TOMATOES

Ingredient of the Month

Presented by ACFEF Chef & Child Foundation and Clemson University
**The tomato**, fruit of a vine native to the coastal highlands of South America, is a member of the nightshade family, along with the potato and eggplant. After making their way up through Central America and Mexico, tomatoes eventually found their way to Europe: Spain, Italy and beyond. They arrived in North America before the Revolutionary War, with the earliest reference to them in 1710, when an herbalist reported seeing them in what is now South Carolina. However, it wasn’t until the 1900s that the tomato gained some measure of popularity in the U.S. Today, it is considered one of America’s favorite “vegetables.”

There are many tomato varieties, spanning all shapes and sizes. Tomatoes offer flavor, color and nutrients to support and enhance dishes. Generally speaking, yellow and orange tomatoes tend to be less acidic and sweeter than red tomatoes. These tomatoes have a fruity, almost tropical flavor as a result of their low acidity. Green tomatoes have a tart, citrus tang because their sugars aren’t fully developed. Purple and blackish varieties have a more complex flavor, similar to that of red wine. Fresh tomatoes are available year-round, with peak season June through September.

### Varieties and uses
- **Beefsteak tomatoes** are the granddaddy of tomatoes and can weigh more than 2 pounds, but are usually around 1 pound. They are generally meaty and thick and can be used for all kinds of cooking, as well as sliced for garnishing.
- **Cherry tomatoes** can vary in size, but are generally about the size of a bing cherry. They can be red or yellow-gold in color and have a bit of a sour taste. Cherry tomatoes are used in salads or eaten by themselves as a snack.
- **Cluster or vine-ripened tomatoes** tend to be a deeper red color and are smaller than the beefsteak slicing varieties. These are usually quite juicy and more flavorful, so they make wonderful additions to salads and other meals.
- **Currant tomatoes** are small, about the size of a pea. They have a strong flavor and go great in salads or as a garnish. Currant tomatoes also have more health benefits pound for pound than most tomato varieties.
- **Globe tomatoes** are medium-sized tomatoes and the most common variety. They are used for all types of cooking. The most common use is sliced for hamburgers and sandwiches or eaten with a little salt.
- **Heirloom tomatoes** are continuing to grow in popularity, with a wide variety of shapes, colors and flavors. Heirloom tomatoes are old varieties whose seeds have been passed down from generation to generation. They are not hybrids like many modern tomato varieties. Among the most popular varieties are the purple tomatoes (such as Purple Calabash, Brandywine and Cherokee Purple), the skins of which can range in color from a dusky pink with purple shoulders to a dusky rose-purple. Depending on the variety, the flesh color can vary from crimson to a brownish purple-pink.
- **Grape tomatoes** are actually baby Romas and about the size and shape of a grape. They are sweeter than most tomato varieties and are good in salads and vegetable trays served with dip.
- **Pear tomatoes** have the same basic shape as a pear, small on one end and fatter on the other. They are about the same size as a cherry tomato. They have a sweet flavor and are great in salads or eaten by themselves.
- **Plum tomatoes** are oblong in shape and are thicker, with less seeds than most tomatoes. Roma is the most common brand of plum tomatoes. The most common use for plum tomatoes is in tomato paste.
- **Roma tomatoes** are most often used for creating sauces, salsas and pastes. These are sometimes called plum tomatoes because they’re about the size of a plum and they’re not actually round. Instead, they are slightly elongated. If you’ve never eaten a Roma tomato, you may not like the texture and taste. They’re not overly juicy, and they have thicker flesh than the other types of tomatoes. Some people also feel that they also have a much stronger taste, which can be a good or bad thing, depending on who you ask.

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### Healthy ingredient contribution

**B-VITAMINS:** Tomatoes contain moderate amounts of many vital B-complex vitamins, such as folate, thiamin, niacin and riboflavin, as well as some essential minerals such as iron, calcium, manganese and other trace elements.

**CHOLESTEROL:** Intake of tomatoes has long been linked to heart health. Fresh tomatoes and tomato extracts have been shown to help lower total cholesterol, LDL cholesterol and triglycerides.

**FIBER:** A medium tomato has about as much fiber as a slice of whole-wheat bread.

**LYCOPENE:** Tomatoes are widely known for their outstanding antioxidant content, including, of course, their oftentimes rich concentration of lycopene. Lycopene is responsible for the red pigmentation found in tomatoes and is thought to offer preventive measures for certain types of cancer, most notably, prostate cancer.

**POTASSIUM:** Fresh tomatoes are rich in potassium. Potassium is an important component of cell and body fluids that helps in controlling heart rate and blood pressure caused by sodium.

**VITAMIN C:** Tomatoes are also a good source of the antioxidant vitamin C, and consumption of foods rich in vitamin C helps the body develop resistance against infectious agents and scavenge harmful free radicals.

**VITAMIN A:** Tomatoes contain good levels of vitamin A and flavonoid antioxidants, such as α and β-carotenes, xanthins and lutein. Altogether, these pigment compounds are found to have antioxidant properties and take part in vision wellness, maintaining healthy mucus membranes and skin, and bone health.
Storage
Ripe tomatoes should be stored at room temperature and used within a few days. They should never be refrigerated—cold temperatures make the flesh pulpy and kill the flavor.

Serving size
At 25 total calories and no fat, one medium tomato provides you with 20% of the daily value (DV) for vitamin A and 40% of the DV for vitamin C.

Contributions to this article were made by Kevin Freebern.

INGREDIENT OF THE MONTH

Yield: 8 servings

Ingredients:
- 8 oz. orzo pasta
- 2 pints grape tomatoes, halved
- 1 (15¼-oz.) can whole-kernel corn, drained
- ¼ cup thinly sliced basil leaves
- ¼ cup freshly chopped flat-leaf parsley
- ¼ cup fresh lemon juice
- 1 T. extra-virgin olive oil
- 2 shallots, minced
- 1 garlic clove, minced
- ½ t. salt
- ¼ t. ground black pepper
- ½ cup crumbled feta cheese
- ¼ cup pine nuts, toasted

Method: In large pot of boiling salted water, cook pasta until tender to the bite (9-12 minutes or according to package directions). Drain. In large bowl, toss pasta, tomatoes, corn, basil and parsley. In medium bowl, whisk lemon juice, olive oil, shallots, garlic, salt and pepper. Add lemon dressing to pasta mixture; toss to coat evenly. Garnish with feta cheese and pine nuts. Serve at room temperature or chilled.

Nutrition Information

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This recipe was created and tested by Clemson University’s Culinary Nutrition Undergraduate Student Research Group.