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FOOD BY CHEF BOY ARI

Terrific Tarra-Gatos

Tarragon and tomatoes make tasty sauce.

Lucy was hawking veggies at the local market like she always does. Hey, Chef Boy Ari, she said. Watcha need? Tarragon, I said.

Tarragon? We got plenty at the farm I can bring next week. What do you need: leaves, roots, dried, fresh? What do you want tarragon for? Lucy frowned. I hate tarragon, she added.

I can see why. Tarragon has a very strong flavor that can easily overpower everything else in the vicinity, and this could turn off sensitive New Age gals like Lucy. But if used correctly for specific applications, tarragon is irreplaceable and highly dank — in a good way.

Summer is fading, and now it's a mad scramble to pack all the bounty in. The tomatoes that remain on the vine make me ponder and lament the feast-or-famine nature of the tomato cycle. Why are we swamped for a month or two, and limited to the imported cardboard versions for the rest of the year? I asked my real estate agent. She answered, Location, location, location. Go south, young man.

Good advice, but no thanks. Chef Boy Ari remains a child of the North.

Covering your tomatoes at night will buy you a few more weeks, but before it gets too cold, pick them all off. Let the orange and red tomatoes ripen by the window, and stash the green ones in the closet wrapped in newspaper, where they will ripen in a matter of weeks. That's my Aunt Ida's trick, and it works.

While you still have enough red ones, make red sauce. If you don't have at least five pounds, there's still time to score a late-season deal at the Farmers Market.

Me, I've got three Sun Gold cherry tomato plants growing in my back yard. They produce huge quantities of little guys that are ripe when orange, with a sweet and meaty taste that's been winning medals at contests all over the country. Lately, my Sun Golds have been producing so much that the fruits are dripping from the vines unused. So I filled a shoe box, which I proceeded to convert into sweet tarragon tomato sauce.

After removing the stems, I washed the little guys and put them in a blender. The blender is optional, but it speeds up the process. Otherwise, you can cut the tomatoes into chunks and put them straight into the pot.

Speaking of the pot, I avoid aluminum cookware because of the urban legend that it contributes to Alzheimer's disease. And tomato sauce doesn't mix with cast iron,

normally my cookware of choice. I poured the contents of the blender into a stainless steel pot on low heat.

After a little while, a layer of scummy foam floated to the top, full of seeds and skins. I poured the contents of the pot through a food sieve, removing the seeds and skins. A colander would also work for this — just make sure to mash the scum against the colander so all the good stuff oozes through. Then, back on the stove, slowly simmering. Or, for a thicker, chunkier sauce, don't filter it at all.

Tomato sauce needs to cook down to half the original volume or less, so be careful about how you season it early on, since the flavor will concentrate. I usually add a splash of olive oil up front, to help lube the mixture and prevent it from scalding on the bottom of the pot. If it scalds, you're screwed, so simmer at a very slow pace, stirring often. Patience is the key: low heat and a long time — at least four hours, maybe eight.

I keep the seasonings pretty simple: a little salt, a little sugar and tarragon, which I snip in with scissors, cutting each leaf to bits, but not the stalks. I also add a whole sprig for a few hours, to be removed prior to canning. You could add other stuff, but I prefer to liven it up when I use the sauce down the road. Something about fresh tarragon, though.

When it's ready for canning, I go with small 1/2 pint jars, because the sauce is so concentrated that you won't need too much for any particular meal. And once the jar is opened, it will mold relatively soon.

Tomatoes are right on the edge of being acidic enough that you can use a regular water bath for canning. It really depends on the variety of tomato: The higher the acidity, the less hospitable it is for food spoilage microbes. If you have a pressure canner, use it for 15 minutes at 15 pounds of pressure. If you don't, the National Center for Home Food Preservation recommends a tablespoon of bottled lemon juice per pint. You can add the lemon juice directly to the sterilized jars right before you add the sauce. Then, process for 40 minutes in a water bath.

Me, I tasted my sauce and decided it was tangy enough to skip the lemon juice, because I'm that type of guy. **EW**

Chef Boy Ari, also known as Ari LaVaux, is currently living and cooking in Missoula, Mont.

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