

IMAGES

...THEN AND NOW

From the Indian Hill Historical Society

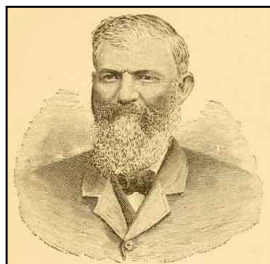


**Buckingham Lodge
1861**

Tomato Lore

The tomato is a widely consumed and versatile food. It belongs to the nightshade family which also includes potatoes, eggplants, peppers, and tobacco. Worldwide there are thousands of cultivars of this plant with differing sizes, colors, shapes, and flavors. The culinary history of tomatoes, a staple in many kitchens, is fascinating.

It is believed that tomatoes were first domesticated in Central and South America, where Aztecs and Incas raised several varieties. Spanish conquistadors brought seeds back to Europe where they were planted near the Mediterranean and thrived in the mid-1500s. At first, they were grown as ornamentals in gardens, where they were regarded as “poison apples”. People were afraid to eat them because when served on a pewter plate they were toxic. Over time, European attitudes shifted from viewing them as decorative to edible. By the late 1600s tomatoes were being consumed, and in 1692 an Italian cookbook with tomato recipes was published. In America, tomatoes were grown in the Carolinas in the mid-1700s, and Thomas Jefferson, who ate them in Paris (when he was the US Minister to France) sent seeds back to Monticello. At that time, many Americans still regarded tomatoes as suspicious.



Alexander W. Livingston

Col. Robert Johnson of New Jersey changed people’s attitudes. An avid horticulturist, he announced that he was going to eat a tomato on the courthouse steps of Salem, NJ in 1820. His physician warned him that he wouldn’t survive. When he consumed one, the hundreds who watched the spectacle were astonished that he didn’t die. Tomatoes became more popular throughout the states after this demonstration. In the mid-1800s Alexander Livingston, a seedsman from Ohio, grew them and did some crossbreeding. He aimed to produce tomatoes smooth in contour, uniform in size, and sweet in flavor. A native of Reynoldsburg, he developed the first commercially successful variety of tomato. The A.W. Livingston Company introduced more than 30 varieties of tomatoes. He moved the business to Columbus in 1880. He was praised by the US Department of Agriculture for perpetuating “superior material”. The town of Reynoldsburg still commemorates Livingston’s plant breeding with an annual Tomato Festival.

Nowadays producers strive to grow plants with larger yields, longer shelf life, a uniform red color, various sizes, and resistance to disease. Sometimes this diminishes nutritional value and taste. Grocery stores have a wide range of tomatoes available year-round, while farmer’s markets, CSAs and home gardeners produce many different and more exotic types.

Whether tomatoes are a fruit or a vegetable has been disputed. Because they are ripened reproductive bodies with seeds, botanically they are fruits. Fruits are fleshy and have seeds, while vegetables consist of roots, stems, and leaves. In 1887 The US Supreme Court deemed them to be vegetables, because they were served with dinner, not for dessert. This ruling subjected them to import tariffs in that era.

Tomatoes offer several health benefits. They contain phytochemicals and antioxidants and are a good source of potassium and vitamins. Their flavor is often described as *umami*, a Japanese word for a pleasant savory taste. As one devotee put it, “It’s sweet, but not too sweet; tart, but not too tart. It’s savory... aromatic... and tantalizes our senses.” Tomatoes can be eaten at breakfast, lunch, or dinner. This versatile food is used in soups, pastes, sauces, salads, juices, casseroles, pickles, jams, relishes, salsas, and ketchup (the best-selling condiment in the United States). It is also a key ingredient in pasta dishes and pizza.

Besides its culinary uses, tomatoes are used in other ways including pharmaceuticals and cosmetics. Skincare products such as face creams, masks, serums, and sunscreens often contain tomatoes or their extracts. They are used in some shampoos and conditioners. They are a popular ingredient in the health and wellness industry. Even veterinary items like animal feed and pet supplements sometimes include tomatoes.

There are numerous types of tomatoes, some of which have unusual names. Among these are Bloody Butcher, Tigerella, Mortgage Lifter, Cow’s Tit, Goatbag, and Purple Dog Creek. Sixty million tons of tomatoes are produced annually worldwide, and the average American’s consumption is 19 pounds per year. The state fruit of Ohio is the tomato (2009), and the state beverage is tomato juice (1965). Tomatoes are grown in 85% of American’s home gardens. Both nutritious and delicious, tomatoes are part of the nation’s history and a favorite food of its citizens.