

# Celebrate tomato diversity with heirlooms

**W**HEN DIANE OTT WHEALY'S grandfather was emigrating from Bavaria, he undoubtedly brought with him everything he thought he needed to prosper in the New World: clothes, personal possessions, tools — and a small collection of seeds from his homeland.

The offspring of those seeds yields the German Pink tomato. An heirloom tomato with a full sweet-floral flavor, the German Pink became the first seeds stored in the Seed Savers Exchange, a nonprofit group dedicated to saving and sharing heirloom seeds. Ott Whealy co-founded Seed Savers in 1975, which has since collected more than 6,000 tomato varieties for their seed bank, out of the total 25,000 varieties in existence.

These aren't all cultivated, of course, and include what Ott Whealy calls the "good, bad, and the ugly." Many of these tomatoes may be incredibly flavorful, but are not commercially viable. Some might be sour, while others might be bitter and tough. But as a collection, they represent the natural variations of what tomatoes can be.

Heirloom tomatoes have become extremely popular in the past few years, displacing other varieties at both markets and on restaurant menus with their rainbow of colors and enticing names: Brandywine, Cherokee, Green Zebra.

Surprisingly, there is no firm definition of the term heirloom plant. Some heirlooms are passed down from father to daughter, as with the German Pink. Others are commercial varieties from the turn of the last century that have since dropped in popularity. Still others were collected from other countries and brought to the United States in a quest to increase



**Aaron French**  
**ECOCHIEF**

aaron@eco-chef.com

the genetic and flavor diversity of our foodstocks.

"Mostly they are useful for variations of size, color and shapes," says Roger Chetelat, director of the UC Davis Tomato Genetics Resource Center, which houses an impressive collection of more than 3,000 tomato varieties. In terms of flavor, "a lot of tomatoes that are commercially grown varieties are great if you allow them to fully ripen," he says. The problem with commercial tomatoes aren't inherent differences, he says, but how they are handled.

"If heirloom tomatoes are picked green and handled roughly the way commercial varieties are, they will also have less taste," he says.

Unfortunately, this is exactly what is happening as heirloom varieties become more popular. Growers are responding to soaring demand by picking them firm and green and shipping them longer distances to market. Any tomato handled like this won't necessarily taste like you may have grown to expect. The ideal tomato is one picked that same day for perfect ripeness. Your best bet is to buy direct from farmers at local markets.

Chetelat also cautions about romanticizing older tomato varieties.

"Just because they are old doesn't mean they are good," he says. In many cases, there are reasons that they fell out of favor in the first place, such

## TOMATO WATERMELON GAZPACHO

Serves 6

**3-4 large heirloom tomatoes, different colors**  
**2 cucumbers, peeled and diced**  
**½ watermelon, peeled and seeded**  
**1 red bell pepper**  
**1 large red onion**  
**4 garlic cloves**  
**3 tablespoons chopped fresh cilantro**  
**2 cups tomato juice**  
**2 tablespoons lime juice**  
**2 tablespoons lemon juice**  
**1 tablespoons red wine vinegar**  
**Dash Tabasco hot pepper sauce**  
**Dash Worcestershire sauce**  
**¼ teaspoons ground cumin**  
**¼ teaspoons coriander seeds**  
**2 teaspoons almond extract**  
**Optional garnish ideas: Cayenne pepper, chili powder, paprika, salt, cracked black pepper, diced fresh tomatoes, diced cucumber, extra virgin olive oil**

1. Coarsely chop tomatoes,

cucumbers, watermelon, pepper and onion. Combine all ingredients and let marinate overnight in refrigerator.

2. Just before service, puree all the ingredients in a blender. Blend in several batches if necessary.

3. Adjust the seasonings to your taste — this will depend in part on the varieties and flavor or the tomatoes you choose.

Serve in chilled cups, garnished with diced tomato and cucumber. Drizzle with olive oil.

— Recipe by Aaron French

**Per serving without garnish: 170 calories, 5 g protein, 51 g carbohydrates, 0 g total fat, 270 mg sodium, 6 g fiber. Calories from fat: 0 percent.**

— Staff analysis

as a lack of disease-resistance or ability to grow in a variety of conditions.

For example, seed varieties follow human populations. As the United States population became more mobile in the 1930s and '40s, people needed seeds that would grow in different regions. Increasingly, seed providers at that time made available newer hybrid varieties that yielded more consistent results across a variety of conditions. People embraced the new seeds, and many older varieties became forgotten.

But recently, the tide has been turning. Farmers are returning to old seed stocks and planting 10 or 20 varieties where in years past they planted one or two. Peggy Le-maux, a plant biologist from UC Berkeley, says "it's nice that some of the old varieties of tomatoes are coming back. The diversity is really good."

She notes that as our commercial crops became more uniform, they also become more susceptible to particular diseases attacking a certain variety. The increasing diversity in tomato populations can help to prevent that.

Upcoming weather patterns are going to be an issue as well. While tomatoes are a relatively drought-resistant crop, the increasing variation in climate is going to be impressive, and we need to have crops equipped to deal with those future conditions. So enjoy your summer heirloom tomatoes, knowing that they not only taste good, but they just might also help to keep our food supply healthy in years to come.

*Ecologist Aaron French is chef at the Sunny Side Cafe in Albany. He can be reached at aaron@eco-chef.com.*