



## Heirlooms

by Anne Pinkerton

I owe my abiding love of tomatoes to my grandfather.

Though my grandparents lived in a modest ranch-style house in urban Houston, Grandpa made excellent use of their diminutive square backyard, laying in rows and rows of baby tomato plants each spring. Other than an old fig tree that stooped in a corner heavy with sweet bounty, tomatoes were his only crop, but his dedication to his annual harvest made the place feel like a farm to me.

When I was a tiny kid of three, four, and five, I was dropped off at my grandparents' regularly for weekend sleepovers, which I adored. Between being spoiled by cartoon-watching, games of hide-and-seek, and my grandmother's silver dollar pancakes, I loitered in the sunshine out back with Grandpa. Barefoot and pigtailed, I stood next to him as he crouched on his knees, lovingly patting the dirt around each seedling. Together, he and I pulled the garden hose around to carefully water his charges.

"Shugie, look," Grandpa said, using his nickname for me as he pointed out the tiny bright yellow star-shaped flowers when they appeared, and again when the blossoms gave way to marble-sized green balls. Each stage of development was a fascination for both of us. With his enormous tanned and leathery hands, he showed me how he staked the plants when they grew heavy with their burgeoning. I gently touched the plants' fuzzy leaves and hairy stalks, and they exuded their distinctive bright fragrance, which I liked to smell on my fingertips.

I watched with wonder, visit after visit, week after week, while the summer heated up, as the tomato orbs swelled, turned sunburn pink, and finally glowed the textbook definition of "red," ready for picking. Grandpa taught me how to twist the heavy tomatoes gently from their stems and palm the giant beauties like the treasures they were. He easily held several at a time; after dropping one that splatted juicily on the patio stones, I cradled a single tomato in both of my small hands.

We carried them triumphantly into the house, handing them off to Grandma. She knew how to serve them, unadulterated but for a smidge of salt. She cut their soft flesh in fat round slices and slid tomatoes onto our dinner plates alongside the protein, as luscious as any meat, and we carved them with the same reverence. The vegetables' juiciness leaked all over, dripped down my chin, probably stained my t-shirt.

Each summer I felt I "helped" Grandpa with his little home crop, but my help was usually in the devouring.

I couldn't—and can't—imagine eating a green salad, burger, taco, or even turkey sandwich without tomato. I wanted tomato on my grilled cheese, even with tomato soup on the side. Cherry tomatoes were adored alongside celery and carrots on a crudité tray with creamy dip. I loved my mom's dish of sliced tomato, cucumber, and onion, drizzled with red wine vinegar. Tomato sauce? Forget about it. Like most kids, spaghetti, lasagna, or pizza nights were worth living for alone. Tomatoes are essential, a favorite vegetable.

"Tomatoes are a *fruit*!" a classmate declared in elementary school.

"What?" I looked at her wide-eyed. She said it had something to do with the seeds being inside. It was a categorical shock.

I recalled the way the baby tomatoes clung to their vines like berries, which is how they are classified botanically. But could anyone imagine them sweet? In a tomato dessert? These days the culinary world describes the tomato as having an *umami* flavor and considers it a vegetable based on usage. The ambiguity of its definition amuses me.

Who are you, lovely tomato?

Spoiled by the long, warm growing season in Texas that provided nearly year-round fresh local tomatoes, I had no idea these jewels weren't available anywhere, anytime. When I moved to Massachusetts for college, it was a rude surprise to be served cold, anemic-looking, flavorless imitations with texture like Styrofoam.

The sad excuses for tomatoes in the campus dining commons broke my heart. They lacked vibrancy, seeming grown in some lonely and dark lab, deprived of sunshine, much less a gardener's tender care. My grandpa would have been horrified.

Did I ever call or write and describe those pink imposters to him? I can't remember. All I can remember is that, with my newfound independence, more than a thousand miles from home, I was never in touch enough.

In his final years, instead of gardening, Grandpa spent his free time in his well-worn leather armchair, feet propped on an ottoman in front of an enormous TV, watching football. It made sense; he'd been an athletic coach before he was a tomato enthusiast. He'd also been a lifelong smoker, and, as it turns out, we have a familial genetic predisposition for pulmonary problems, so his fate was fairly well determined. After a serious open-heart surgery, which bought him a couple of additional years, his ticker—which must have been about the size of one of his Beefsteaks—stopped ticking. I got the call in my dorm, when I was 20, far from sunny Texas.

I missed being called "Shugie." I missed not just my grandad's big loving heart, but his giant gentle hands and equally colossal ears and nose (it was because of him that I learned about how men's ears and noses continue to grow), along with the wide grin that greeted me each time I visited. I missed the simple pleasure of tending his garden with him. It has occurred to me more than once upon visiting his grave, that, similar to the Jewish tradition of leaving rocks for their dearly departed, I should leave on the double-wide headstone he now shares with Grandma, the offering of a tomato.

Later, I grew my own tomato plants in pots on my apartment porch. Without room to spread out, the stalks grew vertically, and intensely. As soon as I'd tied the plants to small stakes, they quickly outgrew them, requiring taller and taller rods for propping, until I finally had to tie the toppling tops, much taller than five-foot-two me, to the posts holding up the porch roof.

When I watered my tomatoes, I stroked them gently to release their scent, and I'd be immediately transported back to the comfort and happiness of Grandpa's backyard. (I was thrilled when, several years ago, Demeter created a tomato plant perfume.) I wondered what my forebear would think of my miniature garden and hoped he'd be pleased I'd followed in his footsteps, even in this small way.

I was delighted by my first foray; those plants produced and produced all summer long. By the time frost hit, there were still baby tomatoes growing prolifically, and I was crushed by the thought of having to sacrifice them to the cold. My future mother-in-law, another highly successful tomato grower, instructed me to pull them out of their pots root and all, and hang them upside down inside until the final fruits ripened. It sounded ridiculous, but it worked.

There was a final harvest of beautiful tomatoes long after New England had chilled all outdoor plant life into submission.

My husband and I settled in a big farming community and joined a local CSA to take advantage of local, organic produce. We sought out Red Fire Farm specifically because they have the best tomato game in town. Each summer, they host an annual tomato festival, replete with a tasting tent in which guests can sample dozens of heirloom varieties. Having known only red standards like Better Boys growing up, it was an epiphany to experience my first Cherokee purples, golden Brandywines, and Green Zebras. What would Grandpa have thought? I doubt he had tasted anything like

these. He would have been tickled by an entire festival dedicated to the vegetables/fruits we loved.

Once Red Fire's tomatoes are available each July, we eat them too quickly—in thick slices with just a pinch of salt—and want for more. They are so good, as good as my grandfathers', and—dare I say it?—even more so.

At the end of each season, the farm opens up their tomato fields to members for a picking free-for-all. I plan thoughtfully on a free Sunday, packing a water bottle and donning a baseball cap to combat the blazing late-August sun, bringing shoulder bags in anticipation of my haul.

Strolling the quiet dirt road of the farm out to the tomato patch, I hear only birds under the arch of blue sky. I pass 10-foot-tall sunflowers, cleanly picked blueberry bushes, shriveled



kale, overgrown herbs, drying corn stalks. Less than a mile in, dozens of rows of staked tomato plans stretch as far as a football field.

Browning stalks strain under the weight of their rainbow-colored labor; overripe tomatoes are smashed on the ground. At last, my greed is satisfied. What almost no one else wants—the imperfect overage—is treasure to me. I see only one or two other nightshade lovers braving the heat, and there is more than enough for a hundred of us to have our fill. I spend an hour or two exploring the rows, stripping the plants of red, pink, purple, green, blackish, yellow, gold, filling bag after bag.