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Marinara Madness

Finally, a tournament that levels the wide world of pasta sauce.

By Kelly Alexander

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There's lots of talk about how the fall of the World Trade Center has made us hungry for shared meals and comfort food. I'm very happy to hear it: The fact that food can help heal us is something I strongly believe in (not to mention something I make my living encouraging).

Unfortunately, when the crisis occurred and for several days after, I was unable to eat. It was during this starved desperation that I did something heretofore inconceivable in my adult life: I bought jarred tomato sauce. I *always* make my own marinara. But when I hadn't consumed food in three days, I didn't have the damn energy. At this delusional moment I pondered the state of store-bought tomato sauce. There are so many brands, flavors, and even celebrities clogging the market nowadays.

As I stood in the valley of the jars, mind reeling, I felt a slight surge of hunger rumble in my belly. I decided I would do a taste test—the biggest, most exacting taste test I could devise, based on the "March Madness" NCAA college basketball scoring system—to determine whether or not any of the products out there were actually tasty. Lo, I had a reason to eat again.



A Note on Marinara

The variations on "marinara" sauce are many, including with basil and without, with garlic and without, with chunks of tomatoes and smooth, with oregano and without—"real" marinara sauce is somewhat hard to define. In *The Italian-American Cookbook*, John Mariani calls marinara sauce "the defining element of Italian-American cookery." His version

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contains oregano and garlic and a half-teaspoon of sugar. Mario Batali's "basic tomato sauce" recipe in *Simple Italian Food* contains onion, a shredded carrot, and thyme.

Despite the wide range of acceptable ingredients, I had to draw the line: nothing with added sun-dried tomatoes, pesto, or sun-dried tomato pesto. Not that these things aren't delicious, I simply object to the way they've become so trendy. Perfectly plain marinara sauces would be the poison.

The Selection Process

The world of tomato sauce is populated by the haves and the have-nots: Some sauces are made and marketed by famous people or well-known restaurants and some aren't. I opted for six of these fancy brands and for six "regular" brands from non-boldfaced names.

Celeb makers include Emeril Lagasse, arguably the most famous chef in America; Lidia Bastianich, a restaurateur and part-time television chef and cookbook author; Paul Newman, who needs no explanation; Patsy's, a restaurant Sinatra used to frequent in New York City that's been open since 1944; Rao's, another family-owned restaurant in New York, this one more than 100 years old with a notoriously vexing no-reservations policy; and Coco Pazzo, a national mini-chain of upscale trattorias.

The Contest	
Celebs	Scrubs
Coco Pazzo Rustica 25 oz.; \$7.99 32 cents/oz.	Ragu Old World Style Traditional 14 oz.; \$1.75 13 cents/oz.
Lidia's Flavors of Italy Marinara 26 oz.; \$8.29 32 cents/oz.	Prego Traditional Pasta Sauce 14 oz.; \$1.79 13 cents/oz.
Newman's Own Marinara 26 oz.; \$2.89 11 cents/oz.	Classico di Napoli Tomato and Basil 14 oz.; \$2.49 18 cents/oz.
Emeril's Kicked Up Tomato 25 oz.; \$4.79 19 cents/oz.	D'Agostino Traditional Sauce 26 oz.; \$2.29 9 cents/oz.
Rao's Homemade Marinara 15.5 oz.; \$6.99 45 cents/oz.	Dell'Amore Original Marinara 16 oz.; \$5.49 34 cents/oz.
Patsy's Marinara 16 oz.; \$5.99 37 cents/oz.	Richfood Meatless Spaghetti Sauce 26 oz.; \$1.89 7 cents/oz.

The Methodology

The taste test was double blind: The judges did not know whether they were tasting a celeb or a scrub sauce, and they did not know the brands of the sauces. Two rounds of inter-team competition produced one winner from each team; the two winners then competed against each other in the finals.

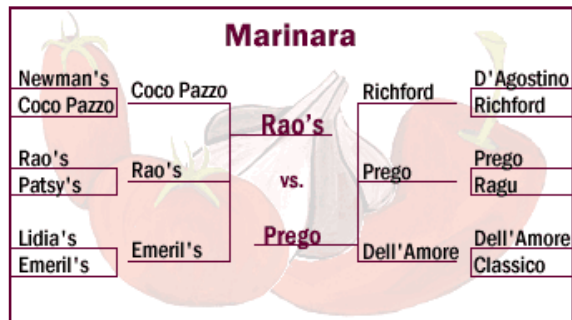
Because I have the good fortune of being married to someone who produces sophisticated accounting spreadsheets for a living, I let my husband organize the heats. Here's what he did: First, he divided the sauces into their two respective teams, celebs and scrubs. Then, he poured the contents of each jar into 12 identical red plastic cups. He next assigned a letter to each sauce and wrote the letter on the bottom of each cup. Within each group, he arranged the cups in random order. Finally, he wrote numbers on the face of each cup.

The first heat consisted of head-to-head competition between two sauces (there were three of these). The second heat consisted of the three winners of the first tests going head-to-head. And the last heat was the final two entries, one from the celebs and one from the scrubs. Only after all the testing was finished and the results were recorded did we match the letters to the original list of sauces.

The Judges

There were three of us: Peter, a writer who covers food subjects for documentaries and television; my husband, a guy who'll eat anything; and me. It might surprise you to learn that within this small group the characteristics of what makes an edible sauce were highly debated.

For guidance, I spoke with the food editor of *Food & Wine* (and, in the interest of full disclosure, my friend and former boss), Tina Ujlaki, a woman with a perfect palate and extensive knowledge of Italian cuisine. "A good marinara sauce should be perfectly balanced with acid, a little bit of sweetness, and enough olive oil to coat the pasta nicely like the Europeans do without drowning it," she said. And so that would be our quest: To find the sauce with the best balance.



The Tests

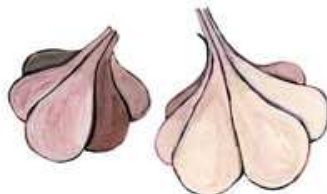
Celeb Round 1

Newman's Own versus Coco Pazzo:

Newman's ingredients: tomato puree (water, tomato paste); diced tomatoes; corn syrup; salt; soybean oil; high-fructose corn syrup; extra virgin olive oil; spices; onion; garlic.

Coco Pazzo's ingredients: imported Italian and domestic tomatoes; fresh onions; pure imported olive oil; hand-picked fresh herbs and spices; fresh carrots; salt; Florida Crystals Natural Unbleached Cane Sugar.

You know how sweet Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward's enduring love story is? It must be the inspiration for Newman's sugary tomato sauce, which was far sweeter than Coco Pazzo's. Coco Pazzo had the added advantage of discernable onion flavor and therefore a more herbal and earthy taste. Winner: Coco Pazzo.



Rao's versus Patsy's

Rao's ingredients: San Marzano tomatoes; pure imported Italian olive oil; fresh onions; fresh basil; fresh garlic; pepper; salt; oregano.

Patsy's ingredients: tomatoes; tomato paste; 100 percent pure olive oil; fresh garlic; fresh parsley; fresh onions; salt; fresh basil; spices.

Patsy's version is loaded with basil—stale, old basil, unfortunately. Rao's, on the other hand, was simple, had a discernible amount of olive oil in it, which we liked, and was salty, which we loved. Winner: Rao's.

Lydia's versus Emeril's

Lydia's ingredients: ground tomatoes; crushed tomatoes; Colavita canola oil; Colavita extra virgin olive oil; fresh garlic; fresh basil; honey; salt; crushed red pepper; spices.

Emeril's ingredients: tomatoes; tomato puree (water, tomato paste); extra virgin olive oil; high-fructose corn syrup; garlic; hot pepper sauce (cayenne peppers, vinegar, salt, garlic); salt; onions; spices; concentrated lemon juice; crushed red pepper.

Lydia's, despite all its "fresh"-sounding ingredients, was redolent of burnt garlic. Emeril's, meanwhile, had big chunks of tomatoes and, though sweet, a nice spicy aftertaste thanks to the crushed red pepper. You may want to overlook the fact that it's called "Kicked Up Tomato," which makes it sound somehow pregnant. Winner: Emeril's.

Round 2:

Coco Pazzo versus Rao's versus Emeril's

The closest race of the day. When tasted next to the other two more savory sauces, Emeril's was much sweeter (we later found out that's due to "high fructose corn syrup"), so it was voted out. One person felt the herbs in Coco Pazzo's sauce gave it a leg up on the plain, unherby version that Rao's makes, but the other two thought the subtlety of the Rao's sauce made it the clear choice. Overall celeb winner: Rao's.

The Scrubs Round 1:

D'Agostino's versus Richfood

D'Agostino ingredients: tomato puree (water, tomato paste); canola oil; salt; sugar; corn starch; dried onions; dried garlic; herbs; spices.

Richfood ingredients: tomato concentrate (water and tomato paste); diced tomatoes; corn syrup; soybean oil; salt; spices (basil, oregano, and other spices); dehydrated garlic; dehydrated onion; dehydrated parsley; citric acid; natural flavors.

Oh, God, this brought back miserable memories. The tinny, canned taste of the D'Agostino brand nearly killed me. The Richfood sauce was much, um, richer, had more spices and blew its competition away. Winner: Richfood.

Prego versus Ragu

Prego ingredients: tomato puree (water, tomato paste); diced tomatoes; corn syrup; vegetable oil; salt; onion powder; spices (basil, oregano, and other spices); dehydrated garlic; citric acid; dehydrated parsley; spice extract.

Ragu ingredients: tomato puree (water, tomato paste); soybean oil; high-fructose corn syrup; salt; dried onions; extra virgin olive oil; Romano cheese; spices; natural flavor.

Prego was very sweet but also pleasantly herby and complex, especially when compared to the thin, watery, metallic Ragu. Winner: Prego.

Dell'Amore versus Classico

Dell'Amore ingredients: vine-ripened tomatoes; tomato puree; whole peeled plum tomatoes; 100 percent pure Italian olive oil; fresh garlic; spices; salt from tomatoes; citric acid.



Classico ingredients: diced tomatoes; tomato puree;; onions; garlic; pure olive oil; salt; basil; spices.

Classico was thin and very oniony. Too oniony. Dell'Amore, while being called "extraordinarily ordinary" by Peter, had a strong tomato flavor and an appealingly thick texture. Winner: Dell'Amore.

Round 2:

Richfood versus Prego versus Dell'Amore

No contest when these three were lined up next to each other. The Richfood had "more acid than a Phish concert," according to Peter, and even my husband, who never met a processed food he didn't like, deemed it "pasty." As for the Dell'Amore, it was gloppy when compared to less thin sauces, blander than the others, too. Prego, which I came to think of as the tomato sauce version of Wishbone's Italian salad dressing, was the only one with any zip. Overall scrub winner: Prego.

The Finals:

Rao's versus Prego

Remember that this test was double blind. Remember that we had no idea we were tasting an extremely expensive restaurant product up against the inspiration for countless bad TV commercials. In the end, the sweetness of Prego was its downfall. Rao's had a more sophisticated taste, aided by loads of olive oil and salt. The winner: Rao's.

Conclusion

As any sports fan knows, the real fun of a championship bout comes not from seeing who won, but in arguing about why the results are screwed up—about the asterisks in the record book. Our asterisk, of course, is price. Sure Rao's was the best, but at \$10 for a big jar you might as well go out to dinner; Richfoods cost 85 percent less. Technically it's victory, but it sure wasn't a fair fight.



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[Here](#) is a somewhat lengthy and borderline philosophical treatise on making marinara sauce. The name of [this](#) page is irresistible, and the information itself just might help you understand and appreciate marinara sauce better: "The Tomato—A Brief History." For further culinary/historical questing, find out about the birth of pizza [here](#). On the origins of the word "marinara" (literally, from the sea), <http://www.pizza.it/> has this to say (rendered, if you like, in a thick Lucca Brazzi mobster accent): "It is so called, even if, strangely, it doesn't contain any fish as one could imagine from the name. 'Marinara' comes from Naples, that, as everybody knows, is famous for its sea."

Kelly Alexander is a senior editor at Saveur magazine.

Illustration by Nina Frenkel.

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