

There's a Chef in your Freezer

There's a Chef in your Freezer

fast, fabulous, delicious Mediterranean-inspired
recipes your family, friends, and you will love

by Richard Azzolini

There's a Chef in your Freezer

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This book is dedicated to my three muses—

Vera Azzolini

Mary Bavaro

Dolores Bavaro Azzolini

... three wonderful women who allowed a young boy to observe,
stir, and taste as they worked their kitchen magic.

Thank you... I loved you all so much.

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Introduction

In a perfect world everyone would have as much time as they wanted to prepare delicious meals for themselves and their loved ones. Unfortunately, most people today find it difficult to take the time to prepare meals starting from scratch. After a long day of work who feels like coming home and roasting a bunch of peppers or making a batch of fresh tomato sauce? But there is another approach....

If you are willing to do some preparation when the time is more convenient, you can have many delicious edible building blocks at your fingertips that you can quickly assemble into a superb meal. I call these building blocks “sunshine in the freezer.” What are they? Blanched and peeled tomatoes, roasted peppers, sautéed wild mushrooms, meltingly soft leeks and onions, and lots of roasted garlic, purée of squash, aromatic chicken stock, purée of basil, and a rosemary and thyme marinade—all ingredients that freeze well and will facilitate your turning a steaming bowl of soup, some pasta, a chicken breast, or a nice salmon filet into a feast in short order.

I wrote this book for people who enjoy good simple food with a Mediterranean accent. The first part of the book focuses on how to prepare the edible building blocks you will need to create the recipes in the second part of the book. Every restaurant kitchen has its own *mise en place*, the chef’s version of edible building blocks. This book will show you how to create a similar set of building blocks for your home kitchen. The building blocks can be used the next day, the next week, or kept in the freezer to be pulled out at a moment’s notice from your frozen pantry. Unlike raw ingredients, the building blocks freeze beautifully, without losing their texture, flavor, or wholesomeness. The recipes in the second part of this book are designed to allow you to create delicious meals when time is at a premium.

While you can make building blocks at any time of year, during the late summer and fall, when produce is at its peak of ripeness and flavor, and at its lowest price, take advantage! Become a gourmand squirrel and stock up to make the building blocks for the dreary winter ahead.

When preparing the building blocks, I encourage you to invite some fellow food lovers and make it a party. Why not buy a whole case of

red peppers, shiitake mushrooms, golden onions, or a pile of chicken bones, and process them together to the accompaniment of a good glass of wine and your favorite music? Then, you can divide up the resulting building blocks by weight or volume—everyone gets to take home their share. Another wonderful advantage of group cooking is wholesale buying. When you can buy produce by the case you will realize substantial savings.

You can drink, dish and groove while you prepare the ingredients for great meals to come. Such a party is like an updated quilting bee, except that instead of coming together to make a quilt from squares of material, you are creating edible building blocks. What a great way to spend a rainy afternoon—creating your own freezer-full of sunshine.

Richard Azzolini

Visit my web site at www.chefaz.com

Contact Richard Azzolini to receive the Chef AZ Newsletter which will feature new recipes and other items of culinary interest.

Want a signed copy of this book? I will send you a signed dedication sticker you can place in the book. Just contact me.

Any comments, thoughts, and questions welcome. Wishing you many happy hours in the kitchen,

Richard Azzolini
'le chef'

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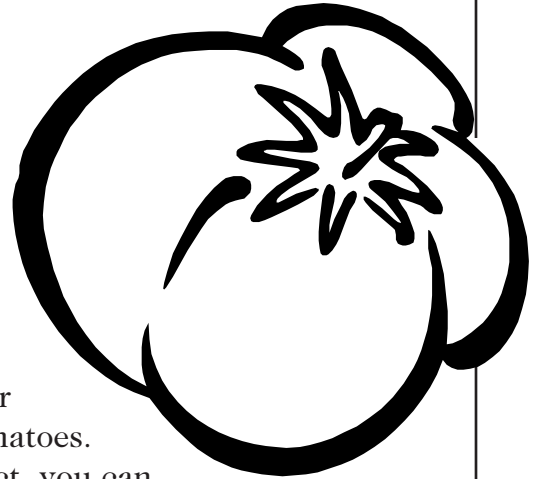
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Snail mail: Richard Azzolini, Cathedral Station, P.O. Box 1162, NY NY 10025



Building Blocks

Tomatoes

Succulent love apples, ripe, juicy tomatoes are among the kitchen's greatest treasures. Late summer and early autumn, when tomatoes are vine ripe, inexpensive, and bursting with flavor, is the best time to put up a large batch to use later when the summer sun fades.



Our tomato preparations will use beefsteak or any full-size tomatoes and plum or Roma tomatoes. The riper you can find them the better. In fact, you can often buy over-ripe tomatoes at a good discount from farm-stands and produce markets. Ask your greengrocer to save you the softies—they are culinary gold!

If the tomatoes need a little extra ripening, try this trick: put them in a brown paper bag with a banana, seal the bag, and put it in a cool place for a day or two. The ethylene gas the banana releases will ripen the tomatoes.

Concasse Tomatoes and Tomato Nectar

Beefsteak Tomatoes—concasse

You will need to process the tomatoes that you've brought home or grown before you can use them in many wonderful dishes. There are four steps; I recommend you process all the tomatoes through each step before you go on to the next step. The result of this process is known as concasse tomatoes.

1. Wash all the tomatoes in a large bowl of cool water with a drop of soap like Dr. Bronner's to remove any dirt. Rinse the tomatoes. Cut out the core and the stem spot—the spot where the tomato was attached to the stem—of each beefsteak tomato. There is a small tool called a *tomato shark*—it looks like a serrated mini melon baller—that makes this a one-second task.
2. Next, we want to remove the skins. The easiest way to do this is to drop the tomatoes into boiling water for a quick dip to loosen the skin. How long to dip is the question. The riper the tomato, the shorter the time necessary. The goal is to blanch just until the skin can be easily removed. Use one tomato to test the time needed: Take one tomato and drop it into the water; remove it after 30 seconds, and drop it into a pan of cold water. Now take a paring knife and see if the skin comes off easily. If not, return the test tomato to the boiling water for another dip and retest. Once you have determined the approximate time, you can process several tomatoes at once. Be careful not to overcook, or the tomatoes will become mushy and more difficult to work with. For best results, blanch as quickly as possible. Once you have blanched all the tomatoes, pull off the skins with a sharp paring knife. Save the skin—it's full of flavor. We will use it later.
3. Cut the tomatoes in half. It's important to make the cut in the right direction so you can squeeze the most out of the tomatoes. If you think of the stem end as the north pole and the opposite end as the south pole, then make the cut through the “equator.” Now, gently squeeze out the seeds. The easiest way to do this is to grasp the tomato-half in the palm of your hand, cut-side facing out, held perpendicular to the counter and over a bowl. Squeeze the tomato-half gently, and use the fingers of your other

hand to help dislodge the seeds and pulp so they fall into the bowl. If you find the tomato juice irritating to your skin, I suggest you use disposable vinyl or latex gloves, available at a drugstore.

The goal here is to remove as many of the seeds as possible. Seeds get hard when cooked and become slightly bitter. Remember, the Duchess of Windsor fired her chef when she found a seed in her tomato bisque. (I'm not suggesting you must remove every last seed but let the Duchess be your inspiration!) Save all the seeds and juice that you remove. You will use them to make tomato nectar.

4. The tomatoes are now ready to be used in recipes. They can be used whole or chopped into $\frac{1}{2}$ inch cubes.

This process results in a very refined tomato product. Making a tomato purée is actually simpler—we'll explain how at the end of this chapter.

But first let's not ignore the tomato seeds, skins and juice that we've set aside in preparing the concasse. They are full of flavor and will yield a wonderful tomato nectar.

Preparing tomato nectar

1. In a food processor or blender put all the skin, juice, and seeds. Process until liquified.
2. Pass the resulting liquid through a fine sieve or strainer. The best strainer for this purpose is called a *chinoise*. A *chinoise* is a conical strainer with a very fine mesh. I have found that the easiest way to extract the juice is to press and push down and against the side of the strainer with your fingers or a rubber spatula. The strainer should be fine enough to keep out the seeds—remember, the Duchess is watching!
3. To concentrate the flavor, bring the liquid to a boil. Lower the heat to a strong simmer and reduce by half, until it has the consistency of canned tomato juice (of course it will taste much better!)
4. Once the juice is sufficiently reduced, strain it.

5. The tomato nectar is now ready to use. If you like, you can continue to cook it. Eventually, it will become sauce-like in consistency and concentrated in flavor.

Variations

To make the tomato nectar even more interesting, you can add some of these flavor enhancers: onion, leek greens, Italian parsley stalks, garlic, roasted garlic skins (see p. 19), carrots, celery, and herbs such as thyme, rosemary, oregano, or bay leaf. The goal is to add a subtle flavoring, so don't go overboard. For each quart of juice, add at least 1 cup of rough-chopped vegetables. A few sprigs of fresh herbs will be fine.

This will produce a very delicious nectar which can be used as a drink (you never had a Bloody Mary so good), a poaching liquid for fish or chicken, a base for soup, or a "stock" for a great tomato risotto.



Oven Roasted Tomatoes and Tomato Purée

Plum tomatoes can be prepared using the concasse method above, but I find it simpler to oven roast them. Oven roasting makes for a more “rustic tomato,” but it is much easier to do. Good news for those of you who were anticipating nightmares from peeling all those tomatoes! Here are the steps:

Oven Roasted Plum Tomatoes

1. Wash the plum tomatoes thoroughly, drain them in a colander, and split them in half down the length of the tomato.
2. Scoop out the seeds and set aside. A melon baller makes this quick work. You can process the seeds the same way as for beef-steak tomato seeds (see above).
3. Lay the tomatoes in a baking dish which has been very lightly brushed with olive oil or sprayed with a non-stick olive oil spray. It's OK if the tomatoes overlap, but don't pile them up; it's better to use more pans. Non-stick pans work well for this purpose. Drizzle the tomatoes with a little olive oil and sprinkle lightly with sea salt and fresh-ground black pepper. (The olive oil can be omitted if you desire a fat-free purée, but the purée will not taste as good!)
4. Roast in a 350° oven until soft. This should take about one hour. Remove them from the oven.

The tomatoes are now ready to use. They can be used whole, diced, or processed into a smooth purée. One advantage of puréeing is that the skins will be pulverized and become part of the smooth sauce. This purée can be enhanced to make sauces and soups. I find a blender is indispensable in creating the tomato purée. Just add the following step to the previous ones:

Plum tomato purée

5. Allow the tomatoes to cool slightly. Fill the blender jar, but be careful not to over-fill it. Keep the lid slightly ajar when you turn on the blender to avoid a steam build-up, which can result in a spattered mess. (This rule applies whenever you are using a blender with warm ingredients.) It is a good idea to start the blender on a slow speed, then to finish on the highest speed.

You will be amazed at the result. The skins vanish into the purée. A food processor would chop up the tomatoes, but would leave bits of the skin recognizable—yuk! The blender totally pulverizes the skins. They become part of the smooth purée without the unpleasant texture tomato skins would otherwise impart. This purée will find uses in the chapters on sauces, soups, and salad dressings.

Oven-dried plum tomatoes

Follow the directions for the oven-roasted plum tomatoes through step 3. Roast the tomatoes in a 250° oven for 5 to 6 hours, until the tomatoes have shrunk by half their size. This will result in the tomatoes having a very intense flavor. They can be processed into a thick paste via the blender method, or used chopped or whole.

Oven-roasted Beefsteak Tomatoes

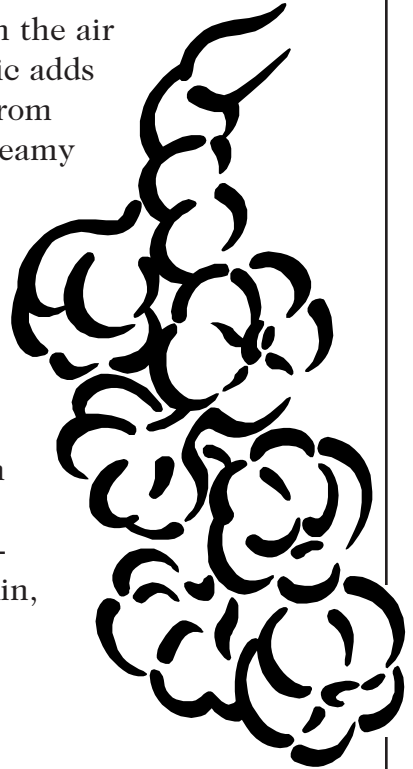
1. Wash and seed the tomatoes as discussed in the concasse preparation section above (p.11, steps 1 and 3) but omit the blanching (step 2).
2. Place the tomatoes cut side up into a baking dish prepared as for plum tomatoes. You can squeeze them in as tightly as you like but do not overlap them.
3. Drizzle with a little olive oil and sprinkle with sea salt and freshly ground black pepper.
4. Roast in a 350° oven until soft and lightly colored, approximately 60-75 minutes.
5. Remove from the oven. Unlike plum tomatoes, beefsteaks will release a lot of liquid during the cooking process.
6. Place the tomatoes in a colander and let the juices drain into a bowl. Save every drop! The juice can be processed as we did for the tomato nectar above (p.12), except for one difference. The olive oil will drain off with the liquid. I suggest you skim it off the surface and add it to the tomatoes.
7. There are two ways to process the tomatoes. The skins will slip off easily now. You can simply slip off the skins and leave the tomatoes whole, or process them in a blender as you would the plum tomatoes (p.14).

Given all the methods discussed in this chapter to prepare tomato building blocks, which method should you employ? The answer depends on how much effort you are willing to put in, and on the uses you will make of these building blocks. For soups and sauces the oven roasted purée works excellently. The concasse tomatoes are great for garnishes in salads and soups, and for adding color and flavor to our quick-sauté recipes.



Garlic

The smell of cooking garlic wafting through the air promises wonderful tastes to follow. Garlic adds its special magic to many savory dishes from simple pasta with garlic and olive oil to rich and creamy purée of garlic soup. (p.81) Marry garlic with tomatoes and you have a match made in heaven. Garlic is available year round, but if you are very lucky you may find new garlic—that is—garlic that has not been cured by drying. One September during a food mad trip to Paris, we found new garlic in the outdoor markets. It had a sweet, mild flavor. We sautéed mounds of wild mushrooms with the garlic and oven roasted many heads. It was a dream to eat. So if you can find it, use the new garlic. If not, look for plump cloves with tight outer skin, firm to the touch. Dull-looking cloves with loose papery skins or any that are soft to the touch or sprouting should be avoided.



For the recipes in this book we will be using cooked garlic. Cooking gives garlic a softer flavor. I love garlic and eat huge amounts of it, but I find raw garlic gives me heartburn. I know I'm not the only one who reacts this way, so I have adapted some traditional recipes using cooked garlic in place of raw. The recipes are still quite delicious.

My favorite way to prepare garlic as a building block is oven roasting.

Preparing Garlic by Oven-Roasting

It is very easy to roast garlic. Here are two methods, the whole-head roasting method, and the individual cloves roasting method.

Whole-head roasting method

1. Cut off the top $\frac{1}{2}$ inch of the crown of the garlic head, saving the top. Place the garlic head root-side-down on a sheet of foil that has been lightly coated with olive oil or sprayed with a non-stick spray. Drizzle a little olive oil and grind some fresh black pepper over the cut. (Be sure to use fresh ground pepper only; pre-ground pepper is a very poor substitute.) Replace the crown. Now bring up both sides of the foil and fold over to make a tent. Add a teaspoon of water for each head. Fold up both ends of the foil to seal the package.
2. Roast in a 350° oven for 45 minutes until the side of the head yields when squeezed. You can roast several heads at a time. Be careful not to overbake, or the garlic could dry out and become bitter. You are allowed to “peek” while the garlic is roasting, but beware of escaping steam from the foil envelope, and be sure to carefully reseal the envelope. After a few times, you’ll get a sense of how the garlic feels through the foil when it is ready.

If you want to make super roast garlic, all you have to do is add some fresh herbs to the package. Add any combination of the following herbs, laying them across the cut top of the garlic head—just a sprig or two is enough: thyme (a must!), rosemary (wonderful), bay leaf (adds depth, but use a piece of a leaf, not a whole one), oregano (Mama mia!), or sage (just a leaf will do). The herbs will add their perfume to the garlic, and the result will be heavenly.



Individual Cloves roasting method

Separate the garlic into cloves, place them on a sheet of foil, prepared as for the whole-head method. Lay down a single layer of garlic cloves, loosely touching. Sprinkle the fresh herbs over them, and then lay down a second layer of garlic cloves over the herbs. Drizzle with a little olive oil, add 1 teaspoon of water for each head, and seal up the foil into a closed packet. Roast about 30 minutes at 350° until the cloves are soft to the touch. Be careful not to overbake.

Storing the Prepared Garlic

Once the garlic is cool enough to handle, it can be stored in two ways:

- **Storing whole heads.** The whole heads or individual cloves can be frozen intact. The heads should be wrapped in plastic wrap and placed in a plastic bag. Zipper locking bags work best. For individual cloves place into a plastic bag and pack tightly but keep cloves in one layer. Press out as much air as possible and seal bag tight. You will have packets of garlic purée just waiting to be liberated. They are now ready to be frozen.
- **Storing the purée.** I prefer to remove the garlic from the skins. With a gentle squeeze the garlic will pop out of the skins. For a large batch use a potato ricer to squeeze the garlic. Either technique will result in a smooth **garlic purée**. I find the best way to store the **garlic purée** is to fill a zipper-locking bag. Flatten the bag so it is about $\frac{3}{4}$ inches thick; and be sure to burp the bag! (See p.52.) The garlic is now ready to be frozen. It's easy to cut a piece of purée from the bag. Be sure to rewrap tightly before returning to freezer.

Whichever method you use, be sure to save the **garlic skins**. They are full of flavor and can be used to infuse nectars and stocks with rich garlic flavor.