
TUSCAN BREAD, TOMATO, AND BASIL SALAD (PANZANELLA)

One of Tuscany's great salads, panzanella is just one of the hundreds of ways in which Italians put leftover bread to good use. We prefer toasting the bread (this is not usually done in Italy), but you can skip the toasting step for a salad with the more traditional soft texture.

If the onion seems very potent when you cut it, soak it in cool water to cover for 30 minutes, then drain and blot dry before adding it to the salad; a brief soak in cool water softens its bite and mellows its pungency.

Serves 2 as a main course, 4 as a side dish

- 115 grams (4 ounces) day-old country bread, cut into ½-inch (1.5-centimeter) cubes
- 45 milliliters (3 tablespoons) extra-virgin olive oil
- ¾ teaspoon salt
- ¼ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 225 grams (8 ounces) ripe beefsteak tomatoes, cut into ½-inch (1.5-centimeter) cubes, or grape or cherry tomatoes, halved
- 115 grams (4 ounces) Persian cucumbers, seeded and cut into ½-inch (1.5-centimeter) cubes
- 25 grams (1 ounce) red onion, cut into ½-inch (1.5-centimeter) cubes
- 15 grams (0.5 ounce) capers in brine, drained
- 10 milliliters (2 teaspoons) red wine vinegar
- 24 basil leaves, torn or cut into a chiffonade

1. Preheat the oven to 400°F convection or 425°F regular.
2. Toss the bread with 1 tablespoon of the olive oil, ¼ teaspoon of the salt, and 1/8 teaspoon of the pepper on a sheet tray lined with parchment paper.
3. Bake in the preheated oven until crisp and golden, about 6 to 7 minutes, checking to make sure it is not burning half way through and shaking the baking sheet to even out browning. Cool to room temperature.
4. Toss all the remaining ingredients in a large bowl and set aside at room temperature for 30 minutes to mingle the flavors; the tomatoes will let out some water, which will add to the deliciousness of the salad. Additionally, letting the tomatoes seep out juice cuts down on the amount of olive oil necessary to dress the salad.

5. When you are ready to serve, stir the toasted bread into the vegetable mixture (do not stir the bread into the vegetable mixture more than 5 minutes prior to serving or the bread will become soggy).
6. Taste, adjust the seasoning as needed, and serve the salad at room temperature.