



A Café Sam Report: Heirloom Tomatoes 101
8/24/10



“We think Heirloom Tomatoes Are the Beautiful Ugly”

Heirloom Tomatoes have become hugely popular in restaurants over the last few years. So what exactly are Heirloom Tomatoes? One thing we already know is that Heirloom Tomatoes are distinctly unusual in a wide variety of shapes and colors, and wonderfully flavorful and delicious. But after that the definition becomes a little confusing. According to Wikipedia.com gibberish “an heirloom tomato is an open pollinated heirloom cultivar of tomato.”

What does that mean?

The word “heirloom” is used twice in the Wikipedia.com definition, and as it turns out the word is doubly (or triply) hard to define, so we might as well start there. Some people believe heirloom relates to age, meaning a tomato with lineage going back fifty to one hundred years. Others believe heirloom relates back to time preceding 1945, which marks the end of World War II and roughly the beginning of widespread use of hybrids by industrial agriculture (which we’re going to be discussing in a moment). And last but not least, there are those that believe heirloom is used to describe tomatoes in a literal sense, attributable to plant seeds that were selected, nurtured, and handed down from one family member to another over a period of generations.

An “open pollinated heirloom” (there can be no other kind) is a plant that is pollinated by insects, birds, winds, or other natural means. Seeds from open pollinated heirlooms sprout into new plants outside (no greenhouses!), but because the pollen (male parent) is from unknown sources, open pollination will result in plants that vary somewhat from year to year. That’s not a bad thing - open pollination may increase biodiversity, whereas closed pollination, such as the “dusting” of hybrid plants with the same pollen, may stunt the variation of life forms in our ecosystem.

An “heirloom cultivar of tomato” simply means a tomato plant grown from generations of nurtured seed that has never been manipulated.

Ergo, an heirloom tomato might be more understandably defined *as an unusual looking tomato attributed to plant seeds that were nurtured, handed down over a period of generations, pollinated by natural means, and never manipulated.*

Hybrid Tomatoes (and plants), by contrast, come from seeds that have been genetically manipulated. Hybrid seeds replaced the traditional practice of farm saved seeds and are usually bought new from commercial manufacturers each growing season. These seeds are bred with an emphasis on yield, and consistency in size and color.

One problem with hybrid tomatoes is that they grow best with the help of chemicals (as opposed to organic methods) - fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides.¹ Another problem with hybrid tomatoes is that they give up flavor in order to grow with commercially attractive characteristics (consistent size and color).

We imagine that prior to World War II, and the coming of hybrid seeds, all tomatoes looked like the Heirloom Tomato of today. The public has become accustomed to hybrid tomatoes and their attractive characteristics – but it is not until one has tasted an Heirloom Tomato by comparison that the matter of flavor is placed on the table.

Attractive characteristics? We think Heirloom tomatoes are the beautiful ugly.

We are now buying Heirloom Tomatoes directly from the Zimmerman Farm, located only 40 miles away in Avella, PA. Hand picked off eight foot vines, these rich, delicious, and colorful “open pollinated heirloom cultivars” will bring tears to your eyes (and joy to your mouth). Stop in soon for a truly authentic farm-to-table experience with Heirloom Tomatoes!



¹ See our post on 9/1/09 for more on organic farming.