

PANZANELLA

Those wonderful tomatoes now available at the Farmers Market are also great for one of my favorite summer salads—the Tuscan bread and tomato salad called panzanella. Like gazpacho last week, panzanella was originally a way for the poor country folk to use up stale bread and the overabundance of fresh tomatoes—but now it's become a trendy dish that the simple Tuscan farmers would never recognize. But I like the old way best.

Take a loaf of stale Italian or sweet French bread, or even sourdough for a California twist. (If the bread isn't stale, tear it into chunks and let it dry out in a 250 degree oven for half an hour or so.) Soak the chunks of bread in a bowl of cold water for a minute or so, then remove and squeeze the water out. Tear the moistened bread into bite-size chunks and drop them into a large mixing bowl.

Take a couple of pounds or so of ripe delicious tomatoes. I like the ratio of one part bread to two parts tomatoes. Core and cut the tomatoes into chunks. I like to use some different heirloom tomatoes for a variety of colors and tomato flavors. Add that to the bread. Add about half a red onion, peeled and very finely sliced.

(If you think your onion may be too strong, slice it before you begin the recipe and put it into a small bowl. Pour some very hot or boiling water over the onion slices and let it sit while you prepare the bread and tomatoes. Then drain it and add it in. That will take the bite out of the onions.) Add a couple of tablespoons of red wine vinegar, about twice that much extra-virgin olive oil, and some salt and freshly ground pepper to taste. Then tear some fresh basil leaves into the bowl and stir gently. That's all there is to it.

There are all sorts of variations on the dish. You can add capers if you like them, or pitted kalamata olives. Or you can add shavings of a good Parmesan cheese, or chunks of a good fresh mozzarella. You can use balsamic vinegar if you prefer, or lemon juice, and once I made a delicious panzanella using raspberry vinegar. Some folks like to put cucumber and sweet red pepper pieces in their panzanella. I saw one recipe that included canned tuna and chopped hard-boiled eggs, but we won't go there.

And there are different ways of handling the bread. Some cooks prefer to use croutons instead of the moistened bread, which they add just before serving. Martha Stewart lightly toasts thick slices of Italian bread, which she tears into the salad just before serving.

I like to serve panzanella as an accompaniment to a Swingles marinated tri-tip, cooked in the smoke oven, with a green salad on the side and a rich Andrae's Bakery dessert to follow. But it's also a delicious lunch all by itself, with some fruit and cheese afterwards.

Another easy tomato salad is to simply core and cut some ripe heirloom tomatoes into bite-size chunks. Add about a tablespoon of mayonnaise, which will mix with the juices of the tomatoes to make a dressing, plus some salt and pepper to taste. Then stack some basil leaves and roll the stack into a tight roll like a miniature basil cigar, and slice thinly. This will leave you with a pile of basil threads, which is called a *chiffonade* by the fancy restaurants. Sprinkle this over the tomatoes and serve.

If you can find it, *buffala* is a type of Italian mozzarella that often comes in small balls like marbles. Chunks of tomato mixed with *buffala* balls makes a delicious first course, dressed with a little extra-virgin olive oil and some basil. Or alternate slices of red heirloom tomatoes and fresh mozzarella cheese on a platter, dress with some salt and pepper and a little extra-virgin olive oil, and sprinkle some torn basil over the top for an easy first course that mirrors the colors in the Italian flag. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.