

Barbera • Simple Roasted Tomato Soup

Barbera (pronounced bar-BEAR-ah) is an Italian varietal that was a favorite of many Italian settlers in the Central Valley. Earnest and Julio Gallo loved it and asked several growers around Lodi to plant it in the early 1970's. Barbera was instrumental in making the tart flavor of Gallo Hearty Burgundy--the most famous production red wine of the 1970's. However, California Barbera production has declined over the past few decades, from more than 20,000 acres planted in 1970 to less than 6,000 acres today. Barbera is one of those well-kept secrets, reserved for true lovers of Italian wines. That's fine with us. There's plenty of great Lodi Barbera for us to drink.

Origin: The earliest recorded plantings of Barbera were in the hills of Monferrato in central Piemonte (Piedmont), Italy. It was first documented by the cathedral of Casale Monferrato between 1246 and 1277. DNA studies suggest that Barbera may be related to the French-Spanish varietal Mourvèdre. Up until the 1990's, Barbera was the most widely planted wine grape in Italy. In 1985, Piedmont Barbera producers were caught illegally adding methanol to their wines, killing more than 30 people. Barbera acreage decreased as a result of the bad publicity, and it was overtaken by Sangiovese (the principal component of Chianti) and later by Montepulciano. Barbera reportedly was first brought to Sonoma County, California, in the 1880's.

Tasting and Serving: Barbera is a dark red, almost brown wine due to the dark pigments in its skin, but its lighter body makes it translucent. The aromas are subtle but you should definitely note cherry, plum, and especially strawberry. In your mouth, the light tannins and high acidity make it taste "juicy." The pleasant tart cherry taste will linger for 5 to 10 seconds. Serve Barbera at 60 to 65 degrees (10 to 15 minutes in a refrigerator).

Pairing: Barbera pairs well with rich dark meats, mushrooms, herbs, herbaceous cheeses like blue cheese, and higher tannin foods like root vegetables & braised greens. It also complements Italian meat and sausage dishes cooked in tomato sauces. It's perfect with spaghetti and meatballs in a red tomato sauce. I chose St. Amant 2016 "Tools of the Trade" Barbera to pair with my Simple Roasted Tomato Soup. More than any other wine, the tart cherry flavor of this Barbera perfectly matches the tart acidic flavor of the roasted tomatoes that is enhanced by the other roasted aromatic vegetables and herbs. This wine was aged in 25% French oak, which emphasizes the fruit and gives only a slight hint of vanilla. Tim and Barbara (St. Amant) Spencer founded the winery in 1979 after a decade of raising mostly Zinfandel and several Portuguese varietals in Amador County, east of Lodi. In 1992, they set up their winemaking operation in the old brandy barrel room where my father worked at the former Guild Winery in Lodi. They ran into some problems with disease in their original Amador County vineyard and began taking fruit from Lodi farmers in return for making them a few cases each. One of those vineyards was Barbera originally planted for the Gallo brothers in the 1970's. The wine turned out so good that St. Amant continued to source it from the same vineyard owner. Today, it's one of their perennial award winners.

Simple Roasted Tomato Soup

Tomato soup is just one of those basic necessities of life. It was always in the pantry and always provided comfort. I never liked it that much. Then one day, some Sheriff's deputies took me to the nearby Waterloo Club for lunch. The chef brought out a few servings of a roasted red pepper soup that he was playing around with, and I was hooked. Roasting the vegetables makes all the difference. I got a bunch of vegetables and herbs and roasted them. One problem: how do you transform a bunch of cooked, wilted vegetables into a creamy soup? Immersion blender? Too many seeds and nasty pieces of skin. Way too much work to remove all that stuff before roasting. I got my food mill down from the top shelf, and there it was. Very messy, but it gave the soup a near perfect rustic texture. I started with fresh Roma tomatoes but found that using canned whole peeled tomatoes gave the best results for nearly the same price. But which canned whole peeled tomatoes? Epicurious.com saved me a lot of time by doing a taste comparison among all the leading brands of whole peeled tomatoes, including the famous and very expensive Cento San Marzano. They actually found RedPack to be the best. Unfortunately, RedPack doesn't sell on the West coast. The runner-up, Muir Glen, is from California (actually founded by our neighbor). I serve this soup with a 1905 salad to most of my guests who visit the ranch for lunch.

Ingredients

3 28-ounce cans Muir Glen Whole Peeled Plum Tomatoes
10 to 12 fresh basil leaves
6 to 8 Bruno's Mild Wax Peppers
1 medium red onion, cut into four pieces
10 to 12 cloves garlic (whole with skins)
1/2 cup fresh parsley (whole with stems)
5 sprigs fresh thyme
1/2 cup Lodi olive oil
2 TBS salt
1 TBS pepper
1/4 cup half-and-half
12 to 16 Jeff's Croutons (page 218)
8 chives (cut into 1-inch lengths)



Roasting the Vegetables

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Pour all the cans of tomatoes into a roasting pan. Spread the basil leaves, wax peppers, onion pieces, garlic, parsley, and thyme sprigs around the pan evenly. Coat the vegetables with olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper. Put the roasting pan in the oven. Check every 15 minutes and stir to brown the vegetables evenly. After about 45 minutes to an hour, when you start seeing black around the edges of the onion, and everything seems to be cooked, take it out. Set the pan on a trivet and allow to cool for about 20 minutes.

Making the Soup

Set a food mill (page 113) with a medium grinding disk over a 4-quart sauce pan. Using a large ladle, scoop out a few cups of vegetable mix from the roasting pan into the mill and turn the wheel. You may have to turn it in both directions to loosen stuck stuff and squeeze out more juice. You will probably have to take the food mill apart and clean it once or twice before all the mix is milled.



Vegetables ready to go in the oven



Pressing the roasted mix through a food mill

Finishing the Soup

Warm the soup on a stove top. When it is at the desired serving temperature, add the half-and-half, about a tablespoon at a time, until you get a texture you are happy with.

Presentation

Serve in a bowl with the chives laid on the surface in an "X" pattern. You can float two or three Jeff's Croutons on the surface and put the chives over them. A dollop of Greek yogurt or sour cream is a nice touch. If you are doing a soup and salad, serve with my 1905 Salad (page 206).

The California Ingredient

Bruno's Wax Peppers are available in just about every Lodi grocery store, fruit stand, and winery shop. Go 50 miles in any direction, and no one has heard of them. The Bruno family started pickling Italian wax peppers in 1947 and have been in business for over 70 years. Jeff and Chris still use the exact same recipe that their grandmother wrote down on the inside cover of an old cookbook. What makes these peppers such a delicacy is that the Bruno family is the world's only producer of Italian wax peppers. These little gems are getting so popular that the local supply often runs out, and we all have to wait months until the next batch gets released. They come in mild, nippy, and hot, depending on when the peppers are picked. The plants produce spicier peppers each time they are harvested. Be careful! "Mild" is still pretty spicy. If you don't live in Lodi, you can buy them online at Bruno's Marketplace.

Tips and Tricks

If you come across fresh tomatoes at a good price, you may want to use just one 28-ounce can of whole peeled tomatoes with 2-1/2 pounds of fresh tomatoes. Just cut the tomatoes in half and lay them face up in the roasting pan.

You will probably want to make this soup a couple of hours before your guests arrive. You definitely don't want them to see you make a mess running the food mill. You can roast the vegetables and make the soup early in the morning, then put the soup on the stove at its lowest setting to keep it warm. Finish the soup just before serving.

You can add different vegetables and herbs to get different flavor profiles. If you want a spicier soup, use Bruno's Hot Wax Peppers or cut a fresh jalapeno in half and throw it into the mix before roasting. If the soup turns out too spicy, rather than add more half-and-half, drop a small dollop of sour cream or Greek yogurt in the middle of each bowl.

Cool Gadget: The Food Mill

One thing you don't see a lot in modern kitchens is a food mill, which is an old-fashioned kitchen tool. It's part strainer and part masher/saucer that crushes foods by forcing them through a perforated disk that retains seeds, cores, and skin. Food mills are typically used to make applesauce, tomato sauce, pureed soups, and riced potatoes. The nice thing about using a food mill for a roasted vegetable soup is that you can roast the whole vegetables—skins, seeds, stems, and all—saving you a ton of prep time and adding more flavor to the final soup. If you use a modern immersion blender, you need to remove much of the skins, seeds, and stems before roasting, then run the blended puree through a strainer.

The food mill consists of a bowl, a strainer disk, and a stirrer with a spring-loaded handle that keeps the stirrer blades pressed against the food. If you buy a food mill, try to get one that is all stainless steel and that has legs that stick horizontally from the bottom for resting it on top of a sauce pot.



Food mill components: bowl, perforated disk, and stirrer with spring-loaded handle.



Turning the handle mashes the roasted vegetable mix into the perforated disk, pushing the juice and pulp through but retaining the seeds, skins, and stems.