



YOU SAY TOMATO ...

Americans have come around in a big way to the once feared fruit

BY CAROL GOODMAN KAUFMAN

While many people might first think of Italian food in any discussion of tomatoes, it was actually the Spanish explorer Cortés who first encountered these natives of the Yucatan, in an Aztec market in Mexico around 1520. Not long after Cortés brought his discovery back to Spain, it did find its way to Naples, Italy, then under Spanish rule. The tomato even made its way into remote

parts of Asia, appearing as an ingredient in a 16th-century Nepalese cookbook.

Early versions of the fruit were small and probably yellow rather than red — hence, the sobriquet “pomi d’oro” (golden apple) given it in Italy. From its very debut, the tomato was the subject of great speculation. Southern Europeans embraced it. Some were even convinced of its powers as an aphrodisiac — the French adoringly called it pomme d’amour (apple of love).

Green and ripened tomatoes at Howe's farmstand in Paxton. Early on in their history, tomatoes were considered an aphrodisiac by some, a poison by others. [PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]

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Others were just as sure that the fruit, a member of the nightshade family, was dangerous, including European neighbors to the north.

One reason given by food historians for the fear was simply a matter of chemistry and bad luck. The rich supped from dinner plates made of pewter and it just so happened that when highly acidic foods were served on them, lead leached out, causing lead poisoning sickness and even death. Poor people ate from wooden plates and therefore suffered no bad effects.

Colonial Americans were among the fearful. American scientists and doctors branded the tomato as poisonous and it would not be served at the dinner table for many years. That is, until Col. Robert Gibbon Johnson, attempting to convince his fellow citizens of the beauty of the fruit, imported some tomato seeds from South America. Following the lead of Englishman John Parkinson, apothecary to King James I and botanist for King Charles I, Johnson tried to get farmers to grow them simply as ornamentals as a baby step in introducing them to the concept of eating them.

Then, on Sept. 26, 1820, Johnson announced that he would eat a tomato on the steps of the Salem, New Jersey, courthouse at noon. No one in America, as far we know, had ever dared to taste one for fear of

Botanically speaking, tomatoes are a fruit, but a ruling by the Supreme Court classified them as a vegetable. [PHOTO/CHRISTINE PETERSON]

the consequences. Two thousand people came from miles around and jammed into the town square to witness the spectacle, probably very few of them believing that he actually intended to take a bite. Even his doctor, Dr. James Van Meeter, warned Col. Johnson that he would get very sick.

The clock struck noon, but Johnson did not appear. The crowd murmured. Had he decided not to take the chance? Had he eaten a tomato in advance and fallen ill? Where was he?

Finally, at quarter after 12, Colonel Johnson mounted the courthouse steps to the cheers of the crowd. He then began to speak about the history of the tomato, telling them, "The time will come when this luscious golden tomato, rich in nutrition, a delight to the eye, a joy to the palate whether fried, baked, broiled or even eaten raw, will form the foundation of a great garden industry."

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Tried green tomatoes? Waste not, want not

Is there anything better than a ripe, red, sun-warmed tomato fresh off the vine, perhaps with little sprinkle of salt? Unfortunately, at this time of year, as the days grow shorter, those luscious crimson orbs have probably all been harvested, leaving your vines groaning with green fruit. Should you gamble that the first frost won't come until after they ripen, or be proactive and harvest them now?

Harvest them! The following recipe for the Mexican condiment salsa verde is just one way to incorporate green tomatoes into your repertoire while putting to good use every fruit in your garden. Try it on everything from scrambled eggs to enchiladas.

5 pounds green tomatoes, diced
 4 cups yellow onions, diced
 3 jalapeno or Serrano peppers, diced (with or without seeds, depending on your love of heat)
 4 red bell peppers, diced
 6 garlic cloves, minced
 1 cup fresh cilantro, chopped
 1 cup lime juice
 ½ cup vinegar
 1 tablespoon salt
 ½ tablespoon cumin
 1 tablespoon dried oregano leaves
 2 teaspoons pepper
 dash of cayenne pepper (more if you really like heat)
 1 teaspoon sugar

Combine all the ingredients in a large pot, mixing well. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to simmer, and cook for 30 to 40 minutes, stirring occasionally.

Ladle salsa into hot sterile jars (see note), leaving ½-inch headspace.

Wipe lids and jar edges clean with a clean paper towel before tightly screwing on lids.

Place the jars — carefully! — into a canning pot filled with boiling water for 15 minutes.

Remove jars — carefully! — with tongs and let sit for 24 hours. Check lids for seal, and refrigerate any unsealed jars.

Note: Sterilizing canning jars and lids is not as daunting a task as it once was. Wash them in a dishwasher, using detergent and rinsing well. Clean jars should then be kept warm prior to filling. You can leave them in the closed dishwasher after the cycle or create a separate hot water bath that will keep the jars both clean and warm. The lids should be dry.

Adapted from a recipe at geniuskitchen.com.

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Then he took a big bite. A woman fainted, but, mesmerized by the demonstration taking place before them, the people ignored her. Johnson kept eating tomato after tomato and nothing bad happened – other than, perhaps, his shirt being ruined by the juices running down his chin.

By 1824 everyone was growing and eating tomatoes. And, at the end of the 19th century, Joseph Campbell developed the canned and condensed tomato soup recipe that, with its partner, the grilled cheese sandwich, many of us enjoyed growing up.

Yes, we Americans have learned to love tomatoes, whether beefsteak, cherry, roma, plum, grape, or any of the popular heirloom varieties.


It is one of the top crops, in terms of area harvested and total production, in the country today. According to the Agricultural Marketing Resource Center, in 2017 about 1.42 million tons of fresh tomatoes and 14.7 million tons of the fruit for processing were harvested. Their total value was gauged at about \$1.67 billion.

Toxicity was not the only source of debate surrounding the tomato. In 1893, the government imposed a stiff 10 percent tariff on vegetables. A fruit importer named John Nix sued the tax collector for the Port Authority of New York,

arguing that tomatoes, since they were botanically categorized as fruits, should be exempt from the tax. The case ended up at the Supreme Court of the United States. (Read *Nix v. Hedden*, 149 U.S. 304 (1893), where witnesses read aloud definitions of "fruit" and "vegetable" from dictionaries and botany textbooks.)

In the end, the justices admitted in their decision that, while tomatoes were indeed fruits, vegetables were things "usually served at dinner in, with, or after the soup, fish, or meats ... and not, like fruits generally, as dessert." So under customs law, the court ruled that tomatoes counted as vegetables. Nix had to keep paying the tariff.

On a somewhat humorous note, the tomato is both the state vegetable and state fruit in Arkansas.

Carol Goodman Kaufman is a psychologist and author with a passion for travel and food. She is currently at work on a food history/cookbook, tracing the paths that some of our favorite foods have taken from their origins to appear on dinner plates and in cultural rites, artifacts and literature around the world. Her blog is at <http://carolgoodmankaufman.com/a-moveable-feast/> and to visit her Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/PeanutPeregrinations/> 



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Use green tomatoes to make salsa verde.
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