

## GAZPACHO

After a late start due to the spring rains, the Amador tomato crop is now beginning to appear at the Farmers Markets. While there are excellent cherry and pear tomatoes, some vendors are even carrying delicious heirloom varieties that are meaty and full of wonderful sweet tomato flavor. So it's time to get out the blender and make some gazpacho.

Modern gazpacho is essentially a liquid salad, and is a far cry from its origins as a use for stale bread. Originally, gazpacho was a poor man's soup made of stale bread or bread crumbs combined with water, garlic, vinegar or sour wine, some olive oil and salt and pepper. Later some chopped or pureed summer vegetables were added. Nowadays, fancy chefs make gazpacho from everything under the sun, including clam juice, lobster, shrimp, raisins, mangos, walnuts and melons. There are as many versions of gazpacho as there are Spaniards—but this one is mine. I use an electric blender, but a food processor works just about as well.

Peel and seed and cut into chunks a large hothouse cucumber, or two regular cucumbers. Core, seed and cut into chunks a red sweet pepper. Put the vegetables into a blender, along with a thick slice of onion, two or three peeled cloves of garlic and a couple of tablespoons of red wine or balsamic vinegar and puree until reasonably smooth. Sometimes I'll add a slice of stale bread, without the crusts. Pour into a large bowl.

Peel and seed several large very ripe tomatoes. I like about two parts of tomato to one part of all other vegetables, but it's a personal taste. Puree the tomatoes and pour them into the large bowl with the other pureed vegetables. Add some salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste, a couple of tablespoons or so of extra-virgin olive oil, and a few shakes of your favorite liquid hot pepper seasoning. (Sometimes I'll add a cored and seeded red jalapeno pepper to the blender when I'm pureeing the cucumbers and pepper—in which case cut down on the hot sauce.) Stir it all together, adjust the seasonings, and if it's a little thicker than you like, add a few ice cubes to help it chill down or even a little tomato juice. I put the bowl in the refrigerator to chill while I make the accompaniments. If the tomatoes aren't as flavorful as you'd hoped, add a squirt or two of fresh lemon juice. But don't try to make this dish with canned tomatoes—it just isn't the same!

For the accompaniments, I like to serve some finely chopped green onion, cucumber, sweet red pepper, and tomato on the side to give a little texture to the soup. Sometimes I'll even serve some tiny bay shrimp for people to put in their gazpacho if they'd like. For a south of the border spin, I'll put about ½ teaspoon of ground cumin into the blender with the vegetables and serve some chopped avocado and chopped cilantro among the garnishes. While nowadays gazpacho is usually meant to be a first course, with some good bread on the side a large bowl of gazpacho makes a fine lunch or even a light supper, followed by some fresh fruit and good cheese.

By the way, to peel tomatoes, fill the kettle with water and put it on to boil. Put the tomatoes in a large bowl. When the water boils, pour the water over the tomatoes. Wait about a minute or two. Carefully remove the tomatoes from the hot water and you'll find the skin will slip right off with a paring knife. While I don't often peel tomatoes for most dishes, you need to peel them for gazpacho as otherwise the skin remains in little nasty flakes that stick between your teeth.

I've made yellow gazpacho, using a sweet yellow pepper and yellow tomatoes, which tasted just fine but somehow didn't have the right color for me to be happy with it. For me the tomatoes need to be red. But however you make it, go down to the Farmers Market and load up on your summer vegetables. This is Steve Muni for the Hometown Kitchen.