

Buñol, Spain

La Tomatina

By Tom Kirvan

A FESTIVAL THAT OFFERS MUCH MORE THAN A TOMATO FIGHT

On the last Wednesday of August, Buñol, Spain feels like a town holding its breath before bursting into laughter. The streets are narrow, the sun is hot, and balconies above the Plaza del Pueblo are covered in plastic sheets. Shop windows are protected, trucks wait nearby, and thousands of visitors pack shoulder to shoulder in old clothes and goggles. Then, at noon, the signal sounds, and one of the world's oddest and most famous festivals begins: La Tomatina.

The festival is not simply a tomato fight. It is a celebration of joy, mischief, and place. Buñol, a small town in the province of Valencia, lies about 25 miles west of the city of Valencia on the Mediterranean coast. For most of the year, it is a quiet community known for its hills, castle, music traditions, and local life. But once a year, it becomes the red-splattered center of international attention.

La Tomatina takes place annually on the last Wednesday of August. In 2026, the festival will be held on Wednesday, Aug. 26. The main tomato fight begins at noon and lasts exactly one hour, ending at 1 p.m. Though the battle itself is short, the celebration around it stretches across several days, with music, dancing, fireworks, food, parades, and community events filling the town with summer energy.

The origins of La Tomatina are famously accidental. The most common story dates the festival to 1945, when young people in Buñol joined a parade featuring giants and big-headed figures. During the excitement, a scuffle broke out near a vegetable stand, and tomatoes became the weapon of choice. The authorities stopped the fight, but the idea had already taken hold. The following year, locals returned with their own tomatoes, beginning a tradition that would grow from neighborhood mishap to global spectacle.

The festival was not always accepted. In the early years, officials tried to ban it, and participants were sometimes arrested. But the people of Buñol defended their strange new tradition. One famous protest was a "tomato funeral," in which residents carried a coffin containing a tomato through the streets. Eventually, La Tomatina was allowed to continue, and over time it has become one of Spain's most recognizable festivals.

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The first impression of La Tomatina is color. At the start, the crowd is mostly adorned with white shirts, bright goggles, and nervous smiles. Minutes later, everything is red. Trucks roll slowly through the streets, unloading tomatoes by the thousands. Participants scoop them from the ground, crush them in their hands to soften the impact, and throw them in every direction. Friends disappear under waves of pulp. Strangers laugh together. The pavement turns slick, and the air smells sharp, sweet, and earthy.

One of the most popular traditions happens before the tomato fight begins. A greased pole called the *palo jabón* is set up with a ham placed at the top. Participants try to climb it while the crowd cheers below. The task is nearly impossible, but the attempt adds to the comedy and anticipation. Whether or not the ham is reached, the real climax comes when the water cannon signals the beginning of the tomato battle.

Food is part of the experience too, though not in the same way as other festivals. The tomatoes used in the fight are not prized table tomatoes; they are overripe or specially supplied for the event. Around town, however, visitors can enjoy Valencian flavors, including paella, bocadillos, grilled meats, pastries, and cold drinks. Many travelers stay in Valencia and take buses or trains to Buñol because local lodging is limited.

Attendance has changed over the years. Before ticket limits were introduced, the crowds could become overwhelming for a town of fewer than 10,000 people. Since 2013, La Tomatina has been a ticketed event with participation capped at around 20,000 to 22,000 people. Recent editions have drawn about 22,000 participants, many from outside Spain, including visitors from Europe, Australia, India, Japan, and the Americas.

The economic impact is significant. For Buñol and the surrounding Valencia region, La Tomatina brings attention, tourism, hotel bookings, restaurant business, transportation revenue, and global media coverage. Visitors often stay in Valencia, use regional transport, buy festival packages, eat locally, and extend their trips to visit nearby beaches, museums, and historic towns. For one hour of tomato chaos, the region receives days of spending and worldwide publicity.

What makes La Tomatina memorable is not only the tomatoes. It is the absurdity of it all: a whole town preparing for a battle no one truly wants to win. It is the laughter of strangers, the red-stained streets, the balconies crowded with onlookers, and the sudden transformation of an ordinary Spanish town into a playground of controlled disorder.

When the second signal sounds at 1 p.m., the throwing stops almost immediately. Fire trucks and residents begin washing the streets. Participants rinse off at public showers, hoses, fountains, and wherever water can be found. Slowly, the red fades from the town, though not from everyone's clothes.

By afternoon, Buñol begins returning to itself. The streets are cleaner, the crowds drift toward buses and trains, and the town's stone walls and castle rise quietly above the summer haze. Visitors leave sticky, tired, and laughing, carrying the feeling that they have taken part in something ridiculous and certainly unforgettable.

Image credit: BearFotos (2013 August 28). BUNOL, SPAIN - AUGUST 28: Battle of tomatoes - tomatoes madness in August 28, 2013 in Bunol, Spain. La Tomatina festival where people throw tomatoes [Photograph]. Shutterstock. Retrieved August 19 from [Shutterstock](#)