

Creamless Creamy Tomato Soup

Plain tomato soup can be thin and sharp. Adding cream—the usual stodgy solution—merely dulls it. We wanted to tame the tartness without losing flavor.

≧ BY J. KENJI ALT ≦

Tomato soup should have it all: good looks, velvety smoothness, and a bright, tomatoey taste balanced by the fruit's natural sweetness. But poor versions are the norm, either featuring an acidic, watery broth or an overdose of cream. Though it's meant to tame tartness and lend body, I've always found that adding any amount of cream goes hand-in-hand with muting flavor. I wanted soup with rich tomato flavor and a satisfying texture. Could I get there without the cream?

The first step in the process was to pass over fresh tomatoes for canned, which are almost always far better than your average supermarket tomato, boasting more consistently rich and concentrated flavor. Plus they're already peeled—a big timesaver for soup. I opted for whole tomatoes rather than diced or crushed; the latter two types often contain calcium chloride, an additive that prevents them from breaking down completely, compromising texture. I then developed a simple working recipe, sautéing onions and garlic in butter, stirring in the tomatoes and a can of chicken broth, and then giving the whole thing a quick spin in the blender. The results were decent, but dull.

If cream subdues tomato flavor, could the milk solids in the butter be tamping it down as well? I substituted extra-virgin olive oil for the butter and found that the soup brightened as a result. A few more small changes—a bay leaf and a pinch of red pepper flakes sautéed with the onions—upped the flavor significantly. To compensate for the flavor the oil lost as it cooked, I drizzled a little more over the soup before it went into the blender. Most tasters also welcomed a couple tablespoons of brandy.

Taming Tartness

Now that I had my flavor profile nailed down, I was on to bigger problems: tartness and thin texture. Sugar is often used as a means to combat tartness. We preferred brown sugar to one-dimensional white sugar and corn syrup, but sugar could only take us so far—add enough to tone down tartness and the soup becomes unpalatably sweet.

I needed a thickener that would also help temper the acid. Flavor-dulling dairy ingredients were definitely out, but what about a starch? Cooking flour along with the onions to form a roux made for a thicker soup, but the texture turned slimy instead of creamy, and it did nothing for flavor. Cornstarch produced similar results. I scoured our cookbook library

before I found inspiration in another tomato-based soup: gazpacho. This Spanish classic is made from tomatoes, olive oil, and garlic, along with an unusual element for thickening: bread. But gazpacho is served cold. Would bread work as a thickener for hot soup?

I tore several slices of sandwich bread into pieces and stirred them into the pot with the tomatoes and chicken broth as they simmered. When I processed the mixture in the blender, I ended up with bread chunks that swam in a sea of broth and resisted being sucked down into the blender's spinning blades. To cut back on the liquid in the blender, I decided to try leaving out the broth until the very end. With my next batch of soup, I pureed the tomatoes with the aromatics and bread before returning the mixture to the pan and whisking in the broth. One taste and I knew I'd hit on just the right solution. My tomato soup had the same velvety texture as the creamy kind, but with bright, fresh flavor. None of my tasters even guessed that my soup contained a secret ingredient. Only after the pot was empty did I divulge it.

CREAMLESS CREAMY TOMATO SOUP

SERVES 6 TO 8

If half of the soup fills your blender by more than two-thirds, process the soup in three batches. You can also use an immersion blender to process the soup directly in the pot. For an even smoother soup, pass the pureed mixture through a fine-mesh strainer before stirring in the chicken broth in step 2. Serve this soup with Grilled Cheese Sandwiches for a Crowd or topped with Butter Croutons (for our free recipes, go to www.cooksillustrated.com/october).

- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- 1 medium onion, chopped medium (about 1 cup)
- 3 medium garlic cloves, minced or pressed through garlic press (about 1 tablespoon)
- Pinch hot red pepper flakes (optional)
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 (28-ounce) cans whole tomatoes packed in juice
- 1 tablespoon brown sugar
- 3 large slices good-quality white sandwich bread, crusts removed, torn into 1-inch pieces
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken broth
- 2 tablespoons brandy (optional)
- Table salt and ground black pepper
- ¼ cup chopped fresh chives



Bread—not cream—is the secret to our soup's creamy texture.

1. Heat 2 tablespoons oil in Dutch oven over medium-high heat until shimmering. Add onion, garlic, red pepper flakes (if using), and bay leaf. Cook, stirring frequently, until onion is translucent, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in tomatoes and their juice. Using potato masher, mash until no pieces bigger than 2 inches remain. Stir in sugar and bread; bring soup to boil. Reduce heat to medium and cook, stirring occasionally, until bread is completely saturated and starts to break down, about 5 minutes. Remove and discard bay leaf.

2. Transfer half of soup to blender. Add 1 tablespoon oil and process until soup is smooth and creamy, 2 to 3 minutes. Transfer to large bowl and repeat with remaining soup and oil. Rinse out Dutch oven and return soup to pot. Stir in chicken broth and brandy (if using). Return soup to boil and season to taste with salt and pepper. Serve soup in individual bowls. Sprinkle each portion with pepper and chives and drizzle with olive oil.

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HOW TO MAKE

- Creamless Creamy Tomato Soup
- Grilled Cheese Sandwiches for a Crowd

VIDEO TIP

- The safe way to puree hot liquids