

# Lorenzo's Legendary Tuscan Bean Salad



The original recipe was given to me by Michael Thomas in 2002, the year I first served as the Mugello Valley Archaeological Project Operations Manager. What follows is the recipe that grew out of that and became the favorite lunch salad at the archaeological project. Three times the following recipe will feed about 40 people. The basic recipe will easily feed 8 to 12.

3 cans 250g net fagioli cannellini	Very good extra virgin olive oil
2 cans 250g net ceci	1 small onion, preferably sweet
1 can 250g net lenticchie	Salt
1 jar 280g net pomodori secchi	Cayenne pepper

1. If you're not in Italy you might have to do some substituting, but that's okay. The single most important ingredient is the olive oil. Be sure you are using one that is very good and to your liking. Look for olive oil that is extra virgin and cold pressed.
2. To begin, mince the onion and place in a bowl. Note that some people such as Rob Vander Poppen prefer to chop the onion coarsely. Which method you use depends on whether you want the onion in the background providing flavor but not texture, or if you want the onion to appear as a prominent ingredient. I prefer to keep the onion in the background and if available I prefer to use a sweet onion, i.e., one with a low sulphur content.
3. Next drain the olive oil from the sun dried tomatoes, the pomodori secchi, into the bowl with the minced onion. The oil from the tomatoes provides a nice bit of flavor. Cut the pieces of tomato into strips about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch wide, then turn  $90^\circ$  and cut into  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch dice. Add these to the bowl with the onion. Add some additional olive oil, mix, and allow the flavors to meld while you prepare the beans.
4. To prepare the beans simply open the tins, drain the beans in a colander, and rinse them well with plenty of cold water to remove the thick juice in which the beans were packed. Be sure to drain the beans well to remove all of the excess water. Place the rinsed and drained beans into a large mixing bowl. Do not stir or mix the beans yet.
5. Salt and pepper to taste, but remember that a cold dish will handle much more salt than a warm or hot dish. A good pinch of cayenne pepper will give the salad a nice bite without turning it into something from south of the border. If you're from south of the Red River make it two nice pinches. If you're from north of the Red River and east of the Piney woods make it a single, small pinch.
6. The cannellini beans, or navy beans if you are in America and substituting, will not stand up to a lot of vigorous stirring. Wait until all of the ingredients are in the bowl before you begin mixing the salad, and then mix gently. Chill in the ice box for several hours or overnight.
7. I like to garnish this salad in one of two ways. One is simply with large capers, probably one of the most under-used and under-appreciated condiments in America. The second is to seed and chop a ripe tomato. The tomato pieces should be diced to about  $\frac{3}{8}$  inch or roughly 1 cm.

## Salads

8. A great variation is to add tinned tuna fish, but not the bland American tinned tuna packed in water, rather with the wonderfully delicious Italian tuna which is packed in olive oil.

This salad is great on a hot summer afternoon for a picnic or for an outdoor cookout. Cooking on the grill brings up an interesting difference between American and Tuscan cuisine. In America when one cooks on the grill one often prepares one type of meat, e.g., ribs or chicken or burgers or whatever. In Toscana cooking on the grill, *alla griglia*, usually involves a variety of meats and vegetables. A Tuscan will typically grill a few ribs, a couple of pork chops, a few pieces of chicken, a bit of rabbit, and perhaps a few sausages. After the meat comes off the grill the Tuscans like to quickly grill vegetables, e.g., egg plant, bell pepper, and zucchini, which are slathered in good, extra virgin olive oil and served along with the meats.

In this picture to the right you see Bruno Parigi from the Podera della Vigna. With that rickety old grill Bruno cooks pork spare ribs and Italian sausages (well, it is Italy after all) to absolute perfection. Just as Bruno is the master of the grill his wife Bepinna is a Magician in the Kitchen. Here you see her frying zucchini flowers, fiori di zucca. Typically the Tuscan, Bepinna does not add a bit of Mozzarella cheese and anchovy fillet as they like to do in



Rome, instead she

simply removes the pistil, dips the flower in a very thin batter, and fries a few at a time as you see here. Bepinna was kind enough to share with me the secret of just why her fiori are so light they almost float off the plate: Using about ½ inch or so of olive oil Bepinna keeps the oil at a constant, hot temperature by only cooking a few fiori at a time. Whether cooking only for herself and Bruno or for their extended family she never tries to hurry the process by crowding the skillet because to do so would lower the temperature of the oil and that in turn would produce heavy, oily fiori.



Part of my job at the MVAP was to prepare lunches for 40+ hungry students and staff members. Here is my work space, the kitchen at the Podera della Vigna house in Vespignano. If you look closely at the table on the right you can see I had just finished making a batch of the bean salad for the next day's picnic lunch. That large, plastic wash tub on the table was my mixing bowl.



## Salads

Notes on ingredients in America:

- Cannellini beans can be found at most American grocers. One can find cans with 14 to 19 ounces priced around \$1.20 to \$1.40. Navy beans may be substituted, but purchase the navy beans without a lot of bacon or pork fat. Use 3 cans.
- Garbanzo beans are available in 14 to 16 ounce tins at a cost of 80¢ to \$1.20. Use 2 cans.
- Lentils are available in 14 to 16 ounce tins at about the same price as cannellini beans. Use 1 can.
- Sun dried tomatoes packed in olive oil are available usually in bottles from 6 to 10 ounces at a cost of \$6.50 to \$8.00. Use at least 10 ounces, 12 ounces is better.
- A really good extra virgin olive oil will cost \$12 to \$30 for a ½ to 1 liter bottle. Don't cut corners here, use a very good olive oil. Tuscan oils often have a more distinctive peppery flavor which I like in this salad, but suit your own tastes. How much olive oil you use is a matter of taste. Use enough. Using too much is less of a problem than using too little.

In Il Mugello I used Tuscan extra virgin olive oils that cost €8 to €12 per liter. The directors, Greg and Michael, did grumble a bit about the expense, but I think it was money well spent. The same olive oils in America cost easily three times that price. Other ingredients I used for the MVAP picnic lunches were also much less costly in Vicchio than in Dallas. The sun dried tomatoes for example were ? of the price they are in Dallas and the quality was better, much better.

This salad may be prepared the same day it is served, but allow it to chill in the ice box for a few hours. It is better if prepared the day before so the flavors have more time to meld.