

WILLIAM ALEXANDER

# TEN *Tomatoes*

THAT  
CHANGED  
THE  
WORLD

*A History*



## BOOK CLUB KIT

---

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1) Tomatoes are often obscured by flashier ingredients, yet they've made such important contributions to human progress. Before reading this book, what foods might you have identified as the most popular or important to global cuisine? Has your answer changed?

2) While other edible plants from the New World were embraced, Europeans scorned the tomato upon its arrival. It was three hundred years before the fruit became a staple of Italian cuisine. Generations from now, do you think our descendants will be surprised by anything we did or did not eat? What does that say about how tastes evolve with changes in society?

3) The introduction of the tomato helped catalyze much innovation, from the automatic line to the industrial complexity behind Campbell's soup. How have the inventions that sprang forth from tomatoes and other foods transformed life beyond our daily meals?

4) The Sarno River is extolled by the San Marzano producers for being clean and rich in minerals, yet their tomato processing plants are partially responsible for pollution downstream. How does this serve as a microcosm through which to examine climate change and environmental degradation across the globe? What similar cost/benefit analysis can you see being made with the production of Florida tomatoes?

5) There is an emphasis on preserving tradition and history with San Marzano tomatoes, Brandywine tomatoes, and Neapolitan pizza. How is myth-making essential for the success of these goods? What do you think is lost when farmers and pizza makers, or food producers of any kind, are not allowed to innovate, and what is gained?

6) Alexander proposes that pizza is in large part responsible for the tomato's global conquest. Consider cuisines around the world. What other dishes do you think helped popularize their prominent ingredients? Can you see this type of symbiotic relationship shaping local delicacies in your area?

# DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

7) Heirloom tomatoes took off in the 1990s. What about that decade do you think primed it for such tomato zeal? How have other decades shaped their defining food culture?

8) A ban on pasta is one instance of food, society, and politics intermingling. Are there other contemporary examples of food becoming politicized? Why do you think that is the case?

9) Greenhouse-grown products offer greater freshness and often better flavor at the cost of a significantly higher carbon footprint. Yet their viability is more complicated, factoring in possible reduced consumption of animal protein as well as the increasing necessity of protected agriculture. Is this tradeoff palatable? Should we have the right to access these fruits and vegetables across all seasons?

10) Supermarket tomatoes might best be described as the food Americans “love to hate,” as consumers rank them at the bottom in food satisfaction surveys while eating a billion pounds a year. How do explain this apparent contradiction; what does it say about consumers and the choices we make; and is there hope for a more delicious future?

# Pasta with Cherry Tomatoes and Basil

---

Serves 2

*Here's my favorite thing to do with cherry tomatoes when they start coming on like gangbusters. Best of all, this can be thrown together in 15 minutes. The sauce works well with either a long pasta like linguine or a short pasta like penne. You want a really hot pan here, just short of smoking, to coax the juice and flavor out the tomatoes, and it's normal for the tomatoes to spit and splatter as their juice hits the hot oil.*

- 8 ounces pasta
- A generous handful of fresh basil leaves
- ½ cup of imported Parmesan or Pecorino Romano cheese (or a mixture of the two)
- 2 dozen cherry tomatoes
- 1 clove garlic, peeled and smashed
- ¼ cup white wine or vermouth
- 3-4 Tbsp olive oil
- Salt and pepper to taste

1. While bringing a pot of salted water to a boil for the pasta:, chop the basil, keeping a few small leaves for garnish.
2. Cut the tomatoes in half and grate the cheese.
3. While cooking the pasta to the al dente stage, heat about 2 Tbsp of the olive oil in a sauté pan over medium-high heat with the garlic, removing the clove just as it starts to brown. Add the tomatoes, shaking the pan frequently, until most of the juice evaporates (about 10 minutes).
4. Add the wine and cook for another minute until most of the liquid has evaporated.
5. Drain the pasta and add it to the saucepan along with the chopped basil, shaking or stirring the pan for a minute or so until the pasta is well-coated. Salt and pepper to taste (if using Romano cheese, go easy on or omit the salt) to taste. Finish with the remaining olive oil, the grated cheese, and basil garnish.

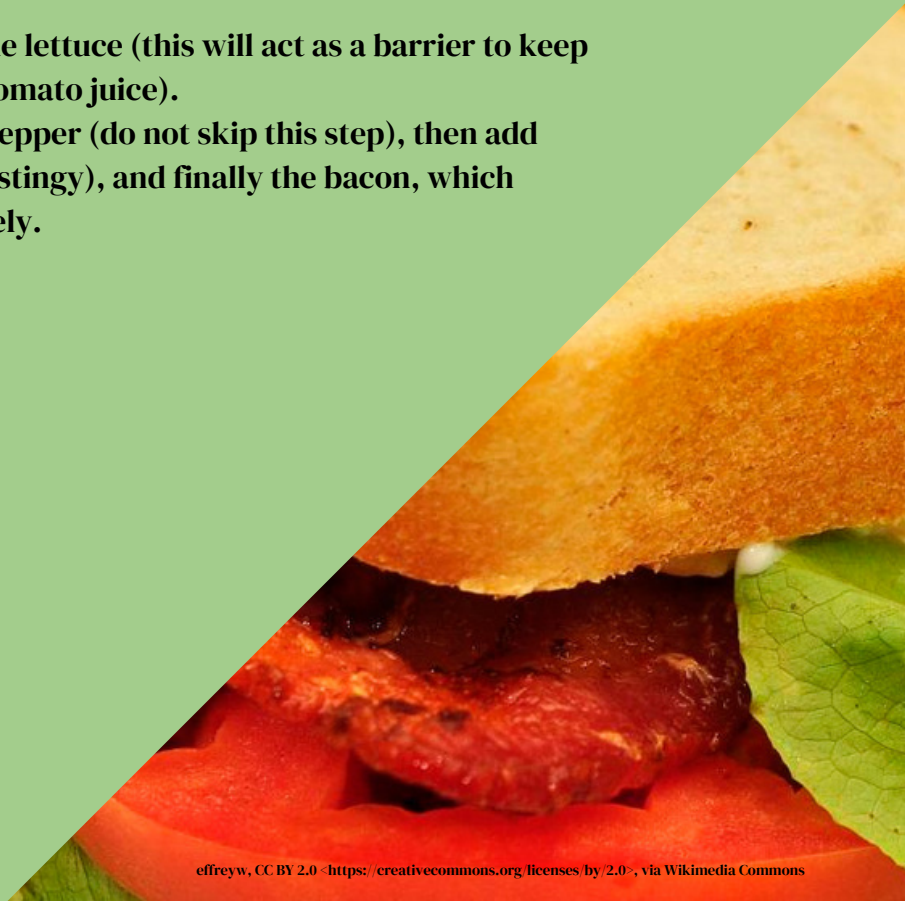
# Sublime BLT

---

*A recipe for a bacon, lettuce, and tomato sandwich? Yes, because there's a right way (bright, crisp, and salty) and a wrong way (soggy and bland) to do it. To achieve perfection, everything matters, from the type of bread (white, never whole wheat) to the order in which you stack the ingredients. So here's my very opinionated method of building the perfect BLT. (Caution: Do not attempt to do this out of season with supermarket tomatoes.)*

- 2 slices of a firm white bread (in the East, something like Arnold's or Pepperidge Farm — not, e.g., Wonder Bread)
- A sliced ripe tomato, either an heirloom such as Brandywine or Purple Cherokee, or whatever is in your garden
- 3 slices good bacon (I prefer Oscar Meyer)
- 2 Tbsp (or more) Hellman's or Best Foods mayonnaise
- Several leaves of crisp lettuce such as romaine
- Salt and Pepper to taste

1. Cook the bacon either in a microwave between paper towels or in a frying pan.
2. When it's almost done, toast the bread, then liberally spread mayo on both slices.
3. Cover one slice (the bottom) with the lettuce (this will act as a barrier to keep the bread from getting soggy with tomato juice).
4. Season the tomatoes with salt and pepper (do not skip this step), then add overlapping tomato slices (don't be stingy), and finally the bacon, which should cover the tomatoes completely.
5. Eat immediately.





# A Tomato-Seeker's Photo Journal



The kitchen where Cosimo de'Medici first encountered tomatoes.



Brandi Pizzeria, the alleged home of the Margherita pizza.



Does the future of the tomato lie in Canadian greenhouses?



**SEE MORE HERE!**