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# school the lunch lady

Bon Appétit's food director would not be upstaged by the **tomato soup** at her son's cafeteria

by Carla Lalli Music



► **Tomato soup is one of those things I never made before I had children.** The first time my older son tasted it was at school. And apparently they do a good job over there because he got home and asked me if I knew how to make it. *Of course I can make tomato soup! Do you even know who I am?!*

Actually, I had no clue. After asking him a series of unanswerable questions about the soup's ingredients, I decided to wing it. I started out with **2 tablespoons olive oil** and **5 or 6 sliced shallots** (I was out of onions), along with a **sliced fennel bulb**. I seasoned with a healthy grab of **salt** and let that business soften up in a soup pot over medium-low heat, then raided the spice drawer. In went a **pinch of fennel seeds**, **2 teaspoons smoked paprika**, and a passing flurry of **cayenne pepper**. (For my younger son, who's more sugar than spice, I would have left out the cayenne.)

**cans whole peeled tomatoes**, squeezing them with my hands. At this point I ran out of ideas and just let it simmer until the tomatoes were very tender, 30 minutes or so.

While I waited, I made the thing my mom always served with soup: fried bread. *This* I knew how to make. Cast-iron skillet, **quarter inch of olive oil**, **thick slices of day-old bread**, medium-low heat—I pressed and turned the bread until it was crunchy outside and chewy inside, each piece like a giant personal crouton, then set the slices on paper towels and sprinkled them with a little salt.

I blended the soup, adding some water to loosen it and a **big knob of butter** for richness (cream would do the same trick). As we dunked our bread into the soup, I studied my son's face for signs.

"So, how is it? Is it as good as at school?"

"Mmm, I think it's better because at school you don't get this kind