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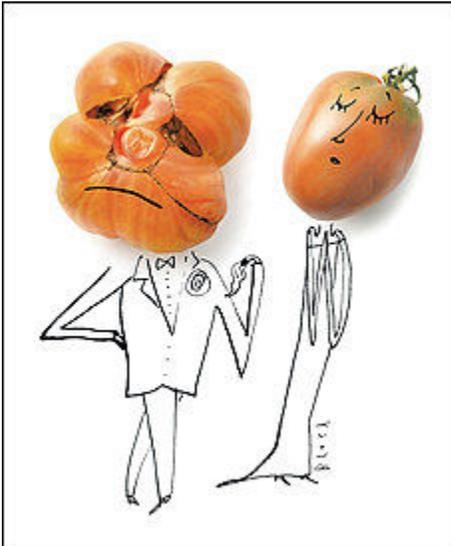
Snob Appeal

Won't Someone Knock Heirloom Tomatoes Off Their Pedestal?

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(Illustration by Serge Bloch For The Washington Post)



In the food world, and in that especially obsessive corner populated by tomato aficionados, heirlooms are the embodiment of all that is good, which is to say they are not perfectly round, perfectly red and utterly tasteless supermarket tomatoes. We food

snobs prize heirlooms for their personalities. These old-fashioned varieties are lumpy, cracked and creviced, with glorious names such as Casady's Folly or Mullens' Mortgage Lifter (which is not to be confused with Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter or Quisinberry's Mortgage Lifter). And they come in nearly all the colors of the rainbow. They can be red, of course. But they are also yellow, streaked with tangerine like a summer sunset, pale green, bronze-and-purple and bruised black as if they've just escaped from a backyard tomato smackdown.

I have eaten terrific heirloom varieties; indeed, I'm quite partial to the Black Prince, which hails from Siberia, a place one doesn't normally associate with tomatoes. But a week ago, I paid \$4.99 a pound for a locally grown heirloom that was slightly mealy, tasted overwhelmingly bland and paled in comparison with a perfectly round, perfectly red commercial hybrid, dubbed Early Girl, that I ate last year and am still dreaming about at the height of this year's tomato season.

Call me persnickety, but someone needs to take a stand here: "Heirloom" is not synonymous with "good."

The key to a great tomato is how it is grown. Tomatoes, both commercial hybrids and heirlooms, like hot nights and plenty of water. The best ones are eaten still warm from the garden. "Heirloom" has become another buzzword, like "farm to table," complained Jeremy Fox, the chef at vegetarian restaurant Ubuntu in Napa, which serves farm-to-table heirlooms as well as hybrids invented by the

restaurant's full-time gardener. "It's about quality," he said. "If a tomato tastes good, it's a good tomato. Nothing else matters."

That wasn't always the case. In the beginning, only serious backyard gardeners swooned over heirlooms. Some, undoubtedly, were concerned about flavor. But for most, growing heirlooms -- which they defined as any variety that can reproduce from seed and existed before World War II -- was more about preserving biodiversity. Only within the past decade did chefs and trend-crazed food writers latch on to the term: NewsBank, a database that tracks more than 2,500 sources, found 1,097 references to heirloom tomatoes in 2008, up from 77 a decade earlier.

Over the years, writers have praised their looks: the psychedelic colors and shapes that result in what Restaurant Eve chef-owner Cathal Armstrong calls "they're-so-ugly-they're-beautiful" tomatoes. They applauded their flavor: the fruity explosion of the Casady's Folly and the candy sweetness and lemon notes of that Mullens' Mortgage Lifter. Soon, heirlooms had been transformed into a status symbol, and not just for foodies. In 2005, a New York Times style writer described a pair of \$635 jeans as "the apparel form of heirloom tomatoes, good the way things used to be, but at 10 times the price."

Indeed, heirloom tomatoes rose to such prominence that sociologists began to study them as a cultural phenomenon. In a 2007 article in the journal *Sociologia Ruralis*, Jennifer Jordan examined the pressing question of why a growing number of consumers had acquired a taste for \$7-a-pound "bug-eaten, calloused, mottled and splitting tomatoes that may or may not taste good."

The answer, Jordan concluded, was that heirloom tomatoes had evolved into a "marker of distinction." The lumpy, imperfect fruit had become a kind of mascot for the good-food movement that is against industrial agriculture's embrace of pesticides, against the development of genetically modified foods, in favor of preserving small farms and in support of local and seasonal food. Some people sought out heirlooms for their flavor, a reaction to the pretty but insipid industrial hybrids. (Jordan reports that university labs were instructed "to imagine the tomato as a projectile" in their efforts to develop fruit that could survive long-distance shipping and extended refrigeration.) But for many, the growing or purchase of heirloom tomatoes was about making a statement.

Heirlooms' popularity took a toll on their taste, however. As farmers and supermarkets realized they could extract high prices for heirlooms, they increased production. And, in some cases, quality fell; hence the gorgeous but mealy and bland heirloom I bought last week.

A stunning but disappointing tomato: Does that remind you of anything?

Which is why this year I'm noting a quiet revolt against heirlooms, even among those of us who tend to blindly believe that everything handmade, organic and

artisanal is best. Seed saving is still an important goal. But hybrids, after all, are the result of plant breeding, a technology as old as farming itself. Protecting heritage species is essential, but Maine farmer Barbara Damrosch (who writes for this newspaper) says she sees nothing wrong with Burpee's hybrid Brandy Boys, which she says are more productive and easier to grow than their famous pink heirloom precursor, the Brandywine.

New Jersey-based writer and gardener Laura Schenone learned that the hard way. Last summer, she grew exclusively Black Princes and Brandywines. The tomatoes were small and so was her yield. "They tasted pretty good," she told me. "But the little tomato plant from some mass-produced seed company that my son brought home from school was better, with lots of bright, tangy fruit all summer."

This year, Schenone has mostly switched to the Ramapo tomato, a hybrid version of an old New Jersey tomato that has been bred in the lab to taste good, resist rot and produce well. The Ramapos look boring, she admits: There are no pretty green stripes or sunset blushes. But they are big and round and turning red, while the few remaining heirlooms in her garden are still puny and green. "The [heirlooms] will be good, too," Schenone told me. "But not necessarily better."

Amen.