

Taste Test: Store-Bought Pasta Sauce

We tested 11 jarred sauces to identify the four best for pastas, pizzas, calzones, and more.



Supermarket shelves are groaning with jarred pasta sauces. After tasting 11 of them from this single - category, we concluded that which sauce you pick really, really matters. Quality differs tremendously.

Among tomato-basil sauces, we found startling variations in consistency (from watery to pasty) and flavor (from basil-free to far-too-much funny-tasting basil). One sauce tasted like a pot of overcooked onions. But there are very good tomato-basil sauces available—and these are our favorites.

OUR TOP PICK: Rao's Homemade Tomato Basil Marinara Sauce with Basil

Photo: Randy Mayor

Get it: \$9 (24-ounce bottle), available at many large supermarkets and gourmet grocery stores.

Testers said: We can hear you now—\$9 for a jar of tomato sauce? Consider, though: Half a jar can feed four people for a dollar-and-change per diner. Rao's struck tasters as very fresh-tasting, a balanced mix of fruity olive oil, tomato, and basil. This will work in a recipe—like lasagna—in which you want homemade flavor without the time investment.

VERY GOOD: Bove's Basil Pasta Sauce

Get it: \$5 (26-ounce bottle), available at many supermarkets

Testers said: Some raters thought Bove's captured the essence of homemade tomato sauce. It was the only sauce that contained Parmesan cheese, and the cheesy flavor and herby notes gave this sauce a pizzeria quality. Great for pizzas, calzones, or meatball subs.

GOOD: Emeril's All Natural Tomato & Basil Pasta Sauce

Get it: \$5 (25-ounce bottle), available at supermarkets

Testers said: Most testers noted sweetness and a subtle basil taste. This sauce also received high marks for its tomato flavor and texture, which one rater said was "smooth but not too acidic." Use this sauce in dishes where you can cut its sweetness with fat or spice. Try it in lasagnas or cheese-stuffed shells, fiery shrimp fra diavolo, or with hot Italian sausage.

GREAT VALUE: Classico Tomato & Basil Pasta Sauce

Get it: \$3 (24-ounce bottle), available at supermarkets

Testers said: Basil makes a minor appearance in this choice, but many welcomed the garlicky flavor in a slightly thinner tomato-based sauce. Adding a little fresh basil at home yields a balanced option that could work on pizzas, baked pastas, or in vegetable soups.

From the Test Kitchen: 3 Tips for Using Jarred Sauce

- **Boost flavors with fresh additions.** Up the ante by adding hot Italian sausage or ground beef to pasta sauces. Other stir-in flavor boosters: a sprinkle of coarsely ground black pepper, crushed red pepper, or fresh grated lemon rind; a drizzle of balsamic vinegar; or a modest grating of Parmigiano-Reggiano.
- **Think outside the pasta box.** These sauces will enrich stew or soup broths, substitute for a good pizza sauce, and can be used in Spanish rice or to simmer eggs.
- **Love the leftovers.** Warm sauce makes a good dip for breadsticks or focaccia, works well over roast beef or in a meatball sandwich, and can serve as a base for a pan sauce for sautéed chicken, pork, or fish.

How We Test

Method. We conducted two blind tests of 11 sauces. The first evaluation by 8 judges weeded out the obvious losers. In the second test, 6 food editors and chefs rated the top 6 sauces, which were warmed and served over spaghetti.

Nutritional guidelines. Our top nutrition consideration was sodium: We selected sauces with less than 700 milligrams of sodium per 1/2-cup serving.

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