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Heirloom Tomato Panzanella

Serve 4 to 6

There's a point in the summer when heirloom tomatoes are full of sunshine and bursting off the vine. A farmer friend once described it best: "They don't require much from us right now. Just slice and plate." I use his "recipe" to inspire all different version of tomato salad from the first Brandywine to the last Green Zebra. I dress the heirlooms with a drizzle of my very best olive oil, flaked sea salt, and torn basil. Sometimes they get a splash of balsamic or red wine vinegar – or maybe a spoonful of pesto. Many days the simple salads feature torn mozzarella or freshly shaved parmesan and almost always, toasted day-old bread. Often I throw in sliced cucumbers and shaved red onions, too. The amount of salt always varies. You have to taste and adjust, taste and adjust (never a problem).

I'm sharing my favorite version, but I encourage you to experiment and find your own combinations. As long as you use premium local tomatoes, you can't go wrong.

1/2 small red onion, halved through the root end and
sliced into paper-thin half-moons on a mandoline
1 medium cucumber, peeled and seeded (if needed), and thinly sliced on a mandoline
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
2-1/2 pounds heirloom tomatoes (preferably a mix of varieties and colors)
1/2 cup mixed cherry tomatoes
Fine sea salt
Freshly ground black pepper
1/4 cup of your best extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon coarsely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley, plus extra for finishing
2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh basil leaves, plus extra for finishing
About 2 cups Hand-Torn Toasted Bread (see below)
1 cup freshly torn fresh mozzarella (about 4 ounces),
or 1 cup shaved parmesan cheese (3 to 4 ounces)
Flaked sea salt, for serving

1. Place the onion and cucumber slices in 2 separate piles at the bottom of a large bowl. Pour 1 tablespoon of the vinegar over the onion and let sit while you assemble the rest of the salad.

2. Slice the heirloom tomatoes into large, bite-size pieces, cutting around the core, slice the cherry tomatoes in half or leave tiny ones whole. Combine the tomatoes with the onion and cucumber, toss together, and season well with salt and pepper to taste.

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3. Drizzle the tomato mixture with the remaining tablespoon of vinegar and then drizzle evenly with the oil. Add the parsley, basil, toasted bread, and cheese and toss gently to combine. Top with a generous pinch of flaked sea salt and more chopped parsley and basil. Serve immediately or let stand briefly so the bread can soak up the juices.

NOTE: Do not salt and dress the tomatoes until just before you serve them or they will become watery. If you must, you can slice them up to an hour beforehand. Wrap a baking sheet with plastic wrap and spread them out in a single layer to sit, propped up on top of the plastic wrap.

VARIATION: Omit the parsley and reduce the red wine vinegar to 1 tablespoon. Drizzle balsamic reduction over the salad after you add the cheese.

Hand-Torn Toasted Bread

Makes about 2-1/2 cups

4 slices (3/4- to 1-inch thick) Italian or ciabatta bread (day old bread is fine)
About 2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
Fine sea salt

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F.

2. Meanwhile, using a serrated knife, cut away the crust of the bread. Tear the bread into bite-size pieces and place it on a rimmed baking sheet. Drizzle the bread with olive oil and season with salt to taste (the bread should not become overly soggy with oil, but you should be able to taste the olive oil and salt). Toss the bread to coat evenly, then spread it in a single layer, being careful not to overcrowd it.

3. Toast until the croutons just turn golden and crispy on the edges, 10 to 15 minutes. Let cool completely. Store in a zip-top bag or airtight container at room temperature for up to 3 days.