

Preserved Tomatoes are a Culinary Hit

Food preservation – it's an up and coming trend in today's hottest restaurants. From house-preserved vegetables and pickles to the use of high quality canned goods during the winter months, culinary experts are celebrating the art of food preservation. Even though forms of food preservation have been around for thousands of years, this culinary mainstay had nearly been abandoned in white tablecloth establishments. Chefs became spoiled to a wide variety of fresh ingredients available to them any day of the year. Feel like fresh raspberries for your dessert plate in January? No problem, just fly them in. With so much availability year round, the natural ebb and flow of seasonal produce became lost. Right or wrong, fresh became synonymous with better.

Preserving Sustainable Traditions

There's a new day dawning in the culinary kingdom. Instead of supporting an unsustainable food model that focuses on shipping fresh foods over long distances, chefs now celebrate a balanced approach to dining that honors the seasons, as well as food traditions. You can give credit to culinary pioneers like Alice Waters, founder of Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California, for putting the local food movement on the map. Waters was one of the first to recognize the value of highlighting simple produce picked fresh from the vine hours before dining. Soon chefs began to cultivate their own vegetable gardens and orchards in order to provide the best seasonal produce for their restaurants. It's a fitting tribute that this year's James Beard Top Chef recognition went to Dan Barber, a visionary in the farm-to-table restaurant movement. His New York restaurant, Blue Hill at Stone Barns, is set on a working farm with a menu focusing on a simple list of fresh ingredients cultivated on the farm.

A Renaissance for Preserved Tomatoes

This new culinary commitment to local, seasonal foods has fueled a renaissance for preserving produce - especially tomatoes. Throughout the country the tomato season provides a prolific harvest of flavorful, juicy tomatoes. Chefs asked the question: why not follow our ancestral food traditions and capture these ruby gems at their finest for use all year long? Some culinary stars latched onto this notion, bringing canning staff into the restaurant during the summer months to can tomatoes from local farms, calling out their house-preserved tomatoes on the menu all winter long. The art of tomato preservation also made an impression on celebrity chefs such as Mario Batali, who highlighted canning in a recent *Food Network* episode that included a visit to a tomato grower in San Marzano, Italy and a lesson in canning tomatoes. Restaurant menus also showcase handcrafted tomato sauces and condiments. The cranberry ketchup is a hit at Strings restaurant in Denver. And at Piedmont restaurant in Durham, North Carolina, you'll find dishes like goat camembert with green tomato preserves on the menu. Tomatoes, in all their glory, are even the focus for entire restaurant menus. At the San Francisco restaurant, Aqua, the Tomato Tasting Menu includes such specialties as tomato and parmesan ice cream sandwiches, chilled yellow taxi gazpacho, cherry tomato-crusting Atlantic cod, and sweet candied tomato.

Canned Tomatoes Honors Seasonality

Culinary experts understand that by preserving a fresh tomato, grown locally and plucked from the vine at its best, the end result is a much better product compared with an off-season, flavorless tomato picked green and shipped thousands of miles. Commercial tomato processors follow these same preservation ideals. Tomatoes are picked at their peak in the field, and then they are immediately whisked off to nearby plants where the tomatoes are canned within hours of harvest. Most chefs rely on commercially canned tomato products to provide a sustainable, delicious solution for tomato ingredients during the colder months. According to *Slate*, even superstar chef Thomas Keller of the French Laundry (Yountville, CA) calls upon canned tomatoes to flavor his award-winning restaurant menu. Canned tomato products are a staple in many favorite dishes such as stews, braised dishes, soups, grains, salsas, sauces, curries, vegetable dishes, pastas, and pizzas.

Preserving Sustainable, Healthy Tomato Traditions at Home

Chefs have always led the food revolution. So it shouldn't be a surprise to find that many people are interested in leading a more sustainable, balanced approach to eating at home. According to the May 2007 report, *Sustainability: Understanding the Consumer Perspective* by The Hartman Group, 93% of Americans have some sort of sustainability consciousness and 75% of these people believe that their purchases have an impact on society. By eating simple, locally grown, seasonal foods, you can reduce your carbon footprint (the amount of green house gas emissions caused in order to create a product). The most sustainable solution for enjoying tomatoes is to gobble up as many fresh, local tomatoes as you can during the tomato growing season. Slice them in sandwiches, chop them in salsas, and dice them in salads. But when the tomato growing season comes to an end, enjoy preserved tomatoes in their many forms to flavor your favorite foods. From lasagna and pizza to beef burgundy and tomato soup, preserved tomato products are economical food staples you can rely on.

Choosing preserved foods doesn't mean you must sacrifice on nutritional content. "Canned foods contain important nutrients and can be just as nutritious as fresh foods," says Ruth Frechman, MA, RD, dietitian and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association. "Often, produce is picked and canned within an hour, thus retaining the nutrients. The fat soluble vitamin, mineral, and fiber content is similar to fresh foods, although some of the heat sensitive nutrients may be lost in the canning process. Once in the can, the nutrients in fruits and vegetables remain stable. Some nutrients may be even higher in canned foods."

Indeed, preserved tomatoes have nutritional advantages that may outshine their fresh counterpart. "Lycopene is a powerful antioxidant that may help reduce the risk of heart disease and certain types of cancer. The lycopene content is higher in canned tomatoes than fresh tomatoes. Pureeing and heating foods in a little oil increases the absorption of lycopene," adds Frechman. Canned tomatoes provide 11.8 milligrams of lycopene per half cup compared with 3.7 milligrams found in one medium fresh tomato.

So think twice before you pick up a hard, flavorless tomato in the winter. Instead, cherish the time-worn tradition of preservation by choosing canned tomato products to let your favorite dishes shine all year long.

Chefs Celebrate Canned Tomatoes:

<http://www.chefs.com/ArticleDetails.aspx?ArticleID=515>

<http://www.foodnetwork.com/recipes/mario-batali/canned-tomatoes-recipe/index.html>

<http://www.realsimple.com/food-recipes/shopping-storing/food/best-use-canned-tomatoes-00000000000583/>