
I CAN AND YOU CAN TOO!

A Tale of Canned Tomatoes

STORY AND PHOTO BY LEAH WILSON

The summer that prompted me to can, I stood elated and dismayed in a beautiful patch of ripe tomatoes that threatened to rot in place if I did not do something. I was a new mother in search of good food. There wasn't anything stopping me from getting perfectly acceptable tomatoes from the grocery. Each uniform can of store-bought tomatoes, with its smiling label and clever marketing jingle contained 16 fluid ounces of tomatoes and immeasurable mystery. Organic or not, those fruits were grown and processed hundreds or thousands of miles away by people I was only haphazardly connected to and they traversed a food system that was complex and vast.

So, I decided to spend a little more time with my grandparents and to learn a few things about food preservation, namely, what to do in the middle of a tomato glut. My grandparents have continued to carry and pass on many of the food traditions they learned from their stout, German immigrant parents.

The angry hiss of the pressure canner was a little disconcerting at first as my Grandmother released the petcock and steam billowed from the tiny escape hatch. She only did it for a second or two, just to provide me with a glimpse of the tomato tempest raging inside the "kitchen bomb" as I had affectionately dubbed it. With an imagination bent on catastrophism, I had visions of a new skylight over the stove.

"Now don't ever do this!" She demanded. "Let it de-pressurize on its own while you get a cup of coffee and clean out the sink."

"Got it!" I peeped as I took two conspicuous and cowardly steps backward.

By evening in Grandma's kitchen, the hundreds of ripe-to-perfection tomatoes that had sprawled on every surface in the kitchen, were now winking at us from 32 jewel-red quart jars. If it hadn't filled an entire day with labor, it would have seemed like a miracle. As it was, there was something uniquely satisfying about the whole process of picking round, twinkling fruits in the early morning; washing, coring and peeling them after lunch; gently packing the peeled whole fruits into sterilized and steaming hot jars; and then learning to manage the inner tumult of the pressure canner without creating violent explosions and tomato shrapnel. And although it was definitely work, it wasn't difficult or complicated, like I thought it would be. In fact, it was very productive social time. My Grandmother and I had tomato-bonded.

The next morning, I clunked down the basement steps to my Grandmother's cellar, as I had done so many times as a child. I carefully shelved the tomatoes and thought about how nice it is to have gained an adult's appreciation of the food in that cellar.



To have learned how work done socially is more like play. My mother, who took up canning in earnest shortly after I was born, said, "Home-grown and home-canned foods taste so good *because they taste like home*. That sounds so cliché, so simplistic. But there's nothing more satisfying than that."

I CAN AND YOU CAN CAN TOO

For those new to canning, tomatoes are a great food to start with for several reasons. They are easy to grow and gardeners usually have them in surplus. They are also easy to process and store safely, and home-canned tomatoes are delicious, convenient and versatile.

Whether you grow them yourself or purchase them from a farmer during the season's peak, choose tomatoes that are perfectly ripe, allowing for about 3 pounds of fresh tomato input per quart of canned output. Choose heirloom tomatoes for their rainbow of colors and flavors when available. Keep in mind, however, that certain colors, like the deep shades of 'Black Krim' or 'Cherokee Purple' may look less-than-fresh to those used to bright red tomatoes and may require good labeling if you decide to use them. I made the mistake of combining purple and red tomatoes one year and spent the winter reassuring myself, jar after jar that they were fit to eat.

When you are ready to begin canning, decide whether you

ROASTED GREEN CHILI SALSA

(adapted from *Preserving the Taste* by, Edon Waycott)

4 large green chilies, preferably Anaheims
2 small onions, finely chopped
4 tablespoons olive oil
6 cloves garlic, minced
2 large or 3 medium tomatoes, seeded and diced (about 1 pound)
4 tablespoons tomato paste
1 teaspoon salt
1 ½ teaspoons dried ground coriander
¼ teaspoon crushed red pepper
½ teaspoon chili powder

Broil the chilies on a baking sheet 4 inches from the heat for 30 minutes, turning to blacken all sides. Remove, and when cool enough to handle, remove the stems and seeds.

Sauté the onions in olive oil in a large non-reactive saucepan over medium heat until soft. Add the garlic and cook, stirring, for 3 to 4 minutes or more.

Puree the chilies and tomatoes in a food processor. Add the puree, the tomato paste, salt, coriander, red pepper, and chili powder to the onions. Cook for 20 minutes, stirring occasionally, until the mixture has thickened slightly. Ladle into 2 hot sterilized pint jars. Wipe the rims clean with a damp towel.

Seal with new lids and metal rings. Process in a hot-water bath for 15 minutes. Remove, cool, check seals, label and store (see your canning manual for complete instructions or download a pamphlet from ISU Extension website: www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM638.pdf).

will use a Water Bath Canner or a Pressure Canner. The former is much cheaper, easy to use and perfectly suited to canning high acid fruits like tomatoes. The latter is much more expensive, but you can use it to can a great variety of foods like sauces, soups and even meats. And really, pressure canners needn't be intimidating. Modern canners are safe to use if, like any other appliance, you follow the instructions and heed safety precautions.

After you choose your canner, you will need canning jars, metal bands and new, unused metal lids. Most sources advise against reusing odd food jars for canning as you will increase the likelihood of broken jars and a broken heart. You will also want to check all of your jars for cracks, nicks and other imperfections that will prevent a proper seal. Other equipment you will need includes a large measuring cup, jar lifter, long-handled spoon, a canning funnel, a food mill for juice-making and cooking pots needed for preparation. Most grocery and general stores will carry basic canning supplies, but try www.Lehmans.com if you can't easily find what you need.

Next, decide on a preparation method: whole tomatoes or juices are often the dilemma for novices. Avoid the temptation to launch into complex recipes with multiple ingredients unless you are confident that you have the necessary equipment to do it right. Although there are many exciting recipes involving tomatoes, some are low-acid concoctions that don't lend themselves to simple water bath canning. For those who simply won't be satisfied by jars of whole tomatoes or juice, try making a small batch of Roasted Green Chili Salsa. You won't use up a huge mass of tomatoes this way, but you'll enjoy mighty tasty results. This recipe (see sidebar) is safe for water bath canning.

While it's always more fun to learn culinary skills from a seasoned friend or family member, there are food preservation classes available in many communities and, of course, dozens of written resources on the topic for those who want to teach themselves. No matter how you get started, a good book on canning is a necessity. There are many, but a favorite is *The Busy Person's Guide to Preserving Food*, by Janet Chadwick (Storey Publishing, 1995). Although there is enormous variety when it comes to canning recipes, one needs to obediently follow the rules regarding safe processing--and with precision. Iowa State Extension is a tremendous resource, and you should never hesitate to inquire about canning procedure or food safety. Visit www.Extension.IAState.edu/foodsafety/ and click on "Consumer Information" for bushels of great tips and guidelines for safe food preservation.

Lena's Pumpkin Patch Gift Shop
835 Bolton Manor Road, Springville, IA
OPEN 11AM - 6PM • SEPT. 28 THROUGH OCT. 31
CLOSED WEDNESDAYS • OPEN HALLOWEEN DAY FROM 11AM - 6PM

Idyllic Country Setting For You, Your Family And Friends To Enjoy All The Traditions Of Autumn... Pumpkins, Gourds, Squash, Jam, Decorative Corn, Corn Shocks, Corn Maze And Much More!

Fun For Everyone!
Serving the Iowa City, Mt. Vernon, Cedar Rapids, Marion, Anamosa and Springville area since 2006

For Weekend Events And More Information Visit Us On The Web At www.justlena.com

Hwy. 151 west to Springville road (x20) then south one mile to Bolton Manor Road then west 1/8th mile.

319 854 7097
justlena@netins.net

INN Springville
A Year-Round Retreat in the Heart of Grant Wood Country. Innkeeper Lena Gilbert Invites You to Treat Yourself to a Stay at The Inn Springville.

319-854-7097
258 BROADWAY
SPRINGVILLE, IOWA
www.innspringville.com