

The "Back Whens" (or, Ode to a Tomato)

The "back whens." We all have them. "Back when I was a kid, the snow banks were so tall that they saluted the eaves as they grew above them." "Back when I was young, the watering hole was so cold that, even in the summer, we'd come out dripping icicles." Or the corn was taller than an elephant's eye; the wind yowled louder than a torn cat under a full moon; the teachers graded so tough that an adult Einstein would have flunked fourth grade science. You know these . . . you've-heard them—and you've probably spilled out a couple of your own. Maybe there's an element of truth in the *back whens*, but more likely, memory has been a benevolent artist and given a rose-colored wash to our recollections.

That being said, when I was a young girl, we used to have tomatoes that were so sweet they'd make a peach blush. My great great (that's not a typo!) Uncle Clyde's gifts to the Augusts of our youth were the incomparably scrumptious tomatoes he grew in his little patch of garden. He and his wife would arrive at their lake cottage—where my sister and I would be eagerly waiting—burdened with goodies, all carefully nestled in sturdy wooden pie or reed baskets. The most treasured of all his prizes: those round, red orbs that were nearly bursting with the summer's sunshine and the promise of warm days. Whatever else was tucked away in those baskets, with the exception, perhaps, of his wife Pansy's homemade hermits, was passed over like pigweed in a field of black-eyed Susans.

For most of the last twenty or so seasons, my husband and I have grown our own tomatoes, each year adding new (heirloom, so really, "old") varieties to some familiar stand-bys. The ultimate goal used to be to find one that had the same explosion of flavor that Uncle Clyde's did; one that needed nothing more than an open mouth to receive it. No salt or pepper (although Pansy was known to sprinkle the teeniest pinch of sugar over a thick slab), no carrier, no dressing. All by itself it was complete, a taste sensation in a class of its own. We've never come close to harvesting a tomato like those in days of yore, nor has any other grower we've been foolhardy enough to expect it of.

As a kid, I didn't spend a whole lot of time analyzing just what it was that made his tomatoes so singular in their supremacy. It was simply part of his magic. This was a man who had the patience to spend hour after hour in an old blue boat with my twin sister and me, teaching us to hook a worm and the best place on the lake to catch

perch; who took daily strolls with his beloved wife (think of Philemon and Baucis, of Roman mythology), embracing the outdoors; who could identify birds by their songs as well as their plumage; who smelled of wood and tools and earth and fresh air. His tomatoes (all his vegetables, for that matter) were an extension of that *je ne sais quois*.

On some level, though, I knew that his gems were the offspring of careful tending and a devout respect for the land and Nature; that there was a direct relationship between their traits and the fact that they were selected for the climate in his yard and arose from nourished soil. No one tried to—or had to—tell an eight-year-old that homegrown "tommy-toes" were in a totally different league from supermarket ones. Heck, those tasteless, half-yellow, cardboard-y things from the A&P didn't even belong in the same botanical class! My unsophisticated palate needed no explanation.

For some, it is intuitive; for others, obvious; and for some, not thought about: that foods, be they vegetables, fruits, eggs, dairy products, or whatever, are best when fresh and when from a local source. (An illustration: here in Columbia County, New York, a strawberry is juicy and flavorful at the start of the summer, while a Florida one, consumed in March, has the same properties as the A&P tomato. Yet a Florida strawberry actually eaten *in* Florida in March is quite yummy. You encounter gastronomic disappointments when you try to mix-and-match seasons and locales.)

When we shop, we should not only recognize the value of local produce and goods, but we should also embrace and honor it. The superior attributes of these items transcend their remarkable flavor, freshness, and nutritional punch and enter into a new, often-overlooked arena: the economical one. By selecting foods and goods that are grown or made or processed within a constrained ambit, we, as consumers, help do the following: support a vibrant, local economy; play a part in backing the small farmers and business owners, thereby maintaining the small-town and individualized character of our communities (as opposed to the homogenization of America through large, chain corporations); preserve agriculture as a viable way of life for the upcoming generations; and save our farmland from being consumed by other (and less environmentally friendly) pursuits.

Oh, and by the way, back when I was a little girl, those tomatoes really *were* as sweet as candy. And if you don't believe me, you can ask my twin sister for unbiased corroboration! She remembers *back when* too!