

Passata

Passata is traditionally a raw sauce or puree, and recipes can vary from family to family and from region to region throughout Italy.

Making passata is a quick and simple way to use up a glut of tomatoes. The puree can be used as a base for numerous tomato dishes and is a fantastic way to bring a little summer sunshine into your life on a bleak winter's day. Tomatoes also have an uncanny way of bringing people together, and I love the fact that during the summer season, many generations of Italian families come together to celebrate the tomato harvest and to make passata and other preserves to share and enjoy throughout the year.

The quality of the tomatoes is vital when creating a flavoursome passata, so only use the best, most perfectly ripened homegrown tomatoes. If you use tomatoes of inferior quality, this will impact on the flavour of the puree and in turn the dish you create. San Marzano tomatoes make sensational passatas, sauces and pastes, as they have a beautiful depth of flavour and a sumptuous, thick flesh as well as a low water content. Costoluto Genovese or Periforme Abruzzo would also be a great choice.

Fresh passata

Although I use passata a great deal in cooking, it was only last summer that I decided to take the plunge and try to make it myself. Why I waited so long is baffling to me – it was fantastic fun and so simple to make. The following process was inspired by the passata-making tips shared by Sardinian-born chef Giovanni Pilu, from the award-winning Pilu at Freshwater restaurant in Sydney, in an article by Justine Costigan on goodfood.com.au.

To make fresh passata, wash the tomatoes and pat them dry. Remove the stems, and cut the tomatoes into halves or quarters, depending on their size. Line a bowl with two layers of paper towel or a tea towel. Add the tomatoes, and let them stand for 30 minutes to absorb any excess moisture. Remove the tomatoes, and place them into a food mill, tomato press or mouli (in batches if necessary).

Place a bowl underneath. The food mill or tomato press will extract the juice and separate the skins from the tomato flesh. Repeat the process until all of the pulp and juice have been extracted from the tomatoes. Retain some of the tomato skins to dehydrate later. Pour the puree into sterilised jars or bottles, leaving a gap at the top. Place the lids on the jars or bottles, and then heat process (see page 211 for instructions). Depending on the variety you choose, 2kg of tomatoes will fill approximately four 375ml bottles. You can store the passata for up to three years.

Giovanni Pilu and Marilyn Anecchini from Pilu make passata every summer using an Anecchini family recipe. According to Justine Costigan, an Anecchini family tradition is to place a single basil leaf at the bottom of each bottle before pouring in the puree. Giovanni recommends only cooking passata lightly, so that the freshness of the puree isn't destroyed.

He also recommends using simply made, fresh passata to prepare your favourite dish, as it gives you much more flexibility when adding other ingredients and flavours.

Roasted tomato passata

To make roasted tomato passata, preheat the oven to 180°C. Cut the tomatoes into halves or quarters (depending on their size). Arrange the tomato pieces in rows on a lined baking tray, cut side up. You could also scatter a few garlic cloves (skin on) around the tomato pieces, as well as some whole shallots or red onion wedges of similar size if you wish. Drizzle with olive oil, and roast for 25–45 minutes or until the tomato pieces are lightly caramelised. Remove the tomato pieces from the oven, and let them cool.

Place the roasted tomatoes, onions and the pulp from the roasted garlic cloves into a bowl, add fresh basil leaves and/or other herbs, and allow the flavours to infuse for up to an hour. Pass the tomato mixture through a 'mouli' or fine sieve several times, until all of the pulp and juice has been extracted. Discard the seeds and skins. Simmer the passata in a pan over a low–medium heat for about 5 minutes. Pour the passata into sterilised jars, and then heat process (see page 211 for instructions). Store the passata in a cool, dark place for up to 12 months.

Extract from: Tomato: know, sow, grow, feast.

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