

Summertime, and the Tomatoes Are Heirlooms
By Katy Budge



(About heirloom tomatoes ... two local heirloom aficionados share their favorites ... tips on making a killer heirloom tomato salad ... and more tomato trivia than you probably want to know... the photo is from the Hollyhock Farms farmstand.)

This is the time of year we've been waiting for, and if you're one of those people who just can't get excited about those cardboard orbs that pass for tomatoes in January, you know what I mean. Summertime means all tomatoes, all the time, 'til the first frost hits! Though I've certainly been a big fan of Early Girls and Burpee Beefsteaks over the years, I've happily jumped on the heirloom bandwagon. Give me a luscious, vine-ripened Mr. Stripey, Paul Robeson, or Brandywine, and I'm a happy girl. I don't care if they're thin-skinned, bumpy, lobed, fluted, scalloped, or just downright ugly – if you're looking for taste and variety, look to heirlooms.

Of course, all those distinctive characteristics make heirlooms tomatoes terrible candidates for large scale, commercial production. The fragile skins mean they have to be picked very green to survive transportation, and the variance in size and shape make them a nightmare to efficiently or economically package. But yes, groceries are still starting to feature heirlooms – they want to get on the bandwagon as well – but really your best bets for exquisite, vine-ripened heirlooms are farmers' markets (like the Dragon Spring Farm table) or farm stands (like those at Hollyhock Farms and Windrose Farm).

So what exactly is an heirloom? Well, the good news is that there are at least a couple agreed-upon points: heirlooms must be "open pollinated" (pollinated by natural methods instead of artificial methods used to develop hybrid plants) and are generally "indeterminate" growers (sprawlers instead of being able to be easily trained within cages). It's also pretty much agreed that heirlooms won't have any GMO's (Genetically Modified Organisms).

Beyond that, the definition is about as clear as "you say toe-mah-toe and I'll say ta-may-toe" or "fruit vs. vegetable," and the waters are getting even muddier as commercial growers try to capitalize on the increasing popularity of heirlooms. The classifications of "heirlooms" range from varieties that have been around for at least a century, to post-World War II (roughly the beginning of modern industrial agriculture), to those that are 50 years old, to seeds that have been passed down for a couple generations. Take your pick.

Nonetheless, whatever the time frame, all heirlooms have a particular connection to the past, and pouring over tomato seed catalogs can be as mesmerizing as browsing through the pages of agrarian and American history. Varieties such as the “Eva Purple Ball” can be traced back to mid-19th century Europe, “Brandywines” all seem to come from Amish country, the Cherokee Purple reportedly hails from the Cherokee people, and the Green Zebra (a favorite of Alice Waters) was only developed in 1985. Whatever their heritage, all these varieties come to us through countless generations of indigenous people, immigrants, farmers, and backyard hobbyists. By supporting our own local heirloom tomato growers, we can continue that link with history.

Among those who have led the heirloom charge on the Central Coast are Bill and Barbara Spencer of Windrose Farm, who also supply many high-end restaurants from Los Angeles to San Francisco with their beautiful, organically grown tomatoes. Below, they’ve shared some of their favorites and the reasons why...

-- Top of the list is always Cherokee Purple: beautiful color, incredible flavor, makes great sandwiches, and can be grown many places, meaning it’s less site-specific than other varieties.

-- Jaune Flammée: early, beautiful clusters of yellow orange salad size, great flavor, dependable no matter what the weather is, coastal as well.

-- Tigerella/Mr. Stripey: a fast, great tasting salad size, and a huge producer.

--- New varieties include the Ananais Noir/Black Pineapple: large like a regular pineapple with greenish color, a good producer and wonderful flavor.

-- We’re also trying more of the Italian small beefsteak types -- Costoluto Genovese, Costoluto Fiorentino, Pantano Romanesco -- and loving the intense flavor, as well as trialing a Greek variety Thessaloniki which is doing well in Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz."

Tips for Heirloom Tomato Salads ...

The Spencers recommend using a wide variety of heirlooms so the salads have a riotous mix of colors, shapes, and tastes.

Tom Fundaro of Villa Creek restaurant in Paso Robles makes a great salad with chunks – NOT slices – of heirlooms and purple onions, a generous helping of basil julienne and a bold, simple vinaigrette.

Carol Broadhurst of Dragon Spring Farms in Cambria* does a similar version with coarsely crumbled blue cheese.

The "Casa Festiva" version included chunks of slightly warm grilled chicken breasts that had been marinated in a Dijon vinaigrette, slices of sweet onions from Bautista Farms in Arroyo Grande*, and served with a Villicana 2004 Zinfandel. The Zin structure was a perfect match for the tomatoes and the fruit notes of the wine held up just fine to the vinaigrette.

These dishes would also pair nicely with the 2004 Sierra Madre Vineyards Pinot Noir from Kenneth Volk Vineyards. Not a surprise that Ken would make a wine that matches well with heirloom tomatoes -- he's almost as obsessed with them as he is with making wine!

(*Both these producers can be located at several local farmers' markets)

Various Tomato Tidbits...

Fruit or vegetable? Technically, a fruit is the edible part of the plant that contains the seeds, while a vegetable is the edible stems, leaves, and roots of the plant. So, a tomato's

a fruit, right? Well, in 1893, because of a tariff dispute, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that although “botanically speaking tomatoes are the fruit of the vine,” they were vegetables both “in the common language of the people” and in use since they were served with the main course or in soup. Does the defense rest?

Health Benefits? The color in tomatoes comes from lycopene, which apparently has significant antioxidant properties and may therefore lower your risk of cancers, heart attack and other cardiovascular diseases. Some research has shown that cooked tomatoes contain even more lycopene than raw, but I’m not giving up my BLT just yet. Tomatoes also contain Vitamins B and C, iron, and potassium.

Poison Fruit? Because the tomato is a member of the nightshade family, it was often considered toxic. Rumor has it that in the early 1800's, a gentleman named Robert Johnson shocked his hometown by eating a basket of tomatoes in the middle of town and not dying, but historians haven't been able to get this tale into the realm of substantiated truth.

Origins? Though it has become a staple of Old World diets, the tomato is one of the New World's gifts to the world (along with corn, chocolate, and a myriad of other delectable foodstuffs). Its cultivation has reportedly been traced back to the Aztecs and Incas, and even our own agriculture champion, Thomas Jefferson.

What's in a Name? The tomato's scientific Latin genus is *Lycopersicon*, or “wolf peach” -- peach for its luscious appearance and wolf for its supposedly poisonous qualities. Reportedly, the word "tomato" derives from “tomatl” in the Aztec's Nahuatl language. The English “tomate” first showed up circa the 17th century, and later became “tomato,” and because many early fruits were round and yellow, the Italian word “pomodoro,” loosely translates as “apple of gold.”