

Pomodoro

Tomatoes



Hardly any other fruit (though classified by the US government as a vegetable in 1893) is as synonymous with authentic Italian cuisine as the tomato. And hardly any other fruit boasts such a rich history, transitioning from a status symbol for the few to a national treasure for all.

It all begins with the plant. The tomato is a member of the nightshade family, a family of plants that has a somewhat bad reputation, and is a close relative of belladonna, mandrake, and tobacco. The tomato plant forms bright yellow blossoms and brightly colored fruits which, thanks to their high concentration of lycopene, develop a vibrant red, a rich yellow, or an intense orange. Until just about 50 years ago, it was still pollinated by hand, but these days bumblebees have thankfully assumed responsibility for performing this task.

Even the name reflects the fascination that this fruit inspires. For a long time, it was known in Europe primarily as the love apple, paradise apple, or even golden apple (*pomo d'oro* in Italian), because the first varieties were golden yellow. Tomatoes were used as love apples for magic potions in France in the 16th century because they were believed to have an aphrodisiac effect. This is actually somewhat true; two of the

substances they contain, tyramine and serotonin, actually possess mood-enhancing properties. It was not until the 19th century that the tomato was given its current name in many languages, derived from *xitomatl*, which means “belly button of fat water” in the Aztec language.

Hernán Cortés brought the tomato from the Aztecs to Europe as a souvenir for the Spanish royal family and, by way of their territories such as Sardinia and Naples, to Italy. So it was that on October 31, 1548, Tuscan Grand Duke Cosimo de Medici held a basket of tomatoes in his hands for the first time—and probably did not know exactly what to do with them. Admittedly, these fruits were rare and were planted as exotic treasures in the gardens of the upper classes, as they testified to the wealth of their owners while impressing visitors. However, they were considered poisonous, and it was probably exactly this that aroused the interest of the Medici family. They carried out certain experiments with the nightshade plant, but these failed to produce the desired outcome when used on their adversaries. It was not until a century later that the fruit ended up on the plate of the Spanish Viceroy of Naples. His chef Antonio Latini composed the first recipes with tomatoes, which quickly caught

on and became famous as *alla spagnola*, or “the Spanish way.” So, it was the Italians who played the biggest role in the triumphant introduction of the tomato to the kitchens of the world. Not only do we have them to thank for an extremely versatile and tasty ingredient, tomatoes are also really healthy. Although tomatoes are made up of 95% water, they are chock full of vitamins, including A, B1, B2, C, E, and niacin, and also have an antioxidant effect, boosting the immune system. If only the Medicis had known!

“It would take a lifetime to know everything about tomatoes.”—Ferran Adrià

But there are a few things you should know:

Fresh tomatoes are best stored separately from other fruit and vegetables, as they release ethylene during storage, causing neighboring fruits to ripen and spoil more quickly. They should not be stored in the refrigerator as they lose their flavor and become mealy. Tomato plants themselves are quite sensitive. In addition to color, smell, and shape, they also signal stress through sounds, which, however, are in the ultrasonic range and not audible to humans.

It is claimed that the best tomatoes ripen in Apulia. And in Sicily. And on Mount Vesuvius. And certainly elsewhere too. There are more than 3,100 varieties worldwide and at least as many varieties again that have not been registered and do not have their own specific name. However, the most important varieties are the following:



San Marzano “Campania’s red gold” grows at the foot of Mount Vesuvius, around the village of San Marzano. This variety has been cultivated ever since Ferdinand de Bourbon received it as a gift from Spain in 1770. Unfortunately, by the 1980s, this variety had almost completely disappeared because it had to be harvested painstakingly and individually by hand, but thanks to a team of researchers, several farmers, and the slow food movement, it was rediscovered and now graces authentic Neapolitan pizzas. San Marzano tomatoes develop their full flavor—a strong bitter-sweet taste with balanced acidic nuances—in cans when they are gently preserved in a water bath at exactly 212 °F (100 °C). San Marzano DOP is the perfect base for sauces, salsa, and traditional pizza.



Piennolo These little treasures are cultivated on the slopes of Mount Vesuvius. The sun is merciless here and the soil particularly rich in minerals, giving the tomatoes a firm skin, plenty of minerals, and a very special sweetness. Immediately after harvesting, they are tied together by hand to form the eponymous *piennoli*, the large grape-like clusters, which will keep

for a whole year. This is also why these tomatoes have been depicted in the famed Neapolitan nativity scenes since the 18th century—they are a traditional ingredient in the local cuisine at Christmas time. The Piennolo del Vesuvio DOP is perfect for enhancing seafood dishes, pizza, bruschetta, and buffalo mozzarella, offering a rich, tangy flavor.



Corbarino Those who like it very tangy and flavorful will be delighted with this historic variety from the Naples region. Grown in the Corbara hills of the Campania region, these egg-shaped cocktail tomatoes are firm, very flavorful, and easy to slice, making them ideal for salads and appetizers. They are also wonderful as a finishing touch in baked fish dishes or pasta bianca, pasta dishes without tomato sauce, with these fresh tomatoes adding a burst of flavor.



Ciliegino Despite its diminutive size, the cherry tomato is considered the ancestor of the modern cultivated tomato and is believed to have first been domesticated in Mexico. The earliest mention of it in Europe was in the year 1623 in Swiss botanist Caspar Bauhin’s standard work *Pinax theatri botanici*. Thriving in the mineral-rich volcanic soil at the base of Mount Etna, these Sicilian tomatoes develop an exceptional flavor. Harvested at the peak of ripeness, they are made into sughi and bruschetta spreads. If you are lucky enough to find them at your local vegetable shop, you can savor them in a salad, paired with buffalo mozzarella, or simply as fresh tomatoes atop bruschetta.



Cuore di bue This distinctive oxheart tomato is thought to have originated in Russia in the late 19th century, and quickly found its way to Italy. It is undoubtedly the heavyweight among tomatoes, and not just in terms of taste. Its firm flesh and considerable size (up to 2+ pounds or 1,000 grams!) make it the number one choice in Italian kitchens. They are preferred to be eaten raw and still slightly green, as the acid to sugar ratio is ideal in terms of taste at this stage. That’s what makes *Cuore di bue* the centerpiece of salads and starters. Ideal for summer feasts, this tomato adds a flavorful touch to any meal.



Datterino This small but immensely flavorful date tomato originally comes from Sicily. It is characterized by its fine fruitiness and distinct sweetness. *Datterino* tomatoes are ideal for creating elegant sauces, pairing beautifully with tender shrimp, or enhancing vegetable dishes.



Grappolo This tomato, which is usually purchased still attached to the vine, is one of the most popular varieties in Italy and abroad. Its strong and hearty flavor has earned it a regular place on our plates. *Grappolo* tomatoes are best served in salads or with starters.