

# apple of my eye

THOSE WHO DON'T PARTICULARLY LIKE TOMATOES HAVE YET TO DISCOVER THE WONDERFUL VARIETY OF SHAPES, SIZES, COLOURS AND FLAVOURS THEY ARE FOUND IN—NO, THEY'RE NOT ALL RED AND ROUND.

If we were to choose the most significant food of the many that Columbus discovered in America, chillies, potatoes, and for many, chocolate—all be strong contenders, but I believe the tomato would have a compelling argument for having the greatest and widest influence. It can be consumed raw or cooked, ripe or green, for savoury or sweet dishes, and combines well with a wide variety of other ingredients. This is quite an accomplishment for a 'plant' that rose out of obscurity and into the limelight in less than two centuries and which, when first introduced, was greeted with suspicion as potentially poisonous.

Technically, tomatoes are a fruit, though they are most often thought of as a vegetable due to their mainly savoury application. Part of the solanacea family, they are related to the New World capsicum, chilli, tamarillo, tomatillo, potato and tobacco, and the Old World eggplant.

## HISTORY

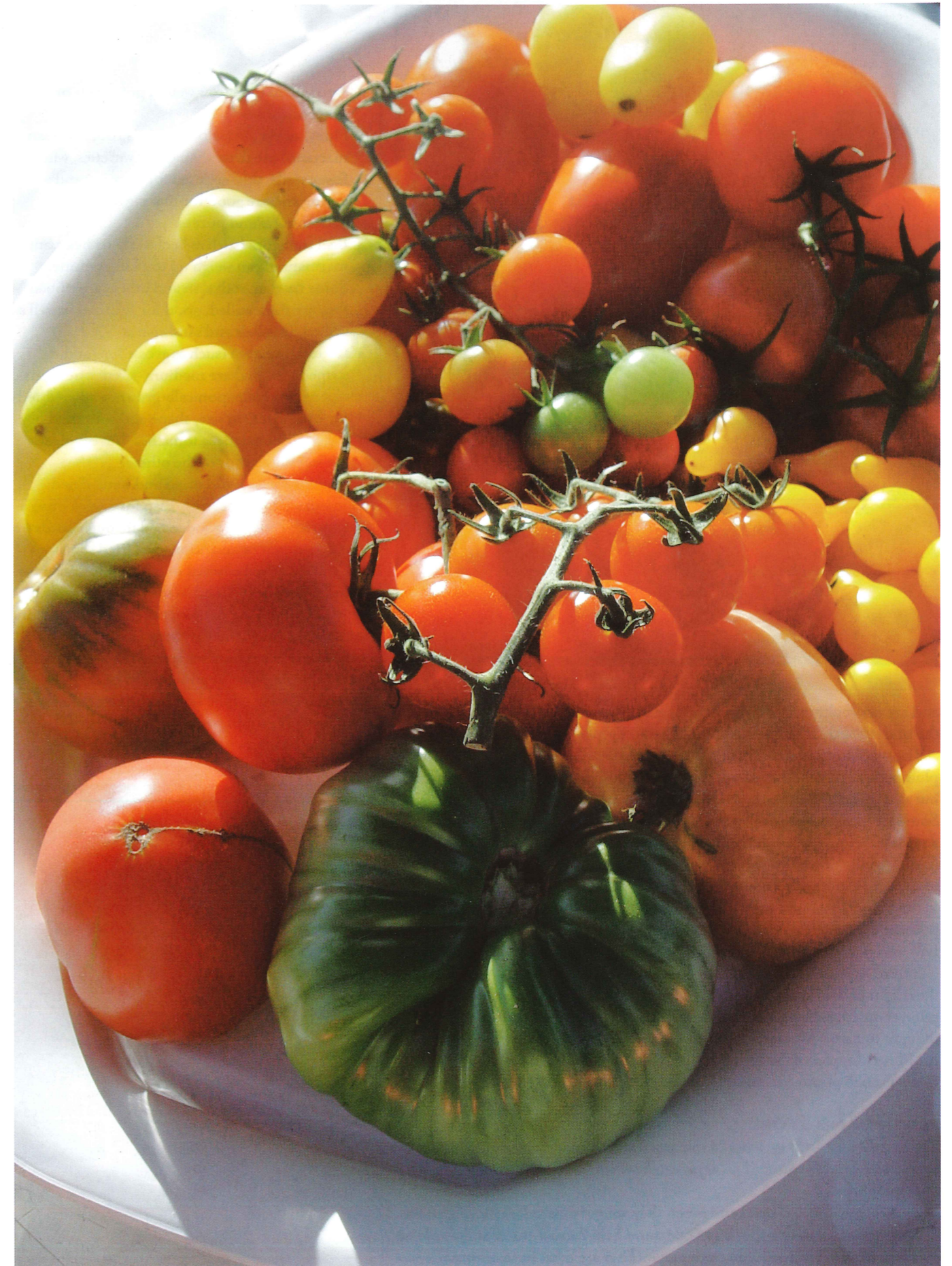
The tomato originated in South America, specifically Peru and Ecuador. The ancestor of

our modern tomatoes grew as a weed that produced a long spray of tiny red berries. It spread north to Mexico where the Aztecs were the first to cultivate it. The Spanish conquered Mexico in 1521, where they discovered many new plants including tomatoes, corn, avocados, chillies, capsicums, potatoes, chocolate, pumpkins, tobacco and peanuts. These were shipped back to Seville, a centre for international trade, from where they filtered out to the rest of Europe. Tomatoes were first grown merely as botanical specimens and many considered them inedible or even harmful. Spaniards returning from Mexico, familiar with the Aztec use of tomato sauces, were the first to adopt them into their diet. The 17<sup>th</sup> century brought severe economic hardship to the Mediterranean and it may have been desperation that encouraged many to eat the strange new fruit rather than to starve.

Italy quickly followed Spain in adopting the tomato, as southern Italy was part of the Spanish Empire. The earliest known tomato recipe is in a Neapolitan book, *Tomato Sauce Spanish Style*, from the late 17<sup>th</sup> century. Early recipes using tomatoes often refer to their sour taste, with lime juice, bitter orange juice, verjuice or unripe grapes being suggested as alternatives for tomatoes when out of season.

The Turks, who traded with Spain and Italy, are credited with bringing the tomato to the eastern Mediterranean. The Spanish were in the Philippines from 1564 and introduced many plants including the tomato, which then spread to southern China as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where it is called fan chieh (barbarian eggplant). Italians migrating to North America brought tomatoes back to their ancestral homeland.

Tomatoes can grow in a wide range of climates, from tropical to temperate,







and are now cultivated worldwide and on a large-scale in Russia, China (since the mid-1970s), as well as the United States, Egypt and Italy.

The word tomato comes from the Aztec (nahuatl) word *tomatl*, meaning plump fruit. The history of other names for tomatoes is somewhat confused, but also paints an interesting picture of the Europe into which it arrived. Some say tomatoes developed a reputation as an aphrodisiac (perhaps due to a mistaken connection with mandrake, also considered an aphrodisiac) leading to the title of love apple—*poma amoris* in Latin and *pomme d'amour* in French. Another common name is *pomme d'ore* (golden apple), leading to the Italian name still used today, *pomodoro*. This may be a corruption of *pomme d'amour*, however it is also suggested that the first tomatoes seen in Italy were yellow, rather than red, and so were given the name 'golden apples'.

A third explanation comes from the confusion in 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe over the origin of the many new foods being introduced. In the past, new foods often came from Spain via the Arabs, so it is possible that tomatoes were thought to have a Moorish origin and were called *pomi di Mori* or *pomme des Mours* (apples of the Moors), which when mispronounced may have led to the French *pomme d'amour* and also the Italian *pomodoro*.

#### BUYING AND STORING

There are over 1,000 varieties of tomatoes, with a huge range of colours, sizes, shapes and flavours. This array can however be broadly grouped into four main types.

- Cherry tomatoes are small and sweet, they are good baked whole with other roast vegetables so that they burst open and help form a sauce, and whole or halved in salads or tossed through pasta. They are great for the home

gardener as they grow well in pots, even on small balconies.

- Plum, or egg, tomatoes (such as roma and san marzano) are drier than other varieties, with fewer seeds, they are used for canning and drying and are good for making sauces, concentrates and purées.
- Beef tomatoes (such as beef steak, ox heart and marmande) can weigh up to 1 kilogramme. Some have smooth skin and others are ribbed: they are thick walled, good for stuffing, as well as grilled, in salads and sandwiches.
- Round tomatoes (such as grosse lisse and striped tigerella) are medium-sized, often vine-ripened or hydroponically grown, and are bred for uniformity of size, shape and colour. They are good all-purpose tomatoes, but often lack the intense flavour of the others.

Tomatoes are also sold dried and semi-dried. Semi-dried tomatoes only keep for a week or so refrigerated and are good tossed through salads or pasta or as part of an antipasto. Dried tomatoes are usually stored covered in oil; they will keep for months and can be used in the same way as semi-dried. Completely dry varieties (i.e. not stored in oil) are also available; they keep (in an airtight container, in a cool, dark space) for 6–12 months without losing flavour and need to be reconstituted in a little hot water or stock before being used in soups, sauces or stews.

Tomatoes grown in late summer or early



autumn and ripened on the vine have the best flavour. Tinned Italian tomatoes are a good substitute and certainly preferable to tomatoes grown in winter—the best is san marzano, an ancient variety grown in the rich volcanic soil around Mount Vesuvius. Tomatoes should be stored at room temperature if possible (where they'll keep for up to a week), as cold dulls their flavour.

#### USES

The sweet-acid taste of the tomato heightens the flavour of other foods and stimulates appetite—from tomato ketchup on French fries to tomatoes' role in classic dishes around the world, such as the pizza of southern Italy, ratatouille of southern France, Spanish gazpacho, fried green tomatoes or green tomato pickles in the southern states of the USA, Mexico's tomato salsa, Singapore's chilli crab (in the form of tomato ketchup), Indonesian sambals (sambal terong and

sambal lilang) and Indian butter chicken.

Being a fruit, the versatile tomato can also be used as a sweet. The Greeks preserve small tomatoes in syrup and serve them as spoon sweets with coffee, the English make tomato jam, and Alain Passard, at the three-star Michelin Arpege in Paris, serves a dessert of caramelised tomatoes.

The Bloody Mary—a concoction of tomato juice, vodka, lemon juice, Worcestershire sauce and Tabasco sauce, is reputed to be a great hangover cure. It is also excellent served with oysters, either in small shot glasses beside oysters on the half shell, or in a shot glass together with the oysters.

#### PREPARATION

For cooked dishes, it is often preferable to peel and seed tomatoes as the skin separates from the flesh and the seeds can be bitter. To peel, cut an 'X' at the base of the tomato, dip in boiling water for 15 seconds, then into ice water, and peel back the loose skin from the cut. Seed tomatoes by cutting them in half and squeezing gently in the palm of the hand, or scoop seeds out with a small spoon.

To dry tomatoes: halve egg tomatoes lengthwise and sprinkle with a little sea salt, place in a 60 degrees C oven for eight to twelve hours (overnight is good) until they are as dry as you like them. Store in olive oil in sterilised glass jars. **WD**



## GAZPACHO

Serves 6-8

Gazpacho is an ancient bread soup possibly dating back to Roman times, which was readily adapted to include the New World tomato in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

- 1-2 cloves garlic
- ½ tsp sea salt
- 4 slices white bread
- 120ml extra virgin olive oil
- 1kg ripe red tomatoes
- 2 red capsicums
- 2 small cucumbers
- 2 sweet onions (see note)
- ¼ cup good quality sherry vinegar (see note)
- 60ml water
- 2 slices white bread, extra, cubed and toasted, for garnish



1. Peel garlic, slice in half and remove the centre 'germ'. Chop the garlic. Process the garlic, salt and bread in a blender until crumbed.
2. With motor running, slowly add olive oil until fully incorporated. Remove from blender and set aside.
3. Peel and quarter tomatoes. Seed one tomato, dice finely and set aside.
4. Remove most of the skin from the capsicums using a small knife or a potato peeler. Halve capsicums and remove seeds and membrane. Dice half a capsicum finely and set aside.
5. Peel and halve cucumbers. Seed half a cucumber, dice finely and set aside.
6. Peel and halve onions. Dice one half

finely and set aside. 7. Combine tomato, capsicum, cucumber and onion in a food processor (reserving the more finely diced portions for garnishing). Process until smooth. 8. Add bread paste and process until smooth. Add sherry vinegar and process briefly to combine. Taste and add extra vinegar or salt if required. 9. Chill well in a refrigerator. 10. Pass through a strainer. Stir water into the soup (more or less water may be added to achieve desired consistency). 11. Serve bowls of the chilled soup topped with diced vegetables and toasted bread cubes.

**Note:** Red onions or sweet white onions are suitable for this recipe. A mild red wine vinegar can be used if sherry vinegar is unavailable, but you might want to start by using half the quantity, and add on to taste.

## PENNE PUTTANESCA

Serves 4

The Roman cook of Catherine II of Russia wrote the first recipe for tomato sauce with pasta in 1790. However, tomatoes only began to dominate Italian cuisine in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

This variation of tomato sauce offers a bit more punch as well as a colourful history. Puttana is the Italian word for prostitute and, the story goes, that while respectable Italian women always shopped daily for fresh produce, busy 'working girls' had only one day off a week and so would prepare their meals from pantry staples such as anchovies, capers, olives and canned tomatoes.

- 500g penne
- 1 red onion, finely diced
- 4 fillets anchovies
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 tsp sambal oelek (or ½ tsp dried chilli flakes)
- 500g Italian canned tomatoes
- 2 tbsp capers
- 12 black olives
- 8 small leaves basil (optional)
- grated Parmesan cheese, to serve
- extra virgin olive oil
- sea salt
- freshly cracked black pepper

1. Heat olive oil in a saucepan and add the onions and anchovies. Stir well, cover and leave to sweat over low to medium heat.
2. When onions are soft and anchovies have 'melted', add the garlic and sambal oelek and sweat for a few more minutes.
3. Add the tomatoes. Mash well and bring to the boil.
4. Reduce heat, add capers and olives, and allow to simmer for 30 minutes or more. If sauce starts to become too thick, cover the pan.
5. Just before serving, coarsely chop basil leaves (if using) and stir through sauce. Taste and season with salt if needed (remember the anchovies, olives and capers are all salty) and pepper.
6. Meanwhile, bring a large pot of salted water to the boil. When it's reached a rolling boil, add the penne and stir. Return to the boil as quickly as possible, stirring occasionally. Boil until pasta is al dente.
7. When pasta is cooked, drain immediately and toss some olive oil through, followed by the sauce.
8. Serve pasta in bowls, topped with Parmesan cheese.

