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## Why Canning Tomato Sauce Is More Important To Our Family Than Going To The Cottage

BY JOSEPH WILSON

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On Labour Day weekend, instead of squeezing in one last cottage visit before school, my family makes tomato sauce. Every year, thousands of Italians across Canada do the same, filling back alleys and garages with propane tanks, sauce pots and wooden spoons the size of oars in order to make enough *passata di pomodoro* (tomato puree) to last the year.

I grew up in a small British family who soberly bought their sauce from the grocery store at the mall. My wife, on the other hand, has a sprawling network of French and Italian cousins who show up every year with brushed aluminum pots and bottles of wine. The connection between family and food is strong in European cultures.

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The collective cooking of tomatoes is something my children have come to expect every year to mark the end of summer. The younger ones play in a plastic pool with their cousins, while the older ones are pressed into service. There is enormous pride when, at the age of three or four, they are allowed to get their hands on some tomatoes in the giant washing sink, cleaning off dirt and leaves.

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For our family, having kids participate in the process of making sauce is as much a part of their education as is anything they'll learn at school.

This year my eldest daughter, age 8, was promoted to the pouring station where over 300 sterile jars needed to be filled with sauce, but not too much or the lids won't seal!. For the first few she took her time, topping up the bottle a few millilitres at a time until she reached the level of my finger on the side of the jar. But soon she was eyeballing 500 mL of sauce as well as the adults and even chirped at the guy grinding the boiled tomatoes for moving too slow.

With the filling of the last jar, she crawled under a bush with the remaining basil and dipped it into the dregs of the sauce, engaging in what Italians call *fare la scarpetta*, the tradition of mopping up oil and sauce with bread (or, I suppose, when you're in a pinch, basil leaves).

For our family, having kids participate in the process of making sauce is as much a part of their education as is anything they'll learn at school. This year we ordered twelve bushels of tomatoes, which is a unit of measurement they don't use in math class. But converting those units is much more satisfying: 12 bushels of San Marzano tomatoes equals 600 pounds which equals 328 bottles of tomato puree.

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Kids need to know that the food they eat takes labour to prepare. To make the puree, tomatoes need to be cleaned, boiled, skinned, crushed, bottled and then boiled again. But maybe the more important lesson is that if that labour is shared amongst family members, and if it takes place under the sun, with regular breaks for wine and bruschetta at the picnic table, it doesn't feel like a chore.

I'm convinced it makes the food taste better, too. In the middle of the winter, opening a sealed bottle of tomato puree is like tapping a portal into summer when fruit is just falling from the trees. There's genuine pride in my daughters' faces as they eat pasta seasoned with sauce that they bottled.

When we visit Italy, and our children eat with their Neapolitan cousins, they know that the pasta they are eating is seasoned with sauce that was made in a similar way, creating a family connection through food. The sauce is sweet, rich and less acidic than store-bought sauce and has exactly one ingredient: *pomodoro*. The word comes from *pomo d'oro* or "golden apple," evoking both wealth and sweetness, both things we feel when we bottle our sauce under the September sun in Canada.

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