

# The Star-Ledger

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## The Great Jersey Tomato Sauce Taste-Off



Three Jersey chefs determine the best of the Garden State's bottled marinara

By Vicki Hyman  
STAR LEDGER STAFF

**C**hef Anthony Pino, born into an Italian-American family and raised on Sunday sauce, numerical ratings system for jarred tomato sauces. A 1, for example, isn't great, but it's a heck of a lot better than a 4.

That's 1 a.m. vs. 4 a.m., as in how late it is when he gets off work, and how desperate he is for a meal.

Pino, one of three Italian-American chefs we invited to judge our Jersey tomato sauce taste-off, leans into a pot of simmering marinara for a deep whiff, then eyes the texture before downing a spoonful. Too garlicky. "That's like a 1:35." With another, he nods approvingly at the signature sheen of good olive oil on the spoon — "You can tell what it tastes like by looking at it" — before sampling.

"That's a before midnight pronounces."

**The marinara sauce** at Nanina's in the Park: "sweet" (\$5.99, ShopRite Markets)  
**Hoboken Farms:** "the f--- good" (\$8.49, Whole Foods)  
**Bongiovi Pasta Sauce:** "spices," "better texture" (ShopRite)  
**Ethnic Cottage Jersey Sauce:** "needs sodium" (\$4.99, Whole Foods)  
**Signature Sauces from Brownstone:** "bitter" (\$8.99, Kings Food Markets)

**L.E. Roselli's Italian Food Specialties:** "nice texture" (\$4.79, Wegmans)  
**John Celentano's Mia Cucina:** "too overpowering" (\$4.99, ShopRite, Wegmans)  
**Teresa Giudice Fabulicious Foods Skinny Italian:** "flat flavor" (\$9.99, skinnyitalianfoods.com)

**The Food Emporium Trading Company Jersey Tomato Sauce:** "aroma unpleasant" (\$8.79, A&P)  
**Two Guys Jersey Tomato Sauce:** "too much seasoning" (\$5.99, Whole Foods)  
"Made with 'Jersey Fresh' tomatoes"



**Chefs' secrets to great marinara**  
**Francesco Palmieri:** Slow-cooked onions at the start will give it sweetness and depth.  
**Louis Laico:** With canned tomatoes, taste them first — some are sweeter than others — so you'll know how to adjust your seasonings.  
**Anthony Pino:** Tomatoes are packed with water, so salt throughout the cooking process to bring out their natural flavor.

**C**hef Anthony Pino, born into an Italian-American family and raised on rich, tangy Sunday sauce, has a numerical ratings system for jarred tomato sauces. A 1, for example, isn't great, but it's a heck of a lot better than a 4.

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shipping), the marinara from the Brownstone, the Paterson catering hall owned by the Manzos, also of Bravo fame, and the Bon Jovi, er, Bongiovi marinara, based on Jon Bon Jovi's father John's recipe — Bongiovi's went to the top of the charts. John Bongiovi made a huge batch of sauce on

Bon Jovi's brother Matthew Bongiovi, who helps market the sauce, all profits of which go to the Jon Bon Jovi Soul Foundation.

Bad news for boosters of Jersey tomatoes: They apparently don't fare so well in sauce, at least in the ones we tasted. The four sauces made with

imported Italian tomatoes and olive oil, garlic, salt, oregano and basil. It's based on a recipe taught to Campania-born chef Vincenzo Loretto by his grandfather nearly 80 years ago. Loretto has been cooking at Nanina's since 1973.

Nanina's launched the sauce line (there's also a tomato basil, vodka and fra diavolo) in 2006; a business instructor at Monmouth University had his students work on the launch as a class project, says Sergio Cucci, the director of operations for Nanina's Gourmet Sauces.

Also scoring points with the judges: the Big Red Marinara from Hoboken Farms, which operates weekly farmers markets across New Jersey and runs a sandwich shop in Summit. The sauce was extra-chunky with barely processed tomatoes, and Palmieri thought that with another five to 10 minutes on the stove, a little more extra-virgin olive oil and some chili flakes, it could be a winner.

"Of the three 'celebrity' sauces they tasted — 'Real Housewives of New Jersey' Teresa Giudice's Skinny

family would be week, seafood, with

Jersey tomatoes and bearing the Jersey Fresh label fared poorly in general.

"I think it's the uniqueness of the Jersey tomato," says a charitable Cucci of Nanina's. "They're great with salads, they're great eating on their own. I don't think they're as good as imported San Marzano tomatoes as far as making great sauce."

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Above: Louis Laico, the chef-owner of Laico's in Jersey City, tastes a sauce. Right: Chef Francesco Palmieri of Bloomfield's the Orange Squirrel samples a sauce. Below: Chef Anthony Pino of Hoboken's Anthony David's and Bin 14 dives deep to assess the aroma of a sauce in our Jersey tomato sauce taste-off.

PHOTOS BY JOHN OSBITLE/THE STAR LEDGER

