



## You Say Tomato

### [Katie Kehrig](#)



*"Portrait of a Summer Tomato"*  
from the Produce Portrait Series  
by Katie Kehrig

A tug of war exists between cooking as a means to expand your culinary horizons, and the concept of culinary perfection. What, for example, is the best recipe for tomato sauce? A certain comfort can be derived from letting a cookbook or food magazine answer this question for you. In particular, *Cook's Illustrated Magazine* is designed to create this problem and then solve it. Each month the magazine addresses such burning issues as "which is the best brand of canned tomatoes?" Its subscription solicitations confront you with its claims of inside information which it assumes that you don't have.

*Cook's Illustrated's* offshoot books, including [The Perfect Recipe: Getting It Right Every Time: Making Our Favorite Dishes the Absolute Best They Can Be](#) by Pam Anderson and [The Cook's Bible: The Best of American Home Cooking](#) by Christopher Kimball, brag that there *is* a best way, and luckily for you, they

have found it. The truth is, sometimes Kimball's recipes work, and sometimes they don't. Anderson gives great basic advice. However, once you have it, you don't need the book anymore. Let me say this right now: there is more than one way to make a great tomato sauce; there is more than one way to roast a chicken!

One of my favorite ways to make tomato sauce is derived from Marcella Hazan's [Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking](#). Her recipe calls for cutting up either fresh or canned tomatoes and slowly cooking them with butter, an onion, and salt. Then she throws the onion away. This creates a messy, runny sauce. I discovered that by altering her recipe by slowly simmering and frequently stirring a can of Pastene's Coarsely Chopped Tomatoes for 45 minutes with a stick of sweet butter, two medium onions peeled and divided vertically, and a splash of sea salt thrown in, I had a wonderful sauce. Especially topped with the onions, which turned out to be delicious. Then the local stores stopped carrying Pastene's Coarsely Chopped Tomatoes. As I work on a private battle plan to buy these canned tomatoes by the case, I use Glen Muir's Ground Tomatoes as a reasonable substitute. If you try this recipe, which serves six, do not add seasonings, other vegetables, or meat to it. The pure tomato taste will not come through.

There are times (if you're not a vegetarian) that you will want to make a meat sauce. This is my own quick recipe. Brown a pound of walnut-sized pure chuck meatballs in a large frying pan, using a little olive oil if you like. Remove the meat and sauté an onion (large or medium sized depending on how much you like onions) cut in half vertically and then thinly sliced, with 1/4 lb. of mushrooms sliced 1/4" thick. When the mushrooms are browned, add a splash or two of red wine to deglaze the pan. If you don't have any red wine around, try some balsamic or red wine vinegar. Stir to dissolve all the brown residue with a wooden spoon. Add the meatballs and half a jar of Aunt Millie's Marinara Sauce. This can be all done in the twenty minutes or so that it takes to heat the water for the pasta and cook the spaghetti. It's handy to use a kitchen scale to weigh the pasta. Count on four ounces for each adult, two ounces for each child. Cook it in four quarts of salted water.

A wonderful cookbook, for those of you who are tired of buying takeout or frozen pizza, is helpfully entitled [Pizza: Any Way You Slice It](#) by Charles and Michele Scicolone. If you have cravings to do everything yourself you will be thrilled to see that it has recipes for making your own ricotta and mozzarella, as well as exhaustive instructions on how to make the dough. What makes this book irresistible to me, however, is the recipe for sausage and cheese deep-dish pizza featured on the book cover. Not only does the pie hold together and taste great, the leftover sauce (there's enough for two pies) tastes terrific on pasta.

Like many people, I use Hazan's book as my basic Italian cookbook. Her pasta recipes work every time. The roast chicken with two lemons and the chicken Sienese recipe will teach you how to fillet chicken breasts (although they should be sliced even thinner to cook through properly) to make a wonderful and speedy entrée. Most, but not all, of her recipes are great. The almond cake is much better than the walnut cake. The Bollito Misto underwhelms. But there are other wonderful

cookbooks. Don't limit yourself. Try Francesco Ghedini's *Northern Italian Cookbook*, a take-no-prisoners gem with great recipes for pesto, chicken stew with vinegar and anchovies sauce, and zabaione, among others. Although it is out of print, I recently saw it at the Strand Bookstore here in New York City, and it is often available through online used bookstores.

Another first-rate choice is [Patricia Wells' \[sic\] Trattoria](#). You can't go wrong with her *pollo alla diavola*, seared tomatoes, grilled zucchini with thyme, or tuna mousse. The color photographs by Stephen Rothfeld will inspire you not only to buy the book, but to cook from it as well.

Carefully chosen ingredients respectfully handled ensure a good meal. Once upon a time I searched frantically through my cookbooks for instructions on how long to steam broccoli. I finally had this revelation: it's done when a fork pierces it smoothly! There comes that point when you remove your training wheels and rely on your own sense of balance. You're the one who's going to eat your food, not El Exigente, the cookbook writer. Be the arbiter of your own taste.

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#### DRAWN ON IN THIS ESSAY

Anderson, Pam, [The Perfect Recipe: Getting It Right Every Time: Making Our Favorite Dishes the Absolute Best They Can Be](#). Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998. Hardcover, 372 pp.

Ghedini, Francesco, *Northern Italian Cooking*. Gramercy/ Crown, 1973. Out of Print.

Hazan, Marcella, [Essentials of Classic Italian Cooking](#). Knopf, 1992. Hardcover, 688 pp.

Kimball, Christopher, [The Cook's Bible: The Best of American Home Cooking](#). Little Brown & Co., 1996. Hardcover, 443 pp.

Scicolone, Charles, and Michele Scicolone, [Pizza: Any Way You Slice It](#). Broadway Books, 1999. Paperback, 224 pp.

Wells, Patricia, [Patricia Wells' Trattoria: Healthy, Simple, Robust Fare Inspired by the Small Family Restaurants of Italy](#). William Morrow & Co, 1993. Hardcover, 338 pp.

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