



Summer is **TOMATO'S PRIME TIME**

Colter Peterson/St. Louis Post-Dispatch/TNS

Salsa Roja on a bed of tortilla chips.

By **DANIEL NEMAN**
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Summer's here, and the tomatoes are ripe. If I could, I'd fill a swimming pool with tomatoes and dive in.

Admit it: The more you think about it, the more that sounds like a good idea.

Because tomatoes are approaching the peak of their tomato-ness right now, I decided to celebrate everyone's favorite fruit-that-masquerades-as-a-vegetable by trying out a variety of ways to use them when they are fresh and at their peak.

No canned tomatoes here. I made recipes that are straight-from-the-vine good.

For only the second time in my life, I made a tomato pie. And I instantly wondered why it wasn't something I make every week throughout the summer.

If the thought of a savory tomato pie gives you pause, perhaps it is best to think of it as a quiche without all the eggs. And if you wonder how you can bake tomatoes in a pie crust without getting the crust soggy, don't worry. These tomatoes are sliced and somewhat dried out in the oven before they are placed in the pie.

Because it is a pie, you obviously have a crust (I made my favorite recipe, which is both flaky and flavorful), and clearly tomatoes are involved. A lot of tomatoes. Three pounds of tomatoes.

But what makes this particular recipe so spectacular is the rest of the filling. It's got bacon. It's got sharp cheddar cheese. It's got mayonnaise and Dijon mustard and one egg, to bind everything together. It's got garlic and shallots and basil and chives, and after you've

baked it's got even more basil and chives.

And all of that goodness is served in a pie crust with ripe tomatoes. Just thinking about it makes me sigh contentedly.

To further my enjoyment of ripe tomatoes, I next made spaghetti with a fresh tomato sauce. It is a wonderful dish that you can only make at this time of the year.

The sauce is uncooked, so you get the pure flavor of the freshest, ripest tomatoes. It is simple to make, just chop a tomato and mix it with olive oil, just a bit of finely minced garlic (the garlic is raw, so you definitely do not want big chunks), red wine vinegar, balsamic vinegar and a good sprinkling of chopped basil.

The trick is to stir this mixture into just-cooked spaghetti while the pasta is still hot. The heat warms up the sauce just enough to release its fullest flavor. All you need then is a sprinkling of Parmesan cheese and you have a light, fresh dish that is superb for the summer.

And because I was using deliciously ripe tomatoes, I naturally had to make that all-time Southern favorite, a tomato sandwich.

Why tomato sandwiches are relatively unknown north of the Mason-Dixon line, I will never know. If you are familiar with them and eat them, my even mentioning them is like suggesting that peanut butter might go well with jelly.

But if you don't know them, now is the time to try one.

They are the simplest things in the world to make. You slather two pieces of

Wonder bread — it almost has to be Wonder bread — with plenty of mayonnaise. In the South, they almost always use Duke's mayonnaise, but any kind you like will be fine.

Season a couple of thick slices of tomato with salt and pepper, and place them between the slices of bread. Eat immediately. Then make another, because you're going to like the first one so much you won't want to stop eating them.

Also delicious was the next dish I made, the somewhat misnamed Sizzling Broiled Tomatoes With Herbs.

They are misnamed, because they are not actually made with herbs, other than maybe some basil in the vinaigrette. But they are awfully good, a better version of stuffed tomatoes, which my mother used to make when I was young.

The dish is just tomato halves topped with bread crumbs and then broiled, but two steps make it so much better than ordinary versions.

One is that the cut tomatoes are first spread with a vinaigrette. You can use any kind you like, but I made the basil vinaigrette recommended by cookbook author Shirley Corriher, and it was excellent. Its bright, fresh, slightly acidic taste is just what a tomato needs, and forms an inviting bed for the bread crumbs.

The other step involves these same bread crumbs. Instead of merely being sprinkled on top of the tomato (or in this case, tomato and vinaigrette), they are first sautéed in butter and then sprinkled on top. As it always does, a little butter makes all the

difference in the world.

And finally, when life hands me tomatoes, I make salsa. In particular, I made salsa roja, which is just Spanish for "red sauce."

You can use salsa roja for any number of dishes, but I mine rarely goes beyond being served with tortilla chips.

It includes all the usual salsa suspects: tomatoes, onions, cilantro and peppers. I like to use three different types of peppers for a rounded, layered taste, but I also create considerable depth by first roasting the vegetables in a hot pan before blending.

How does it taste? I'd tell you, but my mouth is too full of chips and salsa.

SALSA ROJA

Yield: 6 servings

- 3 tomatoes
- 1 small white onion
- 1 jalapeño pepper
- 1 serrano pepper
- 1 Anaheim or poblano pepper
- 2 garlic cloves
- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon salt, plus more to taste
- 1/2 cup water
- 1 tablespoon white wine vinegar
- 1/4 bunch cilantro, chopped

1. Cut tomatoes and onion into quarters. Remove stems from peppers and slice in half; remove seeds if you want the salsa to be less spicy. Peel and crush garlic.

2. Heat a large skillet over medium-high heat and add oil. Add tomatoes, onion, peppers and 1 teaspoon of salt. Cook, turning occasionally with tongs, until browned and soft, but not burned. A few minutes before the vegetables are done, add the garlic; turn occasionally to keep from burning.

3. Place cooked ingredients in a blender with the water and vinegar. Blend until it reaches your desired texture. Pour into a bowl

or container and stir in cilantro. Taste and add more salt and vinegar, if needed.

Per serving: 75 calories; 5 g fat; 1 g saturated fat; no cholesterol; 2 g protein; 8 g carbohydrate; 4 g sugar; 3 g fiber; 397 mg sodium; 20 mg calcium

Recipe by Daniel Neman

TOMATO PIE

Yield: 8 servings

- 3 pounds tomatoes
- 1 teaspoon salt, divided
- 6 thick-cut bacon slices, diced
- 2 shallots, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, finely chopped
- 6 ounces (about 1 1/2 cups) aged extra-sharp cheddar cheese, grated
- 1/2 cup mayonnaise
- 1/2 cup chopped fresh basil
- 1/4 cup thinly sliced fresh chives
- 1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
- 1 large egg
- 1 (9-inch) unbaked pie crust, your favorite

Fresh basil leaves
Minced fresh chives

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.

2. Cut tomatoes into 1/2-inch-thick slices. Place about 7 or 8 slices (enough to cover top of pie) on a baking sheet lined with paper towels, and sprinkle with 1/4 teaspoon of the salt. Cover with additional paper towels, and reserve.

3. Arrange remaining tomatoes in a single layer on a lightly greased wire rack set on a large baking sheet. Sprinkle with 1/2 teaspoon of the salt. Bake until wilted and slightly dried out, 40 to 45 minutes. Cool completely, about 1 hour.

4. Meanwhile, cook bacon in a skillet over medium-high until fat is beginning to render, 4 to 5 minutes. Add chopped shallots, and cook until bacon is crisp and shallots are caramelized, 6 to 7 more minutes. Stir in garlic; cook until fragrant, about 1 minute. Using a slotted spoon, transfer bacon mixture to a plate lined with paper towels to drain. Cool

20 minutes.

5. Stir together cheese, mayonnaise, basil, chives, Dijon and egg until combined. Sprinkle with pepper to taste and remaining 1/4 teaspoon salt. Fold in bacon mixture.

6. Gently spread a third of cheese mixture into pie crust; layer with half of the roasted tomato slices in slightly overlapping pattern. Spread another third of cheese mixture on top of tomato slices. Repeat with remaining roasted tomato slices and cheese mixture. Top with reserved sliced fresh tomatoes, pressing filling gently into crust. Shield edges of pie with aluminum foil.

7. Bake in preheated oven until filling is set, 45 to 60 minutes. Transfer to a wire rack, and let stand 1 hour before serving. Sprinkle with basil and chives.

Per serving: 440 calories; 34 g fat; 11 g saturated fat; 64 mg cholesterol; 11 g protein; 23 g carbohydrate; 5 g sugar; 3 g fiber; 840 mg sodium; 183 mg calcium

Adapted from a recipe by southernliving.com

TOMATO SANDWICH

Yield: 1 serving

- 2 slices soft, sweet, white bread, such as Wonder bread
- 2 tablespoons mayonnaise, Duke's or your favorite
- 3 or 4 thick slices tomato

Salt and pepper

Spread 1 tablespoon of mayonnaise on each slice of bread. Cover 1 slice with tomato, season liberally with salt and pepper, and cover with the other slice of bread.

Per serving: 357 calories; 23 g fat; 4 g saturated fat; 12 mg cholesterol; 6 g protein; 32 g carbohydrate; 6 g sugar; 3 g fiber; 618 mg sodium; 94 mg calcium

FRESH TOMATO SAUCE

Yield: 4 servings

- 8 ounces dried spaghetti
- 2 cups diced tomatoes
- 1/2 teaspoon finely minced fresh garlic
- 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 teaspoon red wine vinegar
- 1 teaspoon balsamic vinegar

Salt and pepper

1 tablespoon chopped fresh basil

Grated Parmesan cheese

1. Cook spaghetti according to package directions.

2. While it cooks, mix together in a medium bowl the tomatoes, garlic, olive oil, red wine vinegar and balsamic vinegar, and season with salt and pepper.

3. When spaghetti is done, drain and place portions on serving plates. Immediately top with tomato mixture, sprinkle with basil and add Parmesan cheese to taste.

Per serving: 311 calories; 8 g fat; 1 g saturated fat; 1 mg cholesterol; 9 g protein; 51 g carbohydrate; 6 g sugar; 3 g fiber; 897 mg sodium; 72 mg calcium

Recipe by Daniel Neman

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At war in the garden with an unknown enemy



LISA BRITTON
IN THE GARDEN

I'm at war.

The enemy: unknown.

The casualty: my garden.

This spring I set out with a hopeful heart, as I'm sure all gardeners do when winter finally relinquishes its grip and spring arrives.

I have raised beds along our driveway, which runs parallel to an irrigation ditch. As the spring sun warmed the soil, I amended it with some compost and then took out my seed packets.

This year I decided to plant only the crops we love the most (well, mostly me — the rest of my family only tolerates vegetables). I planted Walla Walla sweet onions, lettuce, car-

rots, peas, radishes and tomatoes.

The tomato plants are in a bed against the house. The other crops went into the beds along the ditch.

Seeds sprouted and the garden grew.

One day, my dad and I were surveying the garden. He lives across the street and has his own garden, so we like to compare the growth rate between our two techniques.

Suddenly I noticed that half of my onions were missing.

We have deer roaming the neighborhood, and they sometimes stop for a snack in my garden. But the soil in the onion patch was smooth — no hole where an onion was yanked from the ground.

I shrugged and didn't think much about the mystery.

Then more onions



Lisa Britton/Baker City Herald

An unknown invader hasn't bothered the author's flowers, but the animal has made away with onions and peas.

disappeared.

When my robust pea plants suddenly wilted, I investigated a bit closer.

The pea plants had no roots.

Some vile invader was

munching my garden from underneath the ground — either nibbling the roots or, in the case of the onions, yanking the entire plant under so the soil filled in the hole.

As for the lettuce, I think the deer started eating that but it's okay because the heat turned it bitter.

Now my carrots are disappearing.

I've pretty much given

up on the garden this year except for the tomatoes, which are behind some fencing and away from the ditch creature(s).

Now I'm looking ahead to next year. I could dig out all the soil, line the bottom of the bed, and then replace the soil.

But I've been surveying gardens and yards around town, and I think I've devised a new plan.

I love flowers as well as vegetables, so I'm going to get some metal tubs to set on top of the garden beds. I'll grow vegetables in those and plant flowers around the base.

My vision is to have an actual crop to harvest while also drawing pollinators to the garden with a variety of blooms.

And I hope that underground critter bangs his head on the metal when he tries to get a meal.