work offered the most up-to-date information on nutrition, food composition, cooking methods and techniques, recipes for the sick, menus, and hints to the young housekeeper. By this time the tomato was firmly entrenched in American cuisine. Commercial production had recently begun, and it was likely the plum variety that was cultivated for use in canning, bottling, preserving and cooking.

Today we take for granted the availability of tomatoes throughout the year and their culinary history in New England. Still, there is nothing quite as satisfying as the taste of summer from a locally grown tomato on a cold fall or winter night. Our recipes for this season offer techniques that extend the tomato past summer. It takes a little more effort than opening a can, but it's worth it. ❖

**Irene Costello**—After 20 years in the corporate world, Irene broke out to develop her passion for cooking. She earned her masters degree in gastronomy and a certificate in culinary arts from Boston University. She also has a certificate in wine studies from the Wine and Spirits Education Trust. Irene joined Ruby Chard as a managing partner in 2002 bringing a unique combination of culinary and business experience. Irene earned her undergraduate degree from Georgetown University.

**Joan MacIsaac**—As a restaurant chef, catering business owner and cooking class instructor, Joan brings more than 20 years professional culinary experience to Ruby Chard as chef/managing partner. After rising to executive chef at the James Beard award-winning Dahlia Lounge in Seattle, Joan returned to her hometown, Boston, and founded Ruby Chard in 1996.

## ROASTING PLUM TOMATOES

Most recipes call for peeled tomatoes. The technique of blanching plum tomatoes in hot water makes it easier to peel the skin and to store for future uses.

12 plum tomatoes

Boil water with ½ teaspoon of salt on high in a large pasta pot. Set up an ice bath beside the stove by filling a bowl half way with water and plenty of ice.

With a small paring knife cut a shallow X in the bottom of the tomatoes about ½ inch long. Use either a pasta drop basket or strainer, and place 6 tomatoes in the basket / strainer. Submerge the tomatoes into the boiling water. After about 1 minute the skin of the tomato will appear to be peeling away. Carefully remove the tomatoes and plunge them in the ice water bath. They should cool in 3-5 minutes. Remove from the bath and let them drain. When they are cool enough to handle, gently remove the skin. Repeat this process with the remaining tomatoes.

You can store the tomatoes whole or cut them in half and removing the seeds. Either way, store in airtight containers or freezer bags, removing as much air as possible. Blanched tomatoes will last for up to 9 months in the freezer.

## ROASTING PLUM TOMATOES

12 plum tomatoes, washed, cored and cut in half lengthwise  
6 Tbsp extra virgin olive oil  
6 basil leaves, torn  
1 Tbsp fresh thyme leaves  
4 cloves of garlic, peeled and slice 1/8 inch thick  
1 tsp kosher salt  
Cracked black pepper to taste

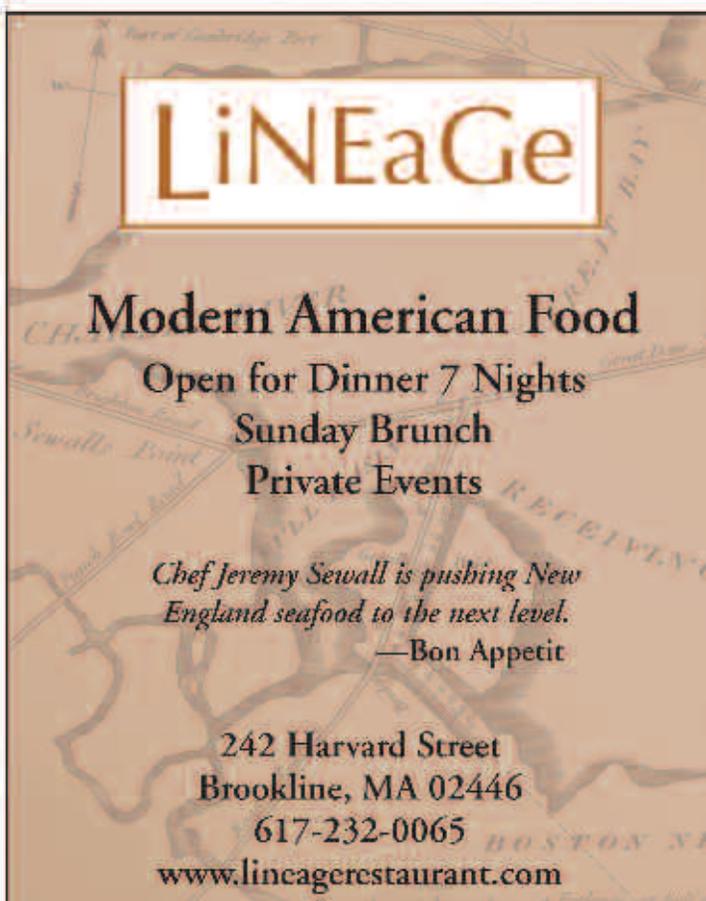
Pre-heat oven to 375 degrees.

In a medium bowl toss the tomatoes with the olive oil, basil leaves, thyme, garlic, salt and pepper. Lay the tomatoes in a roasting pan or a casserole dish, cut side facing up. The tomatoes can be touching, but not stacked on one another. Insert any loose pieces of garlic and herbs into the cavity of the tomatoes. This infuses the tomato with that flavoring and helps prevent the garlic from burning.

Roast the tomatoes for 45 –60 minutes or until the tops are browning and they are curling up around the edges

Note: You can roast the tomatoes for up to 90 minutes which will produce a roasted tomato with less moisture and more intense-sugary flavor. Remove the tomatoes from the oven and let cool. Peel the skin off the tomato with a metal tong or your fingers. It should easily slip off.

At this point you can make a pasta sauce or relish or you can package the tomatoes for future use. To store the tomatoes, place them snugly in a plastic container and lay a piece of plastic wrap directly on the surface of the tomatoes. This helps to make an air barrier. Cover the container tightly and store in your refrigerator for up to 2 weeks. You can freeze the roasted tomatoes in plastic containers or in freezer storage bags. The tomatoes are good for up to 6 months in your freezer.



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## OVEN DRIED PLUM TOMATOES

When it comes to preserving tomatoes by means of drying or dehydration, there are numerous methods to follow.

The following method results in an oven dried tomato with some moisture and softness in the center. It is a tomato that will have to be refrigerated or frozen when finished.

This is not to be compared with sun-dried tomatoes that are stored at room temperature and require extensive and precise drying methods.

This particular method produces an intensely flavored; sweet, chewy oven dried tomato, perfect with cheese, bread or just for snacking.

12 plum tomatoes, washed, cored and cut in half lengthwise  
1 tsp kosher salt

Pre-heat oven to 200 degrees.

Set up a sheet pan with a baking rack or cake rack on it, preferably a coated baking rack. Lay the tomatoes on the baking rack leaving approximately ½ inch of space between the tomatoes to allow for airflow. The baking rack also allows for better air circulation.

Sprinkle the tomatoes generously with salt.

Bake the tomatoes for 2 hours and rotate them in your oven. Continue baking (drying out) the tomatoes for another 2 hours and rotate the pan again. Depending on the size of the tomatoes and your oven it could take anywhere from 5 – 6 hours total.

The tomatoes are done when the skin is shriveled and the sides of the tomato are caving in. The center of the tomatoes will be slightly moist.

Let the oven dried tomatoes completely cool and then store in airtight containers. Lay a piece of plastic over the surface of the tomatoes to prevent air exposure.

They will last in your refrigerator for up to 3 weeks. Oven dried tomatoes can be stored in freezer bags, removing as much air as possible, and frozen for up to 4 months.

Variation: Add a few rosemary leaves to the cavity of the tomato at the start of the drying process.

## ROASTED TOMATO-OLIVE RELISH

The deep, rich and sweet flavor of the roasted tomatoes against the salty olives and the fresh herbs make this a wonderfully versatile relish. Serve it over pasta, in your favorite sandwich or alongside grilled meats.

8 roasted plum tomatoes, skins removed  
Red pepper flakes, a pinch  
2 Tbsp chopped oregano  
2 Tbsp chopped basil  
1 tsp balsamic vinegar or lemon juice  
½ cup extra virgin olive oil  
½ cup Kalamata olives pitted and chopped  
½ tsp salt  
Cracked black pepper to taste

Roughly chop the tomatoes into a ½ inch dice and place them in a bowl. Add the red pepper flakes, oregano, basil and vinegar (or lemon juice) and stir to combine. Add the olive oil, olives, salt and black pepper. Taste and adjust seasonings as you like.

## TOMATO AND GINGER CHUTNEY

Here is an adventurous relish made with locally grown tomatoes. This chutney is great served with lamb, chicken, rice and lentil dishes.

3 Tbsp canola oil  
1 medium onion, finely diced  
3 cloves of garlic, finely diced  
1 Serrano chili, finely diced  
2 inch piece of ginger, finely diced  
2 cinnamon sticks  
2 tsp ground cumin, toasted  
1 tsp ground coriander, toasted  
¼ cup rice wine vinegar (or cider vinegar)  
2 tsp sugar  
8 plum tomatoes, peeled and finely diced  
¼ cup chopped cilantro  
Juice of 1-2 limes  
Salt and pepper

Heat the oil in a medium saucepan on medium heat. Add the onions and cook until they are soft or wilted about 3 minutes. Add the garlic, chilies, ginger, cinnamon stick, cumin and coriander and stir with a wooden spoon. Continue to cook until softened, about 2-3 minutes. If anything starts to stick, reduce the heat and add more oil.

Add the vinegar, sugar and tomatoes and bring the ingredients to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and cook until the tomatoes are softened and the flavors are blended, about 10 – 12 minutes. Depending on the size of your pan, you may need to add water if the chutney becomes too thick. Transfer to a bowl and let cool.

Add the cilantro, juice of one lime, salt and pepper. Taste the chutney and add more lime juice as needed. If the chutney is acidic, add a pinch of sugar.

## TOMATO FENNEL SOUP

2 Tbsp olive oil  
1 Tbsp butter  
2 medium onions, diced  
3 cups fennel, cored and diced (reserve the tops)  
5 garlic cloves, thinly sliced  
Small branch of fresh thyme  
2 small branches of fresh oregano  
2 strips of orange peel  
6 cup peeled, seeded tomatoes, roughly chopped  
1½ qts vegetable stock, chicken stock or water  
2-3 tsp salt  
1 tsp cracked black pepper

### Garnish:

Finely diced fennel tops  
2 tsp chopped fresh thyme  
Shaved Parmesan  
Drizzle of good olive oil  
Tie the thyme branch, oregano branch and orange peel (bouquet garnish) together with butcher twine and set aside.

In a large soup pot heat the oil and butter on medium-high heat. Add the onions and cook for 4 minutes or until the onions are starting to soften and wilt. Add the fennel, garlic and the bouquet garnish and continue cooking for 4-5 minutes or until the fennel begins to soften and become aromatic. Add the tomatoes and stock and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to low and simmer for 15 minutes.

Remove the bouquet garnish with a metal tong or spoon and let the soup cool for a bit. Puree the soup in a Cuisinart and strain through a wide mesh strainer or use a food mill to puree. Season the soup with salt and pepper to taste.

At this point the soup can be chilled and then packaged and frozen. It makes a great base for future fall and winter soups such as seafood stew or a white bean and leek soup. If you are serving the soup right away, finish the soup by adding the fennel tops and chopped thyme. Garnish each bowl with a drizzle of olive oil and shaved Parmesan.



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