

# Cooking with the Greatest Tomatoes from Europe: canned tomatoes – tasting fresher than ever!

By MickyN / Dec 28, 2019 / All things meat, Vegetarian



Have you ever eaten a tomato fresh off the vine? I have – and I can tell you it's an incredible experience! As a child, I would often spend my summer vacations in the countryside, at my aunt and uncle's house. The latter (a WWII survivor who had endured terrible times of hunger and deprivation) had a deep respect for nature and an appreciation of its treasures, and he was pretty much obsessed with gardening. Having played all morning in the sand with my niece, I would take refuge in my uncle's garden, with dirty nails and coarse sand still fresh in my mouth and hair, and I would feast at random – and what a feast that was! Moist apricots just fallen off the tree, sugar sweet, their pulp melting in my mouth; red currants delicate and slightly pungent, with crisp leaves hiding clusters of ruby goodness; last but not least, tomatoes – meaty, slightly fuzzy, with a herbaceous smell and a delicious natural sweetness. I would sink my teeth into a tomato and the juice would start dripping on my chin, utterly thirst-quenching and refreshing, like nature's perfect elixir. My love for those magical tomatoes was so deep that sometimes I would eat too many and I would get a tummy ache – but who cared? 😊 Those were the days when we lived off the land and we ate organic, local and mostly plant-based, long before these concepts became mainstream. We were just too poor to be able to afford pesticides, food miles, or meat for that matter.

As I grew older, I tried to replicate the extraordinary childhood experience of eating fresh tomatoes, with mixed results. My aunt's homemade canned tomatoes and tomato juice were a great substitute – she was a food preservation expert, who knew how to capture the freshness of tomatoes in a canned form like no one else I've ever known. More often than not however, tomatoes were disappointing. As I moved to the UK, a country which relies heavily on tomato imports, I learned more about food miles and became acquainted with bland, tasteless tomatoes which came from far away.

My enthusiasm for tomatoes returned upon starting a new life in the US. The produce I tasted at local markets during peak summer season was delicious, and its herbaceous smell and slightly sweet flavor somewhat reminded me of my uncle's magical tomatoes. I also wrote about my childhood tomato eating experiences on several occasions on this blog (see [here](#) and [here](#)). And yet, the big question remained: will I ever be able to perfectly replicate those long-cherished memories? Was that depth of tomato flavor, was that textural experience ever to be encountered again – or were they well and truly unique?

After years of tasting and thousands of attempts, I can now reveal that my search is finally over, and the result may be surprising. I found the beloved fresh tomato flavor&texture of my childhood... in a can. Is that possible? Most definitely. After all, especially off season, **canned tomatoes are better than fresh tomatoes**. Moreover, and equally important, I am talking about the **Greatest Tomatoes from Europe (GTFE)** – which means delicious fresh flavor should come as no surprise.

GTFE is a EU financed campaign whose purpose is to increase consumers' awareness of the outstanding taste of European canned tomatoes. I was excited to find out more information [on their website](#) about the history of the tomato plant, as well as the health benefits of tomatoes, and the EU legislative framework which governs their cultivation and processing. Indeed, the peculiarities of European tomatoes stem from the specific methods used for harvesting and processing, and soil composition is paramount in ensuring their deliciousness.



GTFE sent me two varieties of Italian canned tomatoes to review, which I used to make two dishes, one vegan and one meat-based. I was super excited to work with canned cherry tomatoes – **delicious, yet hard to find in US grocery stores** (your best bet is to shop for these [online](#)). This variety of canned tomatoes are super sweet and delicate, and as such they do not require a lot of cooking. They are usually used in vegetable dishes – and that's exactly how I used them. I made butter bean stew, a vegan dish which pays homage to the down-to-earth foods I used to enjoy as a child growing up eating very little meat. I started off by sautéing chopped carrots, pepper, celery (both root and stalk) and onion...



...in vegetable oil over medium heat for 3-4 minutes, until translucent.



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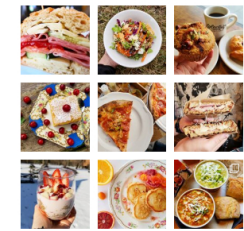


A lover of all things food - with a soft spot for panini. An adventurous foodie spirit with a passion for storytelling. \*Panini lover \*Recipe developer \*Restaurant reviewer \*Cheeseaholic through and through!

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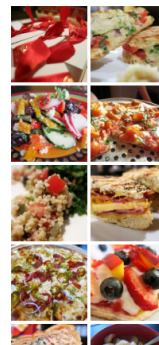
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For this dish my mom and aunt would normally use dry beans, soaked overnight and thoroughly drained and rinsed. I used canned butter beans for convenience.



I added the cherry tomatoes...



... and then gave them time to work their magic.



My ingredients did not require a lot of cooking (I just wanted the sauce to thicken a little bit), so the dish was done in about 20 minutes. I also got carried away and used a couple of tablespoons of harissa (a condiment my mom and aunt would have had no knowledge of), which made the beans rather spicy. The addition of any spice is optional though.



Most of my family and social media friends thought I had used fresh local cherry tomatoes - imagine their surprise when they found out these were actually canned tomatoes! Beautiful and vibrant, these cherry tomatoes had an amazing taste, which felt unadulterated and authentic, and which provided a unique sensory experience. In my mouth, each tomato burst with a pop of fruity fresh flavor, reminding of delightful simple lunches of summers past - in my uncle's garden, for example 😊



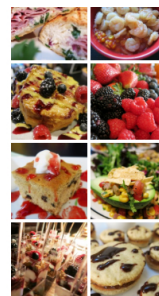
I used the second variety of canned tomatoes I was sent - polpa di pomodoro - in a dish which in my view is great to ascertain the quality of any canned tomatoes: meatballs in tomato sauce. We are big meatball eaters, and as such I have made many meatballs in my lifetime - yet not all of them have been successful, partly due to the tomatoes used to make the sauce. I've always looked for a smooth, richly flavored consistency, but sometimes the sauce would turn out chunky and/or watery, and I (along with others) have often wondered why. Now I know that many brands and varieties of US canned tomatoes - even some of the organic ones out there - contain calcium chloride to keep the tomatoes super firm, and thus difficult to break down. That's not a problem with European canned tomatoes though, which also have less salt added during processing.



I used ground chicken (for leanness) and pork (for flavor) - just the way my mom and aunt would make meatballs, on those rare occasions when they managed to find meat to buy for us. I also added Italian style breadcrumbs and meatball seasoning, as well as freshly grated imported Pecorino Romano (all ingredients unknown to my mom and my aunt, back in the day).

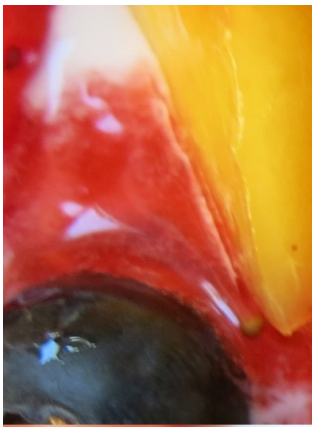


When all was said and done, I had 24 medium size meatballs...



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...which I browned in vegetable oil over medium heat.



To make the sauce, I sautéed onion and garlic in vegetable oil until translucent...



...and then added the tomatoes.



I let the sauce simmer over low heat...



...until it started thickening. Patience is key at this point!



I added the meatballs...



... and allowed the meat to absorb the rich tomato sauce for about 10 minutes, while also seasoning to taste. You are free to add extra water at this point if the sauce has reduced down too much.

Can you smell the deliciousness through the screen? I sure hope you can 😊



Here they are: the best meatballs I've ever made, bathing in an exceptional tomato sauce. A-mazing!



I had a soul-searching experience recreating – and re-imagining – these two family recipes in the comfortable cosmopolitan environment of my Chicago kitchen. European canned tomatoes make up a unique, deliciously multilayered flavor encounter, which truly has to be tasted to be believed. Sporting very few preservatives and reasonably detached from the BPA controversy which surrounds many of



their American counterparts, European canned tomatoes are nature's gift to us all – one which has to be acknowledged, respectfully understood, and celebrated. I am very pleased with my discovery of the Greatest Tomatoes from Europe because they helped me to cook delicious food, and also because they allowed me to go back in time to relive some truly memorable taste experiences. My search is over, and my flavorful childhood memories – chock-full of fresh, vibrant tomatoes from my uncle's garden – are back on, and livelier than ever 😊

*Disclaimer: While I received complimentary products to facilitate this review, all opinions expressed here are my own.*

## Delicious meatballs made with European canned tomatoes

🕒 **Prep Time** 30 minutes

🕒 **Cook Time** 30 minutes

👤 **Servings** 4 people

### INGREDIENTS

- 1 lb ground chicken
- 1 lb ground pork
- 3 whole eggs
- 1/4 cup freshly grated Pecorino Romano
- 1/2 cup Italian style breadcrumbs
- 1 tbsp meatball seasoning
- 1 28oz can European finely chopped tomatoes
- 1 large onion, chopped
- 2 garlic cloves, chopped
- 6 tbsp vegetable oil
- 1-2 cups water (if needed)
- Salt and pepper to taste

### INSTRUCTIONS

1. Put the ground meat, eggs, cheese, breadcrumbs and seasoning in a large bowl. Mix until well combined. Make meatballs out of this mixture (use approximately 2 tbsp mixture per meatball, or as desired). Brown the meatballs in 3tbsp oil in a pan over medium heat for about 5-7 minutes, turning once during cooking. Set aside.
2. Sauté the onion and garlic in the remaining 3tbsp oil in a separate pan for about 4 minutes or until translucent. Add the tomatoes. Let the sauce simmer over low heat for approximately 7 minutes or until slightly thickened and vibrant red.
3. Add the meatballs to the sauce and cook for a further 10 minutes. Add extra water at this point if the sauce has reduced down too much. Season to taste.
4. Serve the meatballs on their own or with pasta and/or mashed potatoes.
5. Enjoy!

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