

Tomatoes: the golden apple

Tomatoes have a unique and interesting history — they were originally yellow. In Italian, a tomato is *pomodoro*, meaning “apple of gold.” Spanish explorers discovered tomatoes in South America and introduced them to Europe around the 1500s. It wasn't until the late 1700s that they reached America. For years, Americans would not eat tomatoes because they were considered poisonous or a wild aphrodisiac.

In Italy today, fishermen bring tomatoes with them for their daily snack, sliced and dipped in the sea for the salt. Like these Italian fishermen, people take tomatoes seriously, especially when it comes to growing their own. Many of my students tell me about all types of tomatoes they harvest from their gardens or receive from friends and neighbors.

Most people think tomatoes are vegetables, but they are a fruit. In the botanical world, the word “vegetable” does not exist. It's actually a culinary term used for plants we eat. Tomatoes are part of the nightshade family, which includes eggplants, potatoes, peppers, and even petunias.

Growing up in an Italian family in Oakland, Calif., canning tomatoes was an annual chore we all participated in. We went out to the farms in the Central Valley, spent hours picking bushels (a bushel weighs roughly 50 pounds) of tomatoes, and then spent the next couple days canning them all. My job was to take the tomatoes out of the

sink where they were soaking in scalding water (this made removing the skin very easy), peeling them, seeding them (squeezing them removes the seeds), cutting them in small pieces, and filling jar after jar. I did all this with my hands and a very sharp pairing knife; there was no room for cutting boards. Afterwards, my hands would feel raw and prune-like for several days, but the satisfaction came from looking at all the jars of tomatoes.

For dinner, our tomato salad was a large bowl of tomatoes cut into bite-sized pieces, sprinkled

Fresh tomatoes can be added to just about any dish; it's not just about pasta or bread.

Add them to:


- Sautéed zucchini or green beans
- Bake them in parchment with tilapia or portobellos
- Panini with lots of cheese
- Fresh slices of tomatoes on pizza instead of sauce
- Baked with herbs and breadcrumbs

with coarse sea salt, extra virgin olive oil, lots of finely chopped garlic, and a few hot peppers cut into large chunks, seeds and all. If peppers are too spicy for you, try adding some fresh oregano. When my mom made the salad for dinner, she would let it sit for at least an hour before we ate while she prepared the rest of dinner. This gives



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the juice from the tomatoes time to blend with the salt, garlic, and peppers. The best part of dinner was ending the meal by dipping a chunk of fresh, crusty bread in the juice at the bottom of the bowl. Now it is my children who fight over who gets to dip first. Leftover tomato salad easily becomes sauce for pasta. Sauté it for a couple minutes in a tablespoon of good extra virgin olive oil and toss your pasta with it.

No matter how you slice them, tomatoes are golden apples. For more information regarding the cooking suggestions, contact me at www.maryrosecooks.com. 

Mary Rose's Best: •Pizza on the Grill•

SERVES 2 TO 4 PEOPLE

INGREDIENTS:

- 1 lb pizza dough
- 2 cups thinly sliced tomatoes or sauce
- 2 cups fresh mozzarella cheese, thinly sliced or shredded
- Fresh herbs such as basil, gently sliced into thin strips



DIRECTIONS:

1. Preheat gas grill on high 15 minutes prior to cooking.
2. Allow pizza dough to get to room temperature if necessary. Roll out to desired thickness.
3. Lower the burners on the grill down to medium.
4. Place dough on a cookie sheet or pizza paddle. Drizzle a light coating of extra virgin on it. Place the oiled side down on the grill and cover. Let it go for about 3 minutes or so until there are grill marks on the bottom and you can flip it without tearing it.
5. On the cooked side of the pizza, place the sliced tomatoes down first, sprinkle with sea salt. Spread out the cheese and cover — by this time the grill should have cooled down a bit and it can sit on the grill long enough to melt the cheese, about 5 minutes. Then remove the pizza, sprinkle the basil, add another drizzle of extra virgin olive oil over the pizza, and it's ready to serve.