

Recently we talked about various pasta shapes – short and long, with holes and without. Then we looked at that perennial favorite Fettuccine Alfredo. This month let's take a look at tomato-based sauces for pasta.

The basic tomato sauce is Marinara. It's about as simple as you can get: tomato, olive oil, garlic, herbs, salt and pepper. This sauce is spicier than just plain tomato sauce from a can and has a deeper, more interesting flavor.

Marinara gets its name from being associated with sailors around Naples. "Marinaro" means of the sea. Apply it to the name of the sauce and you get something like sauce of the sailors.

There is no seafood, not even anchovies, in Marinara. It's also a meatless sauce. This fact plus the acidity of tomatoes made the sauce easier to keep on the sailors' ships before the age of refrigeration.

To make an easy Marinara, sauté some chopped garlic in olive oil. Then add a 28 to 35 ounce can of crushed tomatoes and simmer for around 20 minutes. You can season with salt and pepper and add an herb such as basil or oregano. Marinara is a little chunky and should be somewhat loose.

Don't add anything else and don't cook it any longer. Marinara is a simple sauce and should be enjoyed that way. Adding vegetables or other things makes it into something else. So let's look at those options.

A heartier "tomato" sauce is made with puréed tomatoes. It's usually seasoned with vegetables like onion, celery and carrot. Several herbs are used and maybe bay leaves. These sauces are cooked for a longer time – a couple of hours – which results in a richer and thicker product. Often this type of sauce is enhanced with tomato paste.

An easy way to enrich tomato sauce is to use it to cook meat. My adopted Italian grandmother in New York – Caroline Caglianone – would make Marinara and then cook beef or veal on the bone in it for a couple of hours or more. She would use the meat for a meal later in the week

If we had sausage during the meal, it was browned and then simmered in that same sauce until tender. She always used sweet sausage seasoned with fennel.

At Caroline's house we always started with pasta sauced with either Marinara or a tomato sauce that had meat or sausage cooked in it. You had to have two bowls or she would have been offended.

There are several ways to use fresh tomatoes to make a sauce. Coarsely chop ripe fresh tomatoes and sprinkle with Kosher salt. Allow them to sit a few hours and the water from the tomatoes will be released. This liquid will then become the base of your sauce. You can add some white wine and fresh basil and it will be great with pasta. Don't cook it but warm it slightly if you wish. Add chunks of fresh mozzarella and the heat of the pasta will melt them perfectly.

Another way to use fresh tomatoes is to cut plum tomatoes in half, length ways. Salt and bake them on an oiled sheet pan in a medium oven for a couple of hours. This will intensify the flavor tremendously.

You can add onion and garlic to the tomatoes and bake them too. In either case add some herbs like basil, oregano or thyme before cooking. After baking purée the solids and add white wine or stock to thin into a great sauce.

What about pizzaiola sauce – like for steak pizzaiola? Well it is properly sugo di pomodoro alla pizzaiola. That is to say a tomato sauce in the style of one used for pizza.

For some this sauce is a simple one. It has the basic ingredients of Marinara with the necessary addition of oregano – the herb so associated with pizza. For others all sorts of veggies are added – even olives and artichoke hearts.

It's an Italian tradition to season meat with a sauce like this one. It works really well on pasta, too - especially with lots of extras in it.

Any sauce you make will be more attractive with the tomato seeds removed. If you cook fresh tomatoes, you should remove the skins after cooking. They are tough and make an unsightly sauce.

A couple of tricks you can use to correct the final flavor of tomato sauce is to add a little sugar if the sauce has too much acid. The other is to add a little vinegar or lemon juice if the opposite situation is the

case. A shot of sherry vinegar always adds great flavor to a tomato sauce.

What I like to do is take a couple of cans of plum tomatoes and squeeze out the liquid of each tomato. Add this mixture to a whole head of peeled sautéed garlic cloves in olive oil and a small can of tomato paste. Season with salt, pepper and a few red pepper flakes. For herbs I add thyme at the first and basil toward the end of cooking.

For a lighter fresh tasting sauce, cook no more than 30 minutes. For a richer sauce simmer for a couple of hours. I like that way best.

When you are finished, you have several sauces in one. You can use the still intact tomatoes as toppings for pizza bread. – just add cheese. Or they are good as a side. The liquid part becomes a pasta sauce. You can use the whole sauce with meat just like pizzaiola. It also makes a wonderful base for baked pasta and is perfect for lasagne. The garlic is a bonus and can be spread on bread for a killer bruschetta, used with the meat or just let it come along for the ride when you use the whole sauce.

No matter what sauce you use, remember that is a condiment to the pasta. It should lightly coat the pasta and never overpower it. There should be no pool of sauce in the bowl.

Buon appetito!