

episode 83 show notes and advice

Episode Description

Now in peak tomato season, you may be wondering what else you could be doing with the fruits of your labour once harvested. In this week's episode, Sarah talks to Claire Thomson, professional chef and cookery writer, about their mutual passion for the humble tomato. From a brief history of this versatile fruit - of which there are no less than 10,000 varieties, to a multitude of ways to cook with them - including some of the recipes featured in Claire's latest book: *Tomato: 80 Recipes Celebrating the Extraordinary Tomato*. It's not often we come across a recipe book focusing entirely on one fruit or vegetable and the many things you can do with it - from salads to curries, chutneys to puddings, so when we do, at the right time of year, and on a subject Sarah is passionate about, it's definitely one for this podcast.

In this episode, discover...

- A brief history of the humble tomato
- How Claire's love of travel led her to cooking professionally
- Why Claire chose to write a recipe book entirely about tomatoes
- The 'burning of the tomato' (instead of the aubergine or pepper) for a delicious Burnt Tomato Salsa recipe
- The Frying Pan Pizza
- Sarah's pick of recipes from Claire's book: *Tomato*

episode 83 advice sheet

Sarah and Claire share a love of the humble tomato, which makes it into each of their top three passions. For Sarah, the tomato joins her tulip and dahlia obsession; while for Claire the tomato is up there with her other top ingredients of lemons and the all-important olive oil.

Claire's background

Having studied journalism at university, Claire had her heart set on travelling, perhaps in part due to growing up in Zimbabwe and other countries outside of the UK. On graduation, she set off around the world and spent much of her twenties cooking professionally in restaurants around Australia, Thailand and China. She loved the excitement and machismo of the professional kitchen and quickly got the bug for cooking. A few years on and as children came along, Claire decided to turn her hand to writing about what she was cooking. **"We live in an age where we cook in 30 minutes and with only five ingredients, and while that's useful for home and family life, sometimes it's really nice to take a recipe and know the history of it and why you make it",** which is

what Claire loves to discover. Her editor, Sarah Lavelle, who has been with Claire right from the start, is also her publisher at Quadrille. Claire recalls writing her first book while sitting in a café and breastfeeding her 10-week-old baby. Now, almost 10 years on, Claire has seven books to her name and is a professional chef and author.

Why Tomatoes?

Besides being a favourite ingredient, Claire has spent the last three years working with the Isle of Wight Tomato Farm. They send her their tomatoes and Claire comes up with recipes for them. A natural synergy soon emerged, and it made sense to do a book solely on tomatoes. There are 80 recipes in total, of which roughly two thirds are using fresh tomatoes and a third with tinned or stored tomatoes, although Claire admits she could have written double that amount, as tomatoes are so incredibly versatile. “When you look at the journey of where they started in the world and where they’ve gone, there’s just a gallimaufry of cuisines and cooking (. . .) with tomatoes.”

A brief history of Tomatoes

We don’t consider a tomato a foreign fruit, however it actually originates from South America and was brought to Europe with the Spanish invasion. From there it was taken into Northern Africa, India and beyond, to where we are today, with every country and cuisine having adopted it as their own. “Whilst we can get stuck in that mozzarella, tomato, basil mindset, if we look at where tomatoes are used in the world, the scope for cookery is insane.”

Sarah’s picks from Claire’s book (all recipes included at the end of the podcast notes)

Butter Chicken

Claire describes this as a lovely creamy tomato-based curry, and very rich. As with many of her recipes, Claire likes to draw on inspiration from her extensive travels, though feels it’s important to remain reverential to the origins of your cooking and to acknowledge the people who taught you those recipes.

Pizza in a frying pan

Already a huge pizza fan, Sarah has always enjoyed her proper wood-fired pizza oven at home, especially the slightly ceremonial aspect of lighting it, but loves the idea of doing a pizza in a frying pan, which Claire says is actually very easy to do. The frying pan pizzas came about from having to live without a kitchen in a temporary house move during the pandemic. “The kids kept asking for pizzas and we found that frying pan pizzas are just as good as those done in the oven.

They puff up and have that bubbly, chewy texture.” You can either have them without cheese, add parmesan over the top once cooked, or briefly pop them under the grill to melt some cheese over the top.

Roasted Tomato Falafels

For a more Middle Eastern use of the tomato, the roasted tomato falafels are great and the addition of the tomato into the falafel mix, makes them really moist and juicy and negates the ‘dry rubble’ that sometimes passes as falafels.

Preserved tomatoes

Tomato was never intended to be a book just for the summer using only fresh tomatoes, but a collection of recipes to take you through the seasons, including cooking with preserved tomatoes, tinned tomatoes, and pureed tomatoes. Claire has several recipes for tomato chutneys and ketchups at the beginning of the book, as well as tomato and chilli jams and various other condiments you can make with tomatoes – all great to do if you have a glut or are wanting to store them away.

“Tomato puree has often been looked upon as an inferior ingredient, but good tomato puree is such an asset to have in your store cupboard and the good stuff should taste of sundried tomatoes. It’s like distilled tomatoes – super strong and cheap to buy and what they deliver in flavour is brilliant.”

Sarah recalls visiting an Italian farmhouse kitchen and the process they used to bottle the whole harvest. They had a massive cauldron on the fire, and it was actually a Ukrainian cook who took out the tomatoes and wrapped them in jerseys and blankets to allow them to cool really slowly, which apparently makes them much longer storing.

Burnt Tomato Salsa

Having heard of the ‘burning of the aubergine’, from Ottolenghi and Honey & Co. and the ‘burning of the pepper’, Sarah loves the idea of the ‘burnt tomato’.

Claire: This salsa is a really punchy flavoursome condiment to serve alongside Mexican cuisine – with tacos etc. The burnt tomato gives a beautiful texture, and by blistering and blackening the skins, they combust within themselves which really ramps up and harnesses the flavour. Once blackened, chop them up with lots of lime (using the skins) and add blackened garlic, red onion and fresh coriander. Tomatoes have everything, from acidity to sweetness, and carry salt beautifully to bring out the umami flavour. Mexican cuisine is so good for using all these flavours in tandem.

Grilled sardines with grated tomato

Sarah: Having spent considerable time in Greece, and cooked with many Greeks, mainly women, Sarah finds they always grate their tomatoes, leaving the skin on, which gives them a different flavour as well as texture.

Claire: The grating of the tomato breaks down all the seed and membrane to give it a delicate viscous texture suited to something like a barbecued sardine. The play of flavours is nice on the palate, with the mix of the char of the grilled sardines, the texture of the tomato, and the addition of some grated ginger gives a bit of heat and freshness.

Claire's favourite tomato varieties

Tinned - the San Marzano tomato, as they have a beautiful, dense flesh that can carry more flavour.

Fresh - in the tomato season as we are now, on a hot day, no tomato isn't a good tomato, however the shape and size will determine how to cook with them. For example, a big beef tomato, thinly sliced makes a lovely tomato carpaccio, with an olive tapenade and rocket served as a salad. Whatever tomato comes my way, will tell me what I'm going to do with it - like giving a cherry tomato a tiny burst of heat that just combusts them and make them extra juicy and flavoursome.

Healthy tomatoes

Sarah has been trialling quite a few of the red and black tomato varieties at Perch Hill. The red pigment is from the lycopene and the black is from anthocyanin - packed full of antioxidants - also present in blueberries and other purple fruits and veg. Two wonderful red and black varieties are:

- 'Black Krim' from the Crimea
- 'Indigo Rose' a similar colouring to Black Krim

Claire admits she hasn't grown any herself, besides the cherry tomatoes the family have growing in pots in the garden, however she did come across a delicious looking Bull's Heart tomato (black and red stripe), through a heritage seed grower on Instagram. She's looking forward to installing the greenhouse at their new house for growing a wider range of varieties especially as tomatoes like:

- heat
- time on the vine
- a struggle for water at the end (i.e. don't overwater)

Behind the lens of *Tomato* - Sam Folan

Sam is a genius behind the camera lens who's done three of Claire's books. Claire has no pretensions with her food and likes to shoot it as it is (no hairspray for glossy effects!), and more importantly, all the food made in the shooting of a cookbook is eaten.

Claire's top recipe recommendation from *Tomato*

The Ricotta and mustard bread-and-butter pudding with roasted cherry tomatoes, which is essentially a bread-and-butter pudding slathered with Dijon mustard and ricotta and then roasted hard with lots of cherry tomatoes. It comes out as a lovely, bubbling bread-and-butter pudding but savoury - although you might need a lie down after you've eaten it.

Claire Thomson's latest book: *Tomato: 80 Recipes Celebrating the Extraordinary Tomato*

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