

Tomato Basics

Many dishes are much better made with peeled and seeded tomatoes. These step-by-step instructions show you the easiest way to accomplish both tasks, as well as how to dice tomatoes both roughly and precisely.

Imagine slicing a perfect summer tomato. You wouldn't dream of sacrificing the sweet band of skin encircling the flesh or of forfeiting the pleasure of one of the slippery little bundles of seeds that elude your fork to the very end. A cherry tomato salsa without skins or seeds? Why bother? Likewise, there is no cause to peel tomatoes destined to be stuffed and baked, since the skin provides needed structure. Nor do you need to peel tomatoes when you are cooking a sauce or soup that you intend to puree or sieve later.

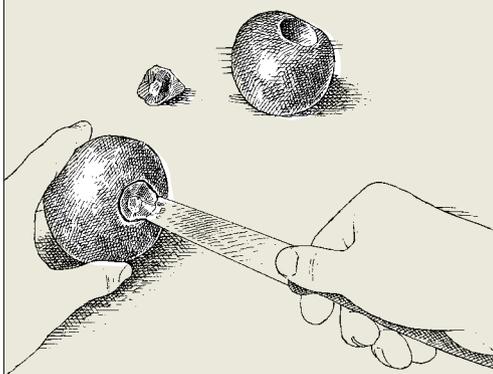
But there are plenty of situations in which you do need to peel and/or seed tomatoes. To confirm this, we made two tomato sauces with diced tomatoes, one in which the tomatoes had been peeled

and seeded, and the other in which they had been diced as is. In the "as is" sauce, the skins separated from the tomatoes and curled up into sinewy little scrolls that were unpleasant in terms of both flavor and texture. The seeds, which are quite bitter, trailed off into the sauce unnecessary and unwanted. Removing the skins and seeds prepares the way for simple and delicious sauces as well as for dicing and julienning tomatoes destined for garnishing.

By following the steps below, you can accomplish these culinary tasks in the easiest and most efficient way. A sharp serrated paring knife makes short work of coring and seeding. For chopping or dicing use a sharp 8- or 10-inch chef's knife in a rocking motion.

CORING

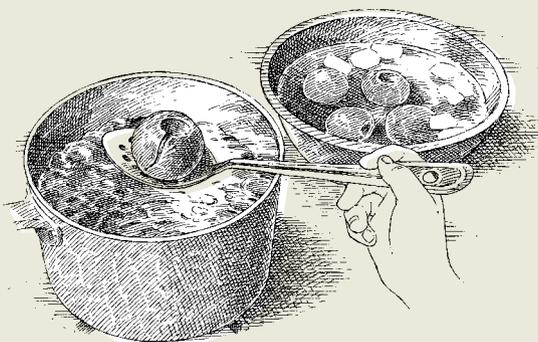
Tomatoes are almost always cored. That is, the tough stem end is removed and discarded. We suggest coring before peeling, as peeled tomatoes are more difficult to handle. Coring also provides a practical point of departure when it's time to peel.



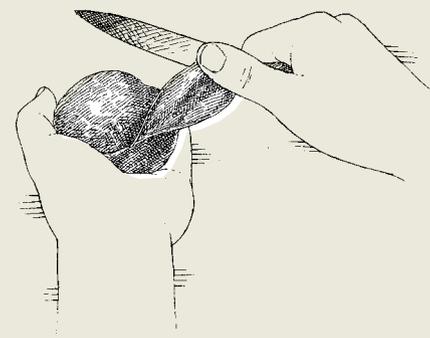
Place the tomato on its side on the work surface. Holding the tomato stable with one hand, insert the tip of a paring knife about 1 inch into the tomato at an angle just outside of the core. Use the paring knife with a sawing motion, at the same time rotating the tomato toward you until the core is cut free.

PEELING

We found that peeling tomatoes is easiest after a quick blanch, even for small jobs. A vegetable peeler—especially a dull one—can be slow and cumbersome and tends to mangle soft, ripe fruit. Holding an individual tomato over a burner gets the job done, but the potential for damage to the tomato flesh is greater. A quick dip in boiling water followed by a plunge in ice water does just what it should: it loosens the skin without allowing the heat to reach the flesh of the tomato.



1. Place cored tomatoes in boiling water, no more than five at a time. Boil until skins split and begin to curl around the cored area of the tomato, about 15 seconds for very ripe tomatoes or up to 30 seconds for firmer, underripe ones. Remove tomatoes from water with a slotted spoon or mesh skimmer and place in a bowl of ice water until cool enough to handle.



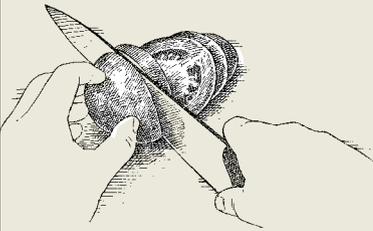
2. With a paring knife, peel the skins away using the curled edges at the core as your point of departure. (The bowl of ice water fulfills a helpful second function—the skins will slide right off the blade of the knife if you dip the blade into the water.)

Illustration: John Burgoyne

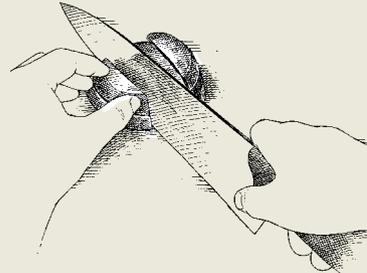
CHOPPING WHOLE UNSEEDED TOMATOES

Whether peeled or unpeeled, whole (and therefore necessarily unseeded) tomatoes can be chopped following these steps. The shape of the resulting tomato pieces will be irregular, but that's fine for uses in which precision and uniformity are not important, such as cooked tomato sauces.

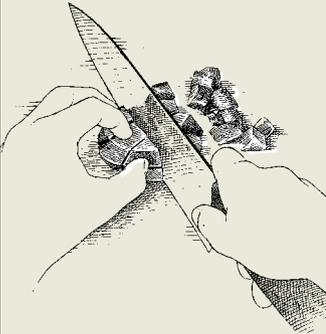
Whole round tomatoes



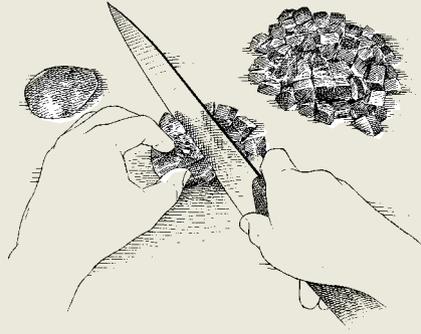
1. Place the tomato cored side down on a cutting board and cut into slices of desired thickness.



2. If the tomato is unpeeled, set aside the end pieces. Stack the slices in pairs of two and cut into strips.

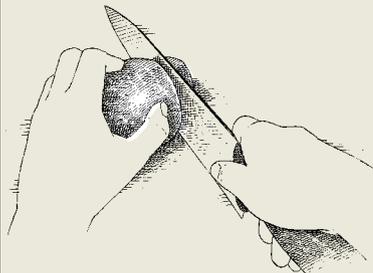


3. Turn strips one-quarter turn and cut them crosswise into cubes.

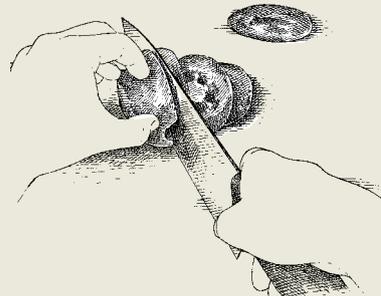


4. Place the end pieces skin side down and cut into strips; make one-quarter turn and cut crosswise into rough cubes.

Whole plum tomatoes



1. Lob off one of the long sides to make a flat side.

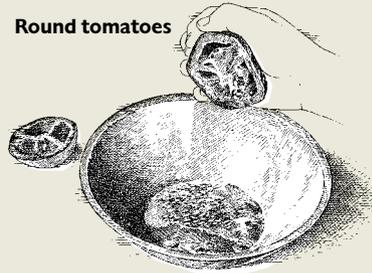


2. Place the tomato cut side down and slice lengthwise into slices of desired thickness. To chop, follow steps 2–4 for whole round tomatoes, above.

SEEDING

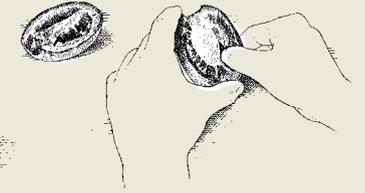
Seeding rid's tomatoes of excess liquid and bitter seeds. This technique works for both peeled and unpeeled tomatoes.

Round tomatoes



Halve the cored tomato along the equator. If it is ripe and juicy, gently give it a squeeze and shake out the seeds and gelatinous material. If not, scoop them out with your finger or a small spoon.

Plum tomatoes

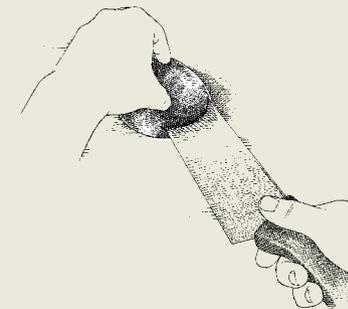


Halve the cored tomato lengthwise. Cut through the inner membrane with a paring knife or break through it with your finger and scoop out the seeds and gelatinous material.

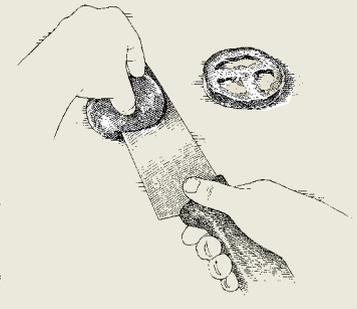
CHOPPING SEEDED TOMATOES

Seeded tomatoes can be chopped into much more evenly sized pieces than unseeded tomatoes. Use this technique when having pieces of a relatively regular size is important.

Round tomatoes



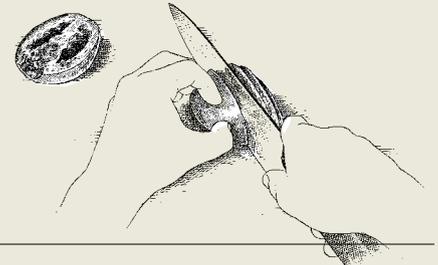
1. Lay a tomato half cut side down on the cutting board. Steady the top of the tomato with one hand and, with a chef's knife held parallel to the work surface, slice into the lower portion of the tomato half using a wide sawing motion.



2. Slide the uncut portion of the tomato off the bottom slice. Repeat until all desired slices are made. To chop, follow steps 2 through 4 for whole round tomatoes, above left.

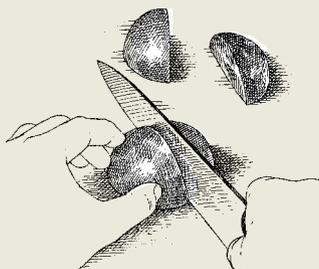
Plum tomatoes

Lay a tomato half cut side down on the cutting board. Slice lengthwise into strips of desired width. To chop, follow step 3 in the instructions for whole round tomatoes, above left.

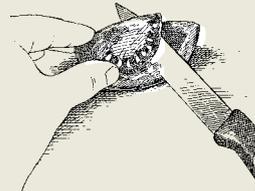


PERFECT-DICING TOMATOES

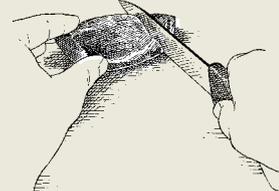
Cutting tomatoes into perfect dice involves a bit more waste—tomatoes are, after all, round fruit. Perfectly diced tomatoes are ideal for garnish, and you can save the scraps for soups or stocks. This technique works for both peeled and unpeeled round and plum tomatoes.



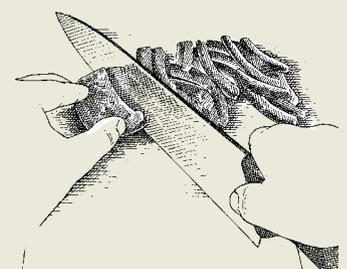
1. Cut the cored tomato into quarters.



2. Use a paring knife to remove the inner flesh, pulp, and seeds.



3. Trim 1/4 to 1/2 inch off the top and bottom of each quarter to form roughly even rectangles.



4. Cut into even strips. Follow step 3 for whole round tomatoes, above left, to chop.