

The pleasure of a hot tomato

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The pleasure of a hot tomato Bill Hall The Lewiston Tribune |

Was it really only three weeks ago that I was standing coatless in the vegetable garden ingesting a substance so intoxicating that it probably should be declared a dangerous drug?

I speak of tomatoes - hot tomatoes straight off the bush, so hot from the sun, so succulent and slobbery that devouring them verges on an erotic, almost biblical experience.

The weather made a sharp turn this autumn from late warmth to sudden winter. Hot tomatoes one day, black tomatoes the next. We are still eating blushing green tomatoes from the kitchen counter, but the outside heat has gone into hibernation.

Heat does wild things to tomatoes and to some other fruits that are normally eaten chilled. For instance, the best cantaloupe I have ever wolfed down was out in the sun in high heat. An elevated temperature intensifies that sweet musky fruit. In a late summer afternoon, the melons can exceed 100 sugary degrees, turning a cantaloupe into some exotic new fruit you've never tried before.

The first time I got the strange notion of tasting a hot cantaloupe, I bent over, plucked a small one and cut it open right then and there with my pocket knife. I held it in both hands like a famished ape and took big, ravenous bites.

Wow!

The steamy flavor of the fruit overwhelmed my senses. The melon's juice ran down my beard and onto my happy stomach. I returned to the house, weak in the knees from flavor, a giddy smile on my face.

"What have you been up to?" my wife asked with a knowing smile as I returned to the house with a face full of guilty pleasure.

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" she asked, seeing right through me.

"Cantaloupe," I admitted, almost surprised that she believed me. If she had suspected me of sensual escapades down there in the Garden of Eating, I couldn't have denied it.

Similarly, there are few deviations from total decency like picking and eating a tomato hot with the sun. The flavor is magnified by warmth. The fresh-plucked fruit is still alive

and gladly fulfills its life's purpose by flooding your mouth and gullet with its juices. You can almost feel the vitamins on your tongue.

If it's not a fountain of youth, it's at least a fountain for surviving old age a little longer. It's energizing to consume those flavors directly, plant to person, with no middle man or waiting.

Meanwhile, those once-totally tasteless store-bought tomatoes have improved in recent years. Most stores now offer vine-ripened winter tomatoes from warmer climates. They are far from superior but tolerable on a December day.

Even better, a few noble farmers have begun a breeding effort to reclaim the lost flavor of tomatoes that have been sacrificed for too long on the altar of shipping toughness. It's not easy to develop a tomato that is rubbery enough to endure truck travel without abandoning its flavor.

Store tomatoes will never equal those grown in backyard patches and patio pots. A "fresh" store food will never give the pleasure of snatching a hot tomato from a lusty plant on a summer day, putting it to your quivering lips, chomping down, freeing a flood of flavor. It's a natural act that leaves a look on your face that the neighbors shouldn't be watching.

There is something fundamental about growing your own tomatoes, an undertaking almost as self-serving and overwhelmingly wonderful for a man as giving up a rib to create a woman.

But make no mistake: the supermarket tomatoes are cheaper. By the time we build elevated beds, pay the city water bill and freshen the soil with compost, our tomatoes probably cost something like \$20 a pound.

Deer hunters follow a similar course. They are fond of saying they go hunting for the meat. But that is only partly true. Their costly rigs and rifles and tents make venison far more expensive than any meat in the market. They don't go hunting for the meat. They go hunting for the hunting, an ancient survival impulse that still lingers in our bones.

Similarly, there is something in my farmer genes that sends me out each spring to plant food. I don't do it so much for the food. I do it for the ritual. I do it so I can seize a hot tomato with my own two hands and marinate my taste buds in the conceit of what I have accomplished in concert with Mother Nature and Father Sun.

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