Tomato Casserole: A New England Dish That's Anything But Common

This classic straight from my great-grandmother's New England recipe box will have you falling in love all over again with the last of the season's tomatoes.

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I never liked tomatoes when I was growing up. Ketchup, sure. Pasta and marinara sauce? Bring it on. But I never understood the excitement around tomato season, or why fresh garden tomatoes were treated with such reverence. But then this heirloom dish, straight from my great-grandmother's New England recipe box, helped open my eyes to the magic happening out in the garden.

A word to the wise: Do prepare this dish with fresh, in-season tomatoes. The mealy, pale hothouse tomatoes that you find in the supermarket come January simply won't cut it. Because in this dish, it's *all about the tomatoes*. And that's exactly how **tomato casserole** changed my opinion of the weighty late-summer fruits: the flavor bursts forward like tomatoes on steroids (all-natural, garden-fresh steroids, of course). The fresh tomatoes get showcased in a homey, definitively comfort-food casserole with a soft, creamy texture reminiscent of polenta, punctuated by crunchy bits of celery.

I grew up in Keene, New Hampshire, as did my great-grandmother and my grandmother. This dish has deep regional roots. We New Englanders are a resourceful bunch, and so this dish has one more trick up its sleeves, with a distinctive regional touch — common crackers.

What are common crackers?

Common crackers are a relic of the past, a culinary evolution just one step beyond hardtack, but preceding saltines. They **originated in the early 1800s** in Massachusetts when they first began appearing in barrels outside the general store. They're not the most flavorful cracker out there — and that's exactly the point. Mild tasting and sturdy, common crackers are a hard-working ingredient typically served with (and crumbled into) chowder and other stews, crushed for use as a binder in casseroles or Thanksgiving stuffing, or simply **halved and broiled with a sprinkling of cheese**.

Unfortunately, common crackers aren't readily available today, having fallen out of favor since the 1970s when my grandmother was churning out tomato casserole on the reg. So what to do when you run across one of the many vintage New England recipes calling for common crackers? You have a couple options: If you'd like to buy traditional New England common crackers, you can **find them for sale online** at The Vermont Country Store, one of the last manufacturers of the biscuits.

An easier route, of course, is to substitute them with a cracker that is more, well, *common* nowadays. Either saltines or oyster crackers are close relatives, albeit without the same heft, and will work just fine in the tomato casserole — just be sure to buy the unsalted variety, or leave out the added salt if using salted crackers. Crushed butter crackers would taste great as well, but will change the nature of the dish quite a bit.

Feeling more ambitious? Try making your own, as I did, using the recipe below on Yummly. Julia Child famously argued that the common cracker was a must-have companion for chowder. In Child's 1995 cookbook, ***In Julia's Kitchen with Master Chefs***, there's a recipe for "Kathleen Annino's Cape Cod Common Crackers." The recipe I used, from blogger Cook & Be Merry, is based on the Annino recipe.

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Homemade New England Common Crackers

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Got your crackers squared away? Let's get down to making casserole. You'll be practicing your knife skills with the chopping in this one, particularly when it comes to the tomatoes.

How to cut tomatoes

When cutting tomatoes, your best bet is to use a knife with a serrated edge; this will help the knife break the skin of the tomato without squishing the juicy insides. (I use **this specialty tomato knife** at home, but a simple serrated steak knife will work fine). For this recipe, you'll want to remove the seeds before dicing the tomato.

Start by halving the tomato through the core using a gentle sawing motion, then cut each half again to make 4 wedges. Use a small paring knife to remove the squishy center from each wedge, and chop off the stem end; you'll be left with four flat wedges of tomato which you can then cut into 1/4-inch wide strips, turn 90 degrees, and chop into 1/4-inch squares.

Once your tomatoes are chopped, the rest of the veggie prep will fly by — and it gets even easier from there! Simply mix all the ingredients together, put it in a casserole dish, and bake. There you have it: late New England summer in a pan.

Recipe: Escalloped Tomatoes Somerset (Tomato Casserole)

Ingredients:

- 3 cups diced, deseeded tomatoes (about 8 medium)
- 2 Tbsp. diced green peppers
- 3 Tbsp. diced onion (about 1/4 medium onion)
- 1/2 cup diced celery
- 1 cup common crackers, crushed
- 1 cup sharp white cheddar cheese, cut fine
- 1/4 tsp. paprika
- 1/2 tsp. salt
- 1/4 cup butter, melted

Directions:

Mix all ingredients together in a large bowl. Turn the mixture into a buttered casserole dish and bake at 350° for 20-25 minutes, until bubbling around the edges.

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Escalloped Tomatoes Somerset (Tomato Casserole)

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