

Pappa al pomodoro/ Tomato and Bread Soup



Pappa al pomodoro is one of the most representative recipes of Tuscan cucina povera. The main ingredients are stale Tuscan bread—a bread that, according to the rest of Italy, is bland, because it is made without salt—and fresh tomatoes (but a can of good peeled tomatoes works just as well).

Pappa al pomodoro recipes differ from region to region: In Florence, the soup is bright red, as the bread is cooked in tomato puree with a battuto of minced onion, carrot, and celery as the flavor backbone. In Siena and the Chianti area, it is paler, made with just a few chunks of fresh tomatoes, along with the stale bread, and garlic instead of the onion. As for the aromatics, fresh basil is the most common herb, but near Pisa, they tend to use wild mint.

In summer, when ripe tomatoes cram the stalls of farmers' markets, make this soup with ripe Roma tomatoes. If you like, you can quickly peel them so that your pappa al pomodoro will be much more velvety. To do so, cut an X in the bottom of each tomato, plunge them into a pot of boiling water for 30 seconds, and then use a slotted spoon to transfer them to a bowl of cold water to cool; this will help the skins release from the tomatoes. This version of pappa al pomodoro is a thick, dense, porridge-like soup, glistening with extra-virgin olive oil and perfumed with the heady smell of basil. It is comfort food for many people in Tuscany, one of those dishes that wakes up childhood memories and soothes like a warm embrace.

Serves 4 to 6 as a first course

One 28-ounce/794 g can whole peeled tomatoes or 8 ripe
Roma (plum) tomatoes, peeled if desired (see headnote)
½ cup/120 ml extra-virgin olive oil
2 cloves garlic, finely chopped
¼ teaspoon red pepper flakes,
plus more to taste
4 thick slices (about 12½ ounces/355 g) stale Tuscan Bread¹ (page 302)
1 tablespoon tomato paste
2 cups/480 ml warm water
2 teaspoons fine sea salt², plus more to taste
A handful of fresh basil leaves, torn

Pour the tomatoes into a large bowl and crush them with your hands.

In a large pot, warm ¼ cup/60 ml of the olive oil over low heat. Add the garlic and red pepper flakes and cook, stirring, until the garlic is fragrant and golden, about 2 minutes. Pour in the

¹ Or another crusty bread. Be sure to use the reduced amount of salt when not using saltless Tuscan bread.

² When using non-Tuscan bread, start with ½ teaspoon fine salt and add more to taste.

tomatoes (set the bowl aside), increase the heat to medium-low, and cook, stirring occasionally, until the tomatoes start to break down into a sauce, about 15 minutes.

While the tomatoes cook, break the stale bread slices into big chunks and place in the tomato bowl. Add cold water to cover and let stand until the bread has soaked up enough water to become soft again, about 10 minutes.

Remove the bread from the water, squeeze it between your hands to remove the excess water, and crumble into the tomato sauce. In a large measuring cup, stir together the tomato paste and warm water until well combined, then add to the pot. Season with the salt, reduce the heat to low, and cook for about 10 minutes, stirring vigorously from time to time with a whisk to give the pappa al pomodoro its typical creamy texture.

Remove from the heat, add the torn basil leaves and the remaining $\frac{1}{4}$ cup/60 ml olive oil, and stir to combine. Season to taste with additional salt as necessary.

Let the soup stand at room temperature for at least an hour to allow the flavors to mingle, then serve at room temperature or reheat gently over low heat to serve warm.

Excerpted from *Cucina Povera* by Giulia Scarpaleggia (Artisan Books). Copyright © 2023.