

Caprese Salad

When tomatoes are ripe and flavorful, and you have access to good quality mozzarella cheese, Caprese Salad is fantastic.

The first time I tried this dish was decades ago, when I worked as a sailboat captain for a summer in France. I had been invited to a French family's home for dinner. They turned eating Caprese Salad into a friendly competition. We drove to the local farmer's market and with basket in hand we selected our ingredients. First you had to find the most flavorful tomatoes, next the best fresh mozzarella cheese available, and once back home, create proportions with just the right amount of mozzarella, tomato, olive oil, and fresh basil to make the perfect bite. The five of us each bought enough ingredients for one serving and tried to create the best tasting combo while feeding each other. This was one of the best salads I have ever had.

Unless you are growing heirloom tomatoes in your own garden, finding flavorful tomatoes in the US is problematic, as most tomatoes are picked green and don't have much flavor. Heirloom (commonly called "ugly tomatoes") often have the better flavor of those sold in most stores, and in late summer are a good choice. Although using large sliced tomatoes makes the best presentation, the most consistent best tasting tomatoes are cherry tomatoes as they are picked when they are completely ripe, and they are usually sweet and flavorful.

You can find very good quality mozzarella cheese in the US, but you need to know what to look for, and the key is "fresh mozzarella". Traditionally the best quality mozzarella cheese is made from whole milk (low fat versions tend to be less moist) and are sold the same day it is made; fresh mozzarella can be kept in brine solution for up to 7 days, so ideally you want to know the packaging date, not just the expiration date. In contrast, low-moisture mozzarella can be kept refrigerated for up to a month, and some shredded low-moisture mozzarella is sold with a shelf life of up to six months, despite that the longer it's stored, the less flavor and moisture it will have. Some of the best brands come from buffalo milk (Mozzarella di Bufala) instead of cow's milk as it is creamier, although they are often double the price, and often you need a specialty store to find them. Whatever the brand, your challenge is to find fresh, whole milk mozzarella, and if using whole milk, then be sure to buy an organic brand as well. The bottom line is look for "fresh" (not more than 7 days old in brine solution), organic, whole milk mozzarella cheese for making Caprese Salad.

Finding good quality extra-virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar is also important, but far less of a challenge as good quality products are readily available, as is fresh basil. Some recipes will suggest a dash or two of dried oregano, yet if you have good quality ingredients, simpler is better.

Prep Time: 5-10 Minutes

Serves: 4

(Caprese Cont.)

Ingredients:

4 large vine-ripe tomatoes, cut horizontally into ½-inch slices (or 3 cups of cherry tomatoes sliced in half)

16 ounces fresh, organic mozzarella cheese, cut into ¼-inch slices

¼ teaspoon sea salt

¼ teaspoon ground black pepper

½ cup fresh basil leaves

4 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil

1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar

Directions:

On a serving platter, arrange tomatoes and mozzarella in an alternating pattern.

Season with salt and black pepper. Sprinkle the basil leaves over the tomatoes and mozzarella.

Drizzle with the olive oil and balsamic vinegar. Serve immediately.

Enjoy!

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