

Caprese Tomato Salad: The Ultimate Tomato Recipe, Essence Of August

Caprese salad is the world's best use of tomatoes and possibly the world's best salad. This classic summer dish from the **Island of Capri** off the west coast of Italy is the essence of August on a plate. It is the ultimate use of each of the ingredients. It is strictly seasonal and can only be made with the best and freshest components because there is no place to hide anything. On an August night, a big Caprese salad with an ear of **grilled tarragon corn** and a sparkling wine is a glorious dinner, even for a Meathead. Now this recipe is not exactly traditional, I have taken a few liberties and I think they make it better.

Tomatoes. The core of the dish, the foundation, the essence is the freshest, ripest, juiciest, sweetest summer tomatoes. I prefer tomatoes from a cool climate which, like grapes, swell with juice and sugar in the daytime, and retain their tartness during the cool evenings. In Southern climes, the hot nights tend to diminish the acidity. I want tomatoes that have both juice and meat. The juice, and the jelly that holds the seeds teem with flavor, and, when sliced, they bleed and mix with the oil and vinegar. Roma tomatoes and other egg shaped varieties work, but I prefer globe shaped bulbs because they tend to have more juice. No pink rocks need apply.

Basil. Basil abounds in summer, so use only fresh leaves. I especially like this dish with Thai basil,

which is a bit stronger than regular basil. And in case you're wondering, that purple thing in the picture is a Thai basil flower. And you must use fresh leaves. Dried herbs just don't cut it in this dish. You can use large leaves and roll them like a cigar and cut them into thin ribbons, called a *chiffonade*, but I prefer to use whole small leaves from just below the flowers.

Cheese. The original recipe calls for water buffalo mozzarella cheese, and it is wonderful that way, but I prefer the more flavorful, more textural **Parmigiano-Reggiano** from Italy. It is called the king of cheeses for a reason, and there is no substitute. Most definitely not the stuff called parmesan in the green toilet paper tube. Click the link to learn why. Most of it is 18 months old, but if you can find it older, go for it. And don't grate it. Chip it off the block so there are chunks of varying size and bursts of crunchy flavor.

If you use mozz, use only fresh, milky cheese, packed in its watery whey. Slice it thin (not an easy task), and be prepared to add more oil and vinegar because the cheese soaks it up. Or go crazy and use both cheeses.

Balsamic. The original in Italy does not have vinegar, but I think balsamic takes it over the top. Use a good balsamic vinegar. OK, the really good stuff, **Balsamico Tradizionale or Balsamico Condimento** is very expensive, so here's a trick. Get a nice grocery store balsamic and pour the whole bottle into a saucepan. Boil it until it reduces by half.

No more. When you're done reducing it, you'll have a thicker, almost syrupy sweet-tart vinegar, perfect for drizzling on all salads. But don't reduce it more than half. Cheap grocery store balsamics have sugar added, and if you reduce it too much the bubbles will get thick and the vinegar will get gooey as the sugar caramelizes. If this happens, you'll have killer balsamic candy, but not the balsamic syrup you want for the ultimate Caprese salad**d**.

Olive oil. This dish is the reason why they make expensive extra virgin oil. The best, usually bright green, has a strong olive aroma and a peppery aftertaste, and is far more than empty calories. It is a flavoring ingredient. I prefer it straight, from Italy, Spain, or California, with no garlic or other flavoring. Again, caprese salad is all about the purity of the ingredients**ts**.

Salt. Use a large grain salt like sea salt or kosher salt so there are pops of flavor**or**.

Onion. The Italian version has no onion, but the French version does, and I side with the French here. Use thinly sliced sweet or red onions. I love the onion, but my wife doesn't care for it raw, so you don't see any in the photo (the sacrifices one makes for love). Thin slices or rings are better than chopped so people who don't like raw onion can remove them easily. They also look better**ter**.

Recipe

Serves. 2

Preparation time. 10 minutes

Serve with. A crusty bread to mop up the juices and a crisp white **wine.**

Ingredients

3 large fresh vine ripe globe-shaped tomatoes

2 pinches of **coarse** sea salt

4 tablespoons of chips **of aged Parmigiano-**
Reggiano cheese

15 small leaves fresh basil, or 5 large leaves

1/2 teaspoon fresh oregano, chopped

1 tablespoon extra virgin olive oil

2 tab**lespoons balsamic** vinegar

Do this

1) The sequence of ingredients is important. First, slice the tomatoes thick, at least 1/4 inch, and lay them down. If you use mozzarella, alternate the disks of cheese with the tomato slices and spread the out, alternating, like a blackjack dealer.

2) Now sprinkle on the salt so it can start pulling out tomato juice. Not too much because the Parm is salty. The parm goes on next. Then the oregano and small basil leaves. If you are using large leaves, stack them, roll them into a green cigarette, and chop them crosswise *into a chiffonade* of thin ribbons before sprinkling them on.

3) Don't mix the oil and vinegar. Drizzle them on separately so the colors show. Go easy, you can

always add more, and I set them on the table so people can do just that if they wish. If time permits, let the salad sit for about 5 minutes so the salt can coax out some of the juices and they can mingle with the oil and vinegar.