

# HEIRLOOM HEAVEN

by Carol Penn-Romine


The first time I ever heard of heirloom tomatoes, I cracked wise about finding wrinkly old dried-out veggies stashed in grandma's attic—and my grandmother kept everything, so that was a distinct possibility. But with the first enticing bite, I knew they were something extraordinary with which I was destined to become good friends. They typically set me back about \$7 or \$8 a pound, so for reasons of both economics and sheer pleasure, I refuse to let one go bad.

Recently, however, I allowed several heirlooms go seriously soft. I decided to try making sorbet with those too-soft-for-anything-else specimens of culinary indulgence. I made the simple syrup, and while it cooled I peeled the tomatoes, which handle beautifully when they're extra ripe, and put them through the food mill.

I'm convinced that this was one of the factors in the sorbet turning out so well. The mill doesn't thrash everything to death the way a blender or food processor does, and it expresses maximum pulp and juice without letting the bitter seeds pass through. I also strained every last bit of juice that remained after the peeling and seeding, and even squeezed the juice from the cutting board—I wanted it all.

Then I chopped the fresh basil finely, so there would be no strands catching on the mixing arm of the ice cream maker. To the mixture I added a high-quality balsamic vinegar. Not the extra vecchio tradizionale I'd spent a mortgage payment on in Modena, but something almost as exceptional. It was sweet, smooth and complex, without the tonsil-seizing aggressiveness of the cheap (and fake) stuff. And I added the barest pinch of salt. It's a great flavor balancer, so I figured, why not give it a try?

The results had a wonderfully complex flavor, the most sophisticated thing I've ever conjured up on my own. Complex but not kitchen-sink busy. The natural sweetness of those overripe tomatoes, along with that of the balsamic, reined in the one-dimensionality of the sugar. In spite of all that sweetness, it wasn't cloying. And in spite of there being both tomatoes and balsamic vinegar in the sorbet, it wasn't terribly acidic. The flavors were well balanced, and the sorbet had a nice harmony on the tongue.

Plenty of tomato sorbet recipes call for basil and perhaps balsamic, but I think four things helped me produce a really flavorful sorbet: using heirloom tomatoes, including a primo balsamic, adding that hint of salt and gently milling the tomatoes. 

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CAROL PENN-ROMINE

## Tomato Basil Balsamic Sorbet

*Makes about one quart*

$\frac{2}{3}$  cup sugar

$\frac{2}{3}$  cup water

2 pounds softly ripe heirloom tomatoes, peeled, seeded and cut into chunks (or other good-quality tomatoes—never hothouse or out-of-season)

$\frac{1}{4}$  cup finely minced fresh basil leaves (use red basil if you don't want freckled sorbet)

2 tablespoons balsamic vinegar (a good balsamic—taste it first to be sure it isn't too vinegary for the mix. Resist the urge to use a reduction, as it will overpower the tomatoes.)

A slight pinch of salt

Bring sugar and water to a boil in a small pan, give them a stir to combine, and pull the mixture off the heat once the sugar has dissolved. Set aside to cool.

Purée tomatoes and press through a fine mesh strainer into a bowl. (If you use a food mill the purée will not require straining.)

Combine syrup, purée, basil, vinegar and salt, then cover and chill for an hour. Freeze in ice cream maker following manufacturer's instructions.

Serve soft or freeze in an airtight container until firm, at least 3 hours.