

SALSA ROSA—The aroma of roasting peppers is a vivid childhood summertime memory for me. I remember big paper bags of roasted peppers cooling in our kitchen, ready to be peeled and pureed with tomatoes and chilies for this condiment. For several weeks in summer, a bowl of the sauce would be placed on the table almost every night so we could slather it on bread. We canned it for winter use, too.

I always make this sauce in quantity because it freezes well and has a million uses. You can spoon it over grilled fish or toss it with pasta. Sometimes I mix it with hummus or sour cream to make a dip, or fold it into mayonnaise for sandwiches. You can serve it with skewers of crusty grilled chicken, make a pool of it under seared scallops, or stir a little into risotto. I also whip it into unsalted butter (about $\frac{1}{4}$ cup sauce to $\frac{1}{2}$ pound butter) and add some minced Calabrian chilies (see Resources, page 210) to make a superb chili butter for corn on the cob.

12 large red bell peppers

Olive oil for coating the peppers, plus 2 tablespoons, or as needed

4 serrano chilies

2 cloves garlic, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon chopped fresh oregano

1 cup fresh tomato puree (see Tomatoes, page 19)

1 $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoons sea salt, preferably gray salt

1 tablespoon red wine vinegar

Freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 450°F. Line a baking sheet with aluminum foil. Coat the bell peppers lightly with olive oil and place on the baking sheet. Bake, turning every 10 to 15 minutes, until the peppers are blistered all over, about 30 minutes total. Transfer the peppers to a bowl and cover with plastic wrap so they steam as they cool. Peel the peppers and remove the stems, seeds, and ribs; avoid the temptation to rinse the peppers, which would wash away flavor. You should have about 4 cups.

Heat the 2 tablespoons olive oil in a small skillet over high heat. Add the whole chilies, lower the heat to moderate, and cook, turning occasionally, until the chilies are softened, lightly browned, and blistered on all sides. Remove the skillet from the heat and let the chilies cool in the oil for several minutes. When cool enough to handle, peel the chilies and remove the stems and seeds (or leave some or all of the seeds if you prefer a spicy sauce). Chop the chilies finely, then use the side of your knife to mash them to a paste.

Add more oil to the skillet if needed to make 2 tablespoons. Reheat the oil over moderate heat and add the garlic. Cook until lightly browned, about 30 seconds, then add the oregano and sauté briefly to release its fragrance. Add the tomato puree and salt, bring to a simmer, and simmer for about 5 minutes to thicken slightly.

Combine the bell peppers, serrano chilies, and tomato sauce in a blender and puree until smooth. Add the vinegar and the black pepper to taste and puree again. Taste and adjust the seasoning. Refrigerate for up to 5 days, or freeze for up to 4 months.

MAKES ABOUT 7 CUPS

SALSA ROSA VINAIGRETTE: Puree 1 cup Salsa Rosa, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup extra-virgin olive oil, and 2 tablespoons red wine vinegar or balsamic vinegar in a blender until smooth. Toss with hot or cool pasta or spoon over fish.

Michael's Notes: You can roast the peppers under the broiler or over a gas flame, if you prefer, but I like to do them in a hot oven. It takes a little longer, but you don't have to monitor them as closely.