

# Locavore Lore - Heirloom tomatoes in full bloom at farmers markets

By Holly Clark-in Leo Newspaper-July 2008

Editor's Note: This week starts a new monthly dining feature about eating locally. It'll run the last week of every month.

Succulent. Mouth-watering. Seductive. These are just a few of the passionate descriptors tossed out during a recent conversation with friends about one of the most thrilling aspects of our July farmers markets: heirloom tomatoes. The proliferation of heirlooms at area markets has vegetable-lovers swooning in anticipation, but that's just one of a litany of reasons to jump on your bicycle and head to your neighborhood farmer's market this month for some of the area's best local produce.

First, let's address the broad question: What's the big deal about eating locally? As if the social and political reasons alone weren't enough (linking rural and urban communities to encourage healthy economic development, supporting the independent farmers who are some of our most careful and reliable producers of food, and contributing to the building of a more sustainable world), eating locally offers abundant opportunities to enhance your physical, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. And, fact is, local produce just tastes better. However, as with so many options for shifting to a more sustainable lifestyle, sometimes eating habits are hard to adapt, especially if we don't know where to start. So I'm going to share some simple ideas for how to appreciate the vegetative bounty produced by our wonderful local farmers in hopes of enticing you to dip your toes into waters that will transform your relationship with the food you consume.

Speaking of relationships with food, let's get back to my ever-deepening love affair with seasonal tomatoes. Growing up, I couldn't have cared less about this nutrient- and flavor-packed fruit, but after discovering the taste of fresh, local tomatoes, I've become hooked. An added joy of buying tomatoes at the farmers market is the ongoing discovery of increasing varieties of heirloom tomatoes, which provide yet another opportunity to mutually benefit producer, consumer and the overall food web.

So what is an heirloom? In general, most growers agree that the term refers to open-pollinated (non-hybrid) varieties whose seeds have been saved and passed down. For example, you could plant a Brandywine tomato, let some of the fruit mature, collect the seed and process it properly, and plant the seed the next year to grow more Brandywine tomatoes that would come back "true to type" — without having to purchase more seed. Growers have survived for generations by preserving and planting seeds culled from these plants, but the proliferation of hybridization has created obstacles to this age-old practice and put many family farms in jeopardy. So not only do heirloom tomatoes taste better to many palates, buying them is a stance against hybridization by multinational corporations that have been less than supportive of family farms. Growing them ensures that certain strains of seeds that have been threatened with extinction will survive. This is good in the face of what some see as a looming global food crisis.

But back to the delicious flavor of heirloom tomatoes. My weakness for these beauties is painfully obvious when you visit the Earth & Spirit demonstration gardens (1920 Newburg Road — first farmers market is Sunday, Aug. 3, 1 p.m.) where I work: The limited garden space is almost consumed by a sprawling forest of more than 12 different varieties of heirloom tomatoes, not to mention the additional bed on the hillside created specifically to house the overflow of seedlings I couldn't resist stuffing in. I blame this gluttonous planting largely on the tomatoes themselves, whose decadent descriptions are too tantalizing to refuse. To prepare you for the delights you're likely to encounter when you arrive at the market, check out the following description of one of my current favorites, the Paul Robeson, from the Baker Creek Seed catalog:



“This famous tomato has almost a cult following among seed collectors and tomato connoisseurs. They simply cannot get enough of this variety’s amazing flavor that is so distinctive, sweet and smoky. 7-10 oz. fruit are a black-brick color. Named in honor of the famous opera singer star of ‘King Solomon’s Mines,’ 1937. Paul Robeson was also a Russian and equal-rights advocate for blacks. This Russian heirloom was lovingly named in his honor.”

A cult following? A sweet, smoky tomato? And on top of that, it hails a social justice icon — could you ask for anything more in a fruit?

Yes: The actual nutrient content of tomatoes, which is noteworthy. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, not only are tomatoes known for their high levels of vitamin C, they also contain vitamin E, thiamin, niacin, vitamin B6, folate, magnesium, phosphorus and copper, and are a good source of dietary fiber, potassium and calcium. They also contain lycopene, which studies have shown to be useful as a cancer-fighting and immune system-enhancing agent.

Attention to the health benefits of eating locally leads me to yet another reason to visit the summer farmers market: fresh basil, adored for its intoxicating aroma and exotic flavor, but underappreciated for its health and healing properties, which are numerous. It’s often used as a digestive aid, to help treat headaches and migraines, and, as a cleansing herb, it can help with healing kidney and urinary maladies. Basil has been used to integrate physical and spiritual desires, to give courage and strength, to enhance moods and as a calming agent.

That brings us to the actual “life-force” of the plants (the potent physical, emotional and spiritual energies they provide when we consume them). The healing properties of plants grown in the bioregion in which you live are reputed to be much more potent than more distantly cultivated cousins. Too New-Age for you? Enough holistic practitioners believe it, so I tested it. After giving myself over as a living experiment to this concept for several years, I can wholeheartedly attest to its validity; eating a diet of primarily fresh, local ingredients has led to a vibrant sense of wellbeing on multiple levels. Skeptical? I encourage you to explore the healing benefits of our regional plantlife; these alone could get you hooked on local produce.

So now that you’re ready to explore the enchanting world of locally grown tomatoes, how are you going to prepare the bounty? This recipe is one of my favorites, because not only is it simple and delicious, it offers a wonderful opportunity to explore and compare different tomato varieties. I highly recommend sampling each tomato as you chop, so you can appreciate their individual flavors before they’re mixed with the marinade. For a truly transformative tomato experience, try sampling several varieties of heirloom tomatoes and let your senses savor the textural, flavor, aromatic and visual nuances of each. I love combining different colors, like mixing Dad’s Sunset (orange), Pink Accordion (pink), Black Krim (dark purple), Roman Candle (yellow), Cherokee Purple (reddish-purple) and Green Zebra (green and yellow) to create a truly dazzling feast for the eyes.

### Midsummer Tomatoes

6 large heirloom tomatoes, chopped

1/2 cup basil, chopped

1/3 cup olive oil

1/3 cup balsamic vinegar

2 cloves fresh garlic, minced

salt and pepper to taste



Place tomatoes in a bowl. Combine remaining ingredients and whisk together, then pour over tomatoes and marinate for 10 minutes. Enjoy!