

The Not-So-Traditional Old-Fashioned Tomato

by Steven Knudsen

For years the bright-red tomato has been king. Piled high in the supermarket, these overly symmetrical ovals are placed carefully, one on top of another, until they tower above the other fruits—an obvious favorite of shoppers. Available almost year round, tomatoes, whether sliced, diced or sautéed, are a fixture in the American diet.

This fruit-turned-vegetable is so popular, in fact, that some providers like John Spencer of Spencer's Fresh Market say that the right type of "destination tomato" will draw people into the store.

"There is nothing better than a tomato picked fresh from your backyard," says Spencer. "Luckily, we have great farmers growing terrific produce. The tomatoes that are grown locally and shipped direct to our stores are as close to backyard as it gets; they are beautifully colored

and eat like candy."

It's not surprising that some of those "destination tomatoes" are Heirloom tomatoes. These tie-dyed fruits with their wrinkled skin and odd shapes are everything but your standard tomato. Although it is well known that consumers have become accustomed to tomatoes that are both uniform in size and color, heirlooms are gaining popularity as a greater proportion of tomato consumers reach for something different.

With names like Mexico, Golden Lemon Boy, Aunt Ruby's German Green, Black Prince, Orange Jubilee, Green Grape, Cherokee Purple, Green Zebra and Mr. Stripe, purchasing these tomatoes is almost as exciting as eating them. The colors of these fruits range from as green as the vine they grow on to as black as the soil that they get their nutrients and flavor from.

But what are Heirloom tomatoes and why do they look so different? An Heirloom tomato has been open-pollinated for at least 50 years. More than 400 different varieties have been collected from specific geographic locations throughout the world.

The origin of tomatoes is



Tomatoes and other red fruits are natural sources of lycopene, which has gained popularity for its health properties and may help prevent some diseases.

considered to be the western coast of South America in present-day Peru, where eight species in the tomato genus still grow wild in the Andes Mountains. Until the 19th century, tomatoes were thought to be poisonous as a result of their lineage with the Nightshade family. It wasn't until the mid-1800s that tomatoes gained in popularity. There soon became thousands of varieties, most all regionally specific.

Horticulture professor and Heirloom tomato connoisseur David Hannings of Cal Poly says that Heirloom tomatoes are "Certainly more interesting and occasionally more flavorful than your standard tomato." When asked about the strange shapes and colors traditionally associated with Heirlooms, Hannings says, "Most tomatoes were selected primarily for their flavor, followed by their resistance to disease and pest pressures of the geographical region where they were grown.





Generally high in the enzyme lycopene for its anti-oxidant properties in some forms of cancer.

Size and shape of the fruit was not a major concern for most farmers.”

It has yet to be seen if the Heirloom tomato trend has caused any significant shift in production locally.

Brenda Ouwerkerk, Chief Deputy Agriculture Commissioner

with the San Luis Obispo County Department of Agriculture Weights and Measures, says that “Although the county keeps records on how many acres of farm land are devoted to tomato production (450

acres countywide), the county does not ask what variety of tomatoes farmers have chosen to grow.”

Another way to find locally grown Heirloom tomatoes is to visit your local farmers’ market. Tomatoes ripen in California in the late summer and early fall. Most medium-sized farms growing the Heirloom varieties produce nearly a dozen different types and have a variety of shapes and sizes to select from. Consumers can expect to see fresh, locally grown Heirloom tomatoes into November, barring an early frost.

In one of the microclimates in North County, planting tomatoes late ensures that they ripen just as supply on the Central Coast begins to dwindle. Michael and Carol Broadhurst own and operate a small farming operation, Dragon Spring Farm, outside of Cambria. There they grow a number of agriculture commodities, including Heirlooms, for sale in farmers’ markets and local restaurants.

“We have about 15 varieties of Heirloom tomatoes and try out two

or three new ones each year,” said Broadhurst. “With each one, you have to watch it and figure out what it needs.” He notes that all of them tend to be thin-skinned—one of the aspects that makes them difficult to grow and transport on a large-scale commercial basis.

“We usually pick our tomatoes the morning of the market,” says Broadhurst. “That fresh-picked taste is what’s so special about home-grown tomatoes. And that’s what we enjoy doing, letting people have that experience of nice, fresh produce at the peak of ripeness and freshness.”

While most Heirloom tomatoes still play second fiddle to the more common varieties, don’t be surprised to find locally grown Heirlooms on the menus of many Central Coast restaurants. Heirloom tomatoes have begun to cross over in dishes such as capri salad, bruschetta, gazpacho and pizza.

It is easy to see why Heirloom tomatoes have become so popular; they add a splash of color and variation to any dish, with each variety of tomato representing an individual flavor and texture. With more than 400 varieties to choose from, don’t be afraid to try more than one with your next meal.

Photos

Far left – Purple Cherokee, an Heirloom Beefsteak tomato perfect for slicing on sandwiches, can be found at many farmers’ market booths.

Above – Delicious Heirloom Tomato Salad, a refreshing fall treat, combines the one-of-a-kind flavor and texture of each tomato. No additional ingredients are needed.

Left – This Striped German Heirloom grew at the Cal Poly Organic Farm.

Photos by Steven Knudsen.

