



## San Marzano tomatoes are 'God's juicy gift to the world'

■ Reputation for perfection is well-deserved

By J.C. REID

In the food-mad country of Italy there are several ingredients that are venerated above all others. Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, Prosciutto di Parma ham and Aceto Balsamico Tradizionale di Modena vinegar are just a few that inspire a fanatical following. These ingredients also are well-known and widely available in the United States. However, one ingredient that is revered in Italy but is less well-known here is the San Marzano tomato.

Many Americans grew up with, and still mainly eat, the commercially grown tomatoes we get at the supermarket. Certainly acceptable, but for anyone who has chomped into a Yellow Brandywine, Black Krim or other heirloom variety, the difference is palpable. In Italy, the most famous variety is the San Marzano. Ask any Italian, and he'll tell you that this plum tomato is nothing less than God's juicy Italian gift to the world.

What's so great about San Marzano tomatoes? I'd eaten them on trips to Italy  
*Please see **MARZANO**, Page F4*

# MARZANO: Inspires devotion among chefs and connoisseurs

**CONTINUED FROM PAGE F1** and even cooked with them here in Houston. For me, the reality matched the hype. Intense sweetness combined with a subtle acidity created the perfectly balanced tomato.

To get an expert opinion, I contacted Houston restaurateur Tony Vallone, who frequently travels to Italy to procure the best ingredients and partners with Italian producers to create his own brands of olive oil and wine.

"There are tomatoes and then there are San Marzanos," Vallone explained. "And they're the only type of tomatoes that I use. They have a unique blend of acidity and sweetness, they're plump, and they're easy to cook with. They're truly unique."

Acquiring real San Marzano tomatoes in Houston can be a challenge. Here are tips and information that will help you to identify and locate them.

San Marzanos are almost exclusively canned. Fresh ones can be found in Italy, but almost never in the United States. Canned San Marzanos are whole, peeled and packed in puree. They are mainly used for making tomato sauces for pasta and pizza. The sauce for true Neapolitan-style pizza, or *Vera Pizza Napoletana*, is made with San Marzanos.

These tomatoes are named after one of the towns in which they are grown, San Marzano sul Sarno in Southern Italy. This area south of Naples is known for a temperate climate and volcanic soil courtesy of nearby Mount Vesuvius, both of which contribute to the Marzanos' unique flavor.

For all practical purposes, you will find three types of canned San Marzanos in Houston: those that are grown and canned in the U.S., those that are grown and canned in Italy but are not certified, and those that are certified and guaranteed to have been grown and processed in the Campania region of Italy.

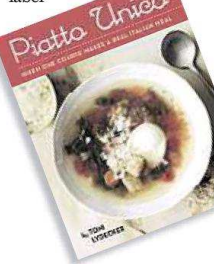
Yes, there are some companies that grow and can San Marzanos in the United States (one company is called Simpson Imports). These are not ideal, but if they are the only ones available, they are better than most supermarket

tomatoes if you're making sauce. If the label claims they are "San Marzano" but lacks the "Product of Italy" stamp, you can assume it was grown in the United States.

You also will find canned tomatoes labeled "San Marzano" and "Product of Italy." Some may even say "Certified." In most cases, these will be true San Marzano tomatoes grown and processed in Campania though not actually certified by the European Union and Italian government. A typical brand found in Houston is Cento Fine Foods.

Unfortunately, there are some producers who sell lower-quality, counterfeit versions of San Marzanos that include the correct labeling but are not grown in Campania and may not even be the right cultivar. For this reason, a "protected" version of San Marzanos was created.

A can of true San Marzano tomatoes will be labeled "Pomodoro San Marzano dell'Agro Sarnese-Nocerino DOP." The most important label



to look for here is "DOP" which stands for *Denominazione d'Origine Protetta* (Protected Designation of Origin). This is a certification bestowed by the European Union and administered by the Italians that guarantees the can of San Marzano you are buying is the real deal.

In Italy, this certification is administered by the *Consorzio di tutela del Pomodoro San Marzano dell'Agro Sarnese-Nocerino*, or the San Marzano Consortium. To guarantee that the San Marzanos you are buying are real, look for labels from both the European Union DOP and the San Marzano Consortium.

Central Market also has its own store-brand DOP San Marzano. Phoenicia



LAKE ISLE PRESS

**OUTSTANDING:** San Marzano tomatoes' intense sweetness combined with a subtle acidity creates the perfectly balanced tomato that truly makes a difference when used in dishes such as Chicken Braised with Sweet Bell Peppers.

Specialty Foods carries a true, imported DOP San Marzano (Rega brand).

Now that you have the knowledge to acquire these tomatoes that inspire such devotion among chefs and connoisseurs throughout Italy and the U.S., try some recipes for yourself.

Follow J.C. Reid at [twitter.com/houston\\_foodie](https://twitter.com/houston_foodie) and his blog, [jcreidtx.com](http://jcreidtx.com).

## MARINARA SAUCE

- 2 teaspoons olive oil
- 2 garlic cloves, peeled and chopped
- 28 ounces canned San Marzano peeled tomatoes
- Handful of fresh basil leaves, torn
- ¼ teaspoon sugar
- Salt and freshly ground pepper, to taste

■ Heat olive oil in a deep, heavy-bottomed pot. Add garlic and saute until very fragrant and golden.

- Crush tomatoes before adding to the pot. Add tomatoes and their juices to the hot oil.
- Add basil, sugar and season with salt and pepper. Simmer for 20 minutes.
- May be stored in the refrigerator for up to one week or in the freezer for two months, stored in an airtight container.

Makes about 1 quart

## CHICKEN BRAISED WITH SWEET BELL PEPPERS

From *Piatto Unico: When One Course Makes a Real Italian Meal* by Toni Lydecker (Lake Isle Press, \$19.95).

- 1 chicken, (3 to 4 pounds), cut into pieces and washed well
- 1 medium onion
- 2 or 3 parsley sprigs
- Sea salt or kosher salt
- Extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ cup red or white wine
- 2 small red and/or yellow

- low bell peppers, cut into small squares
- 2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 3 to 4 anchovy filets, pinched into small pieces
- ½ cup chopped canned San Marzano tomatoes
- Freshly ground black pepper

■ Combine wing ends, neck, and cleaned gizzard in a medium saucepan; if the chicken was sold with head and feet, throw them in too. Trim and peel onion, adding the ends and skin to the saucepan; chop and reserve the onion. Cut off the parsley stems; add to the saucepan; coarsely chop and reserve the leaves. Cover the contents of the saucepan with water, add 1 teaspoon salt and bring to a boil; reduce the heat and simmer, skimming off any frothy scum and fat that rise to the top, for 20 minutes to 1 hour.

■ With paper towels, blot chicken pieces dry and sprinkle with salt. Over medium-high heat, heat enough oil to coat the bottom of a large skillet. Cook chicken, turning with tongs, until browned on all sides. Lower the heat and add wine and about the same amount of broth (dip

it out of the saucepan & pour through a strainer the skillet); stir and cook until liquid is reduced, 10 minutes. Transfer to a platter, pouring any juices over it.

■ Add a little more olive oil to the same skillet. Over medium heat, sauté the chopped onion until golden brown; add the bell pepper and garlic and sauté 10 minutes longer. Stir in anchovies, pressing them into the sauce with a wooden spoon until they semi-dissolve. Add the tomato and an equal amount of broth.

■ Return the chicken to the skillet and stir to combine with the pepper (bell pepper mixture). Simmer, partially covered for about 30 minutes or until the chicken is tender. Add and add more salt (if needed) and pepper. Garnish with chopped parsley leaves.

**Note:** If you're short on time, buy prepared chicken broth rather than make it. Choose an organic one with reduced sodium; minimum of additives; any leftover broth to use in steamed couscous or go with the chicken.

Makes 4 to 6 servings

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