

unripe for the taking

Red tomatoes are richly rewarding, but their younger, greener counterparts are equally endearing for their tart flavor and surprising versatility.

By Denise Gee ~ Photography by Robert Peacock



*“Greenies” are unripe tomatoes and a staple of southern home cooking.
Right: Sliced, a greenie displays the hint of pink that gives the young tomato a touch of sweetness to tickle even the most fickle northern palate.*

LIFE WAS OFTEN MADE IN THE SHADE at our Natchez, Mississippi, home, but not when it came to growing tomatoes. Because of the street-front siting of our Victorian enclave, most of the casual planting was relegated to the back yard. There, rain trees towered above fig trees as thick as thieves. The diffused light indeed had its charms, but the sun’s lack of direct reach had a major downside: We were left pining for tomatoes.

We did nurture a few scrappy tomato plants each season, but the fruits of our labor wound up enough for only a salad or two. Frankly, that was fine by me: Back then, I didn’t like eating what I considered “raw” tomatoes; I only liked trying to coax them into existence alongside my grandmother, Nannie. And thanks to the wily squirrels with which we competed, the tomatoes we did manage to nab were small and green—never big enough to respectably slice and fry (the form I most favored).

For a tomato fix, nearly every Sunday, Nannie and I would head to the house and country garden of Mrs. Tatum, a lady blessed with the true riches of our hearty sun and soil. We’d drive up the gravel road in our old land barge—barking dogs bobbing alongside us like dolphins astride a boat. Mrs. Tatum would peer out from behind her front porch’s screened door, nodding us a welcome and chiding her furry, scrappy “boys” to hush all their nonsense. Soon, all of us would be traipsing through the dewy, tall grass that blanketed the land around her garden.

In a picket-fenced spot, stalwart tomato vines surrounded by towers of chicken wire harbored the most beautiful tomato plants I’ve still yet to see (or at least my memory has committed it to be so). I’d unfold a couple of paper bags from the Jitney Jungle supermarket, and Nannie would take on the look of a child who had the run of a candy store. After thoughtful inspection, she would select a few of the weightiest, rubiest gems, instructing me to place them carefully in one bag before



we’d move on to the ones she called “greenies”—and I called good eating. (Then, as now, I’d eat newspaper if it were coated in buttermilk, flapped around in cornmeal and flour, and fried up in bacon grease. Back then, frying them just made better sense than fretting much over their seedier-looking red-faced cousins.)

Back home, I’d pull up a stool and watch Nannie slice the green tomatoes for frying in her jet black, pockmarked skillet. I see her near a large kitchen window, holding up a slice with the most intricately laced interior. “Notice that blush,” she’d say, reminding me on more than one occasion that tomatoes ripen from the inside out. “That hint of pink gives them a little sweetness.” We’d fry a few platefuls for the late afternoon dinner, letting the piping hot tomato cakes de-sizzle atop the same bags in which they’d been brought inside.

Typically, we’d eat the slices with only a squeeze of lemon, and often alongside black-eyed peas or lima beans, pork chops or smothered chicken. Sometimes we’d add a dab of homemade mayonnaise atop the slices or, if company was coming for lunch, maybe some dollops of shrimp salad.

I don’t eat fried green tomatoes nearly as much as I used to, but I will forever cherish them. As an adult, I find there’s nothing lovelier than a sun-warmed, earthy-sweet, cool, beautiful tomato—in any color or variety. I’ve branched out to savor their culinary charms in numerous ways, but I relish introducing friends to the pleasures of the green version—sliced and grilled; fried and added to BLTs; chopped up in fruity salsa; blended into ice-cold gazpacho or warm curried stews; mixed into bread, or even dessert.

Like Nannie, I wear that same childlike look of hers—in this case, though, as I wander through the Dallas Farmers Market each summer weekend. In my mind, and my kitchen, greenies will always be the epitome of summer. Of my youth. And of joy. •

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Peachy Green Tomato Salsa

This lovely mix goes well with fish, chicken, or pork—or simply served solo. The sweetness of the peaches balances beautifully with the green tomatoes’ tartness.

- 3 cups chopped firm green tomatoes
- 2 cups chopped ripe peaches
- ½ to ¾ cup sliced green onions
- ½ cup olive oil
- 2 tablespoons white wine vinegar
- 3 tablespoons minced fresh cilantro
- 2 tablespoons freshly squeezed lime juice
- 1 tablespoon hot pepper vinegar
- 1 tablespoon honey
- ½ teaspoon salt, or to taste

1. Stir together the tomatoes, peaches, green onions, olive oil, white wine vinegar, cilantro, lime juice, hot pepper vinegar, honey, and salt.

2. Cover and chill at least 1 hour before serving.

Makes about 6 cups



Mean & Green

Just because a tomato is green, that doesn’t mean it’s fit for frying. Heirloom varieties such as ‘Tasty Evergreen’ and ‘Green Zebra’ are bred to stay green even after maturity. Make sure any green tomato is firm and unripened before attempting to immerse it in hot oil (otherwise you’ll get battered mush). Papery-husked tomatillos, or “Mexican green tomatoes,” are also fry-able, but their flavor can be bitter-tart (an attribute that might work when tempered with a soothing sauce to balance it).

Old-Fashioned Fried Green Tomatoes

Add a squeeze of fresh lemon juice if so inclined. Or better yet, serve them with my Righteous Remoulade Sauce.

- 3 medium-sized firm green tomatoes, cut into ¼-inch slices
- ½ cup buttermilk
- ½ cup corn flour or all-purpose flour
- ½ cup finely ground cornmeal
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon garlic powder
- ¾ teaspoon salt, plus more for sprinkling on tomatoes
- 2 cups vegetable or peanut oil

1. Lay the sliced tomatoes in shallow baking pan(s) lined with paper towels. Sprinkle them with salt (to help pull water out of the tomatoes) and let them sit about 30 minutes, turning them midway through.

2. Pour the buttermilk into a shallow dish.

3. In a medium-size bowl, combine the flour, cornmeal, pepper, garlic powder, and ¾ teaspoon salt. Dip the tomatoes into the buttermilk; then dredge them in the seasoned flour-cornmeal mixture. Set aside on a large platter.

4. In a large skillet, heat the oil over medium-high heat to 370°F. (We suggest using a fry thermometer for best results.)

5. Deep-fry the tomatoes in batches (being careful not to crowd them in the skillet) until golden brown. Keep warm until ready to serve. Sprinkle, if desired, with a little more salt while the tomatoes are hot and serve immediately.

Serves 4 to 6



Righteous Remoulade Sauce

This spicy, creamy sauce is often served alongside fried green tomatoes down South. Up the flavor ante by adding boiled, sautéed, or grilled shrimp to it.

- 1 cup mayonnaise
- 2 tablespoons Creole or whole-grain mustard
- 2 tablespoons ketchup
- ½ cup finely chopped green onions
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped parsley
- 2 tablespoons finely chopped celery
- 2 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 teaspoon prepared horseradish sauce
- 1 teaspoon paprika
- 1 teaspoon hot sauce

Whisk together all ingredients. Cover and chill 1 hour.

Makes 1½ cups

From Southern Cocktails, by Denise Gee (Chronicle Books, 2007); used with permission.

Fried & True

- Avoid frying smaller green tomatoes, which tend to be bitter in flavor.
- Add a tablespoon of bacon grease to amp up the frying oil’s flavor.
- The best frying oil is one that can take high heat (400°F+), helping to quickly seal the coating and keep the slices from soaking up too much oil. Canola and peanut are my favorites.
- Some favor an egg wash for fluffing up crusts, but I find it promotes burned exteriors.
- A buttermilk soaking helps a crust stick to the tomatoes; without it, you’ll wind up with rustic, less evenly coated slices (which sometimes have their own charms).
- In cool northern climate zones, green tomatoes are most popular in September or October, at the end of tomato-growing season; by then in the sultry South, the vines are burned out by intense summer heat. Also in the North, slices are typically dusted with self-rising flour before frying, while in the South, cornmeal or corn flour rules.
- If you can think to do so, chill tomato slices overnight on thick layers of paper towels to help drain away water. This will help the fry coating to stick.
- Slice tomatoes ¼ to ½ inch thick. Thinner slices always seem to be a good idea until you watch them disintegrate in the bubbling oil.
- Some people add sugar to a coating mix to counteract the tomatoes’ tartness. Bless their hearts.
- Add breadcrumbs or panko crumbs for unexpected textures and flavor.
- Fry tomato slices in shallow, hot (but not smoking) oil, always in a heavy iron skillet (to harbor the high heat), to help golden crusts form on the bottom of each slice.
- Keep fried tomato slices warm on a raised rack fitted within a baking pan in an oven heated to 250°F. They’ll keep there for about 30 minutes (but the longer they’re there, the more prone they are to losing their crispness).

Sweet Green Tomato Pie

This dish, from chef Emeril Lagasse, tastes amazingly like apple pie, which makes life even sweeter when you can let others in on the surprise. What a fun, unexpected way to use an abundance of green tomatoes.

1 Sweet Pie Crust (recipe follows)
¾ cup packed light brown sugar
½ cup plus ½ teaspoon granulated sugar
6 tablespoons all-purpose flour
1 teaspoon ground cinnamon
⅛ teaspoon salt
⅛ teaspoon finely ground white pepper
4 cups finely chopped green tomatoes (about 4 firm green tomatoes)
1 tablespoon fresh lemon juice
2 tablespoons unsalted butter, cut into pieces
2 teaspoons heavy cream

1. Preheat the oven to 425°F.

2. Make the piecrust and let it rest in the refrigerator for at least 30 minutes.

3. Divide the dough in half. Place 1 piece of the dough on a lightly floured surface and roll out to an 11-inch circle, about ⅛-inch thick. Transfer to a 9-inch pie pan. Trim the crust with scissors or a sharp knife to within ½ inch of the outer rim.

4. In a large bowl, mix together the brown sugar, ½ cup granulated sugar, flour, cinnamon, salt, and pepper. Sprinkle 2 tablespoons of the flour mixture across the bottom of the prepared piecrust.

5. Add the tomatoes and lemon juice to the bowl with the remaining flour mixture and toss to coat. Spoon the tomato mixture into the pie shell and dot with the butter.

6. Roll out the remaining crust on a lightly floured surface. Slice into 1-inch strips to place decoratively or place whole pastry on top of the tomato filling (cutting ½-inch-long vents in a decorative pattern). Tuck the overlapping crusts into the pan, forming a thick edge. Crimp the edges to seal.



7. With a pastry brush, brush the top of the crust with the cream, and sprinkle with the remaining ½ teaspoon of sugar.

8. Bake for 15 minutes (shielding edges as desired); then reduce the temperature to 375°F. Bake until the crust is golden brown and the filling is bubbly, 35 to 40 minutes.

9. Remove from the oven and cool on a wire rack for at least 1 hour before serving.

Makes 1 (9-inch) pie

One of the more unusual recipes for green tomatoes, and one that makes good use of early abundance from the garden, is Sweet Green Tomato Pie. Try it with homemade vanilla bean ice cream or a 50/50 mix of plain yoghurt and whipped cream. Light and meltingly lovely.

Greens Keeper

- You may not immediately see green tomatoes at the farmers' market, but that doesn't mean they're not available. Sometimes they're being stored elsewhere or can be brought in the next day or weekend. Supermarkets sometimes keep them behind the scenes, so don't hesitate to ask a produce manager. Much of what's brought in is in the green stage and stored during the ripening process.
- The best green tomatoes for eating are large (10 to 16 ounces), smooth, well-rounded, and shoulder-free. Think 'Better Boy', 'Celebrity', 'Early Girl', 'Floramerica', 'Mountain Delight', 'Mountain Pride', and 'Supersonic'.
- To maintain the best flavor and greenness, store freshly picked tomatoes in a single layer in a cool place in your home (maybe a cellar or pantry) and always out of direct sunlight (which will ripen them in no time). They can be refrigerated, but over time this will cause them to lose flavor and become mushy.
- Full-sized green tomatoes—heavy, with just a hint of give to their exteriors—are ideal for frying or broiling. Smaller, younger ones, with condensed flavor and more crispness, are most often used as an ingredient of sprightly relishes or sauces.

Sweet Pie Crust

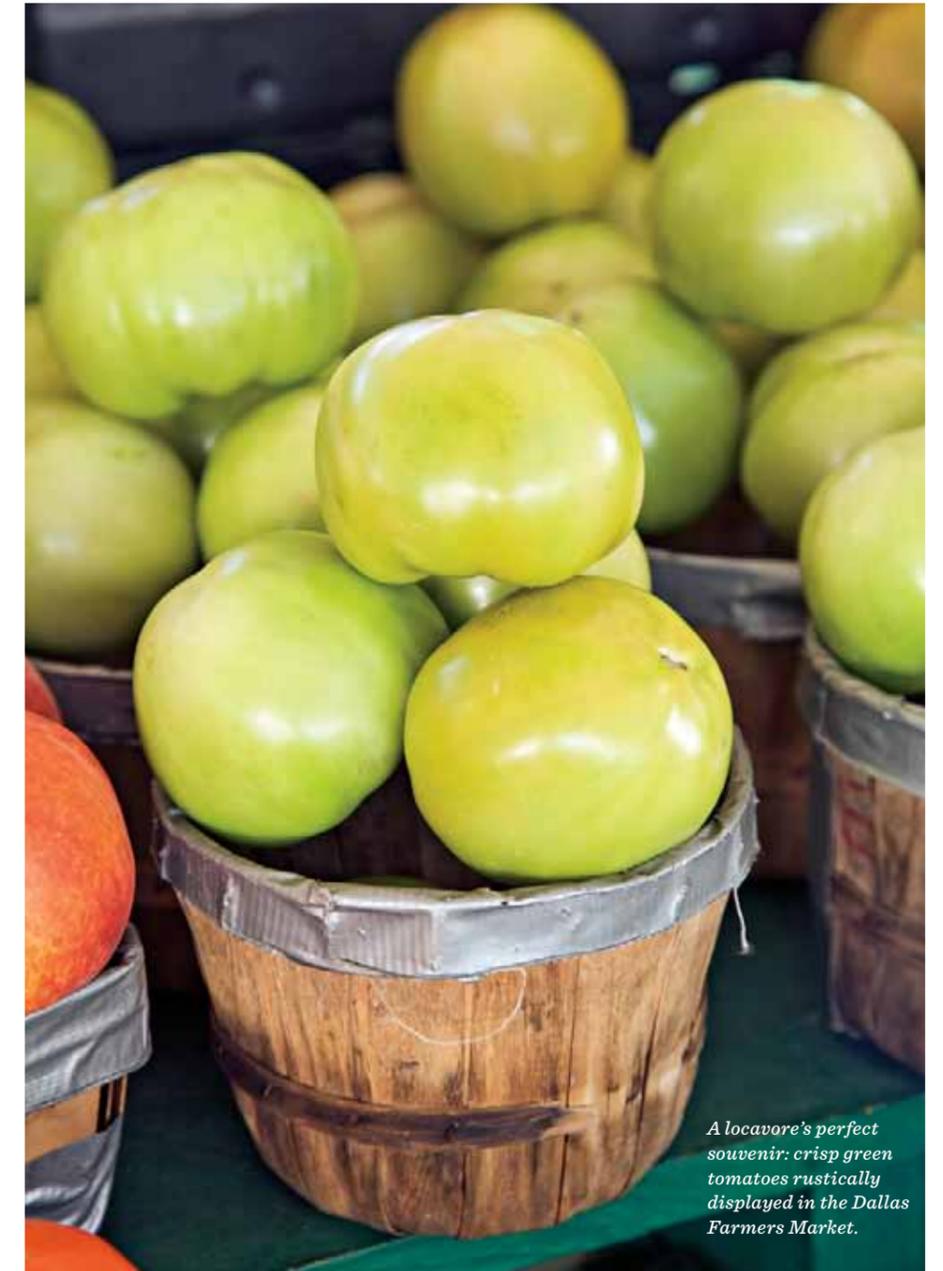
8 ounces all-purpose flour,
about 1½ cups plus 2 tablespoons
1 tablespoon granulated sugar
½ teaspoon salt
1 stick cold unsalted butter,
cut into ¼-inch pieces
2 tablespoons solid vegetable
shortening
3 tablespoons ice water

1. Sift the flour, sugar, and salt into a large bowl. Using your fingers, work in the butter and shortening until the mixture resembles coarse crumbs.

2. Add 2 tablespoons ice water and work with your fingers until the water is incorporated and the dough comes together. Add more water as needed to make a smooth dough, being careful not to overmix.

3. Form the dough into a disk, wrap tightly in plastic wrap, and refrigerate for at least 30 minutes before using.

*Makes enough for 1 (9-inch) pie.
Used with permission from Emeril
Lagasse.*



A locavore's perfect souvenir: crisp green tomatoes rustically displayed in the Dallas Farmers Market.