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The Return of a Lost Jersey Tomato

By [JULIA MOSKIN](#)

WHEN heirloom tomatoes became popular in the 1990s, Jack Rabin became acutely uncomfortable.

“Everyone was going gaga over them. My farmers were trying to grow them, and we’d walk out in the field and just see horticultural garbage,” said Mr. Rabin, a longtime agricultural extension agent with [Rutgers University](#) in New Brunswick, N.J. who works with about 800 growers around the state. “Every time it rained, they would crack open or turn into water bags. They burned in the sun or developed fungus you could taste,” he said. “It was painful to watch, and the yields were a nightmare.”

Since 2001, Mr. Rabin has been the head of the Rutgers tomato project, responsible for identifying tomatoes that farmers can grow successfully and consistently. It is an awesome charge in a state where “Jersey tomato” is as prideful a phrase as “Jersey girl.” It is even more so this year, as Mr. Rabin helps to bring back to market a lost variety that was once virtually the definition of the Jersey tomato.

But what’s so special about the Jersey tomato?

“It can’t be the soil, because we’ve got sandy soil in the south of the state, and more clay and loam in the north,” said Pete Nitzsche, a Rutgers agent in Morris County. “What we’ve got here is a memory of how tomatoes used to taste.”

That memory is so powerful that when the seeds of a favorite tomato, the Ramapo, became unavailable in the late 1980s, the state’s gardeners began a letter-writing campaign, demanding that Rutgers bring it back.

“The 1990s is when we began to hear a swelling of dissatisfaction with the flavor of tomatoes in New Jersey,” Mr. Rabin said. “Something had to give.”

The Ramapo was popular when it was released by Rutgers in 1968, but was eventually judged too soft for shipping, Mr. Rabin said. This spring, after a multiyear project that involved retrieving fragile seeds from a retired plant geneticist and sending them to Israel for germination, Rutgers finally brought back the Ramapo.

John Ebert, whose family runs the last working farm in Cherry Hill, N.J., has three acres of Ramapos just turning red this week.

“Ramapo was literally the only tomato we grew for most of my childhood,” he said. “It was, and maybe still is, the perfect Jersey tomato.”

The classic Jersey tomato is not an heirloom, loosely defined as a tomato your great-grandfather might have grown in the backyard. Classic Jerseys are hybrid tomatoes, bred by seed companies or in laboratories like Mr. Rabin’s, to have certain qualities such as resistance to disease or high yields. The famous Rutgers hybrid tomato, released

by the university in 1934, has a particular sweet tanginess that was prized by the Campbell Soup company, based in Camden, N.J.

An heirloom can be any type of tomato, such as a plum, a cherry or a beefsteak. Since their breeding is uncontrolled, heirlooms tend to have intriguing genetic variations like green streaks, blushing blossom ends and mahogany shoulders.

“The Jersey tomato is a nondescript red, round tomato,” said Mr. Rabin. “And I use nondescript as a term of respect.”

Is there nothing unique about the legendary Jersey tomato? Ask seven New Jersey farmers and you get the same answer: a perfect balance of sweet and acid. But everything from lemonade to lollipops can be described that way.

Although many praise the Ramapo’s tangy, mouth-filling flavor, growers especially appreciated its vigor. Unlike some heirlooms, this hybrid variety was prolific and easy to grow. Linda Muccio, a retired teacher who grew up near Paterson, said that her Italian-born grandparents — all four of them — used home-grown Ramapos all summer and for sauce in September when she was a child, choosing them over Italian plum tomatoes because the yields were so much greater. “More tomatoes on the vine means more sauce for the winter,” she said. “Simple as that.”

Last week, the [Food and Drug Administration](#) announced that tomatoes were not linked to the current salmonella outbreak.

New Jersey tomatoes and homegrown varieties have been considered safe for weeks.

“I have two large Ramapos ripening in a pot on my patio,” said Sandra McLaughlin, who participates in the state’s Master Gardener program in Monmouth County, and has never tasted a Ramapo. “I can’t wait to see what all the fuss is about.”

Such excitement about a round red tomato is now rare. American cooks and gardeners have embraced striped Green Zebras, maroon Brandywines and Russian Blacks. In some circles, the plain old red, round, medium-size beefsteak is now branded with the dreaded phrase “supermarket tomato.”

Except, that is, in New Jersey, where the state’s agricultural reputation was built on consistently sweet, juicy tomatoes that were ingested by the nearby Campbell and Heinz plants and transformed into soup, ketchup and juice, generating vast fortunes and mighty brands in the process.

“The Ramapo is the heirloom tomato of New Jersey,” said Mr. Nitzsche.

Many factors, from rainfall to genetics, contribute to a tomato’s flavor. But perhaps the most important is ripeness, an advantage that Jersey tomatoes had whenever they were eaten in or near New Jersey.

“Someone will probably have my head for saying this,” said Gary Ibsen, an organic tomato farmer in central California. “But to my mind, what the Jersey tomato has going for it is the legend, and the loyalty, and the rest of it is just the pronounced flavor of any tomato that’s picked ripe and not shipped around the continent.”

Flavor versus function has been a fundamental choice for American farmers, since the Interstate highway system was established in the 1950s.

“Once tomatoes were being bred for shipment, everything changed,” Mr. Ibsen said. Farmers benefited most by selecting varieties with thick skins and tough walls. “But now that shipping is so expensive, I think everything is going to change again,” he predicted. “You’re going to see a lot more local tomatoes everywhere.”

Is spending \$10,000 to send a truckload of Jersey tomatoes from California to New Jersey like sending coals to Newcastle? On his 300-acre organic farm, Mr. Ibsen grows both heirlooms and hybrids, including the Rutgers.

“The hybrids that were developed for taste, not for shipping, can hold up to any heirloom out there,” Mr. Rabin said.

“When I hear these young chefs gushing about heirlooms, I wonder: haven’t they ever tasted a Big Boy, or an Early Girl?”

Tops for Taste

Since 2001, the Rutgers Agricultural Extension Service has invited the public to evaluate about 150 tomato varieties. (Details and information on Ramapo tomatoes are at nifarmfresh.rutgers.edu/JerseyTomato.html.) Following are the highest rated.

LARGE TOMATOES Cherokee Purple, Mortgage Lifter (also known as Radiator Charlie’s), Hawaiian Pineapple, Pruden’s Purple.

MEDIUM-SIZE TOMATOES Eva Purple Ball, Arkansas Traveler, Box Car Willie, Lemon Boy, Costoluto Genovese, Ramapo, Brandywine Red, Green Zebra.

SMALL TOMATOES Snow White, Isis Candy, Yellow Pear.

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