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Warm and Cool Tomato Salad

Serves 4

We first tasted this salad at La Scala in Buis-les-Barrionnes, a small village bistro in the Rhone Valley. The sweet and very delicate tomato sauce was made with tiny ripe tomatoes and was a sensuous foil for the cheese and salty olives. If you've ever thought of visiting Provence, or even if you know it well, make this salad and you're halfway there!

For the tomato sauce:

2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 garlic clove, minced
1 shallot, minced
1 pound small ripe red plum tomatoes, quartered
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

For the salad:

1 medium-size ripe red tomato, cored and cut into 4 thick slices
4 slices day-old country bread, sliced 1-inch thick and trimmed into rounds
3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 tablespoon balsamic vinegar
2 teaspoons *herbes de Provence*
4 1/4-inch-thick rounds fresh mozzarella cheese, shaped to fit the bread rounds
1/2 head romaine lettuce, shredded or cut into thin strips
1/2 medium-size cucumber, thinly sliced, for garnish
Cured olives, for garnish

1. To make the sauce, in a medium-size skillet, heat the olive oil over medium heat and sauté the garlic and shallot for 1 minute, or until softened. Add the tomatoes, salt, and pepper and cook over medium-low heat until the tomatoes are slightly softened, about 10 minutes. The tomato juice will have evaporated and the tomatoes will have a creamy appearance.

2. Preheat the oven to 400°F.

3. To make the salad, place the tomato slices on the bread rounds. Make the dressing by whisking together the olive oil, vinegar, *herbes de Provence*, salt, and pepper. Brush a little over the tomatoes and top with cheese. Bake until the cheese is just melted, 7 to 10 minutes.

4. Spoon the warm tomato sauce onto a large serving platter. Toss the lettuce with the remaining vinaigrette and place over the tomato sauce. Arrange the bread rounds on top of the lettuce and arrange the cucumber rounds and olives around the edges of the platter. Serve immediately.