Driven by taste:
A passion for heirloom tomatoes

BY GARY IBSEN

HEIRLOOM TOMATOES ARE NOT ONLY splendid to taste, but they have a fascinating, rich history that springs from family farms around the world. Ninety-five percent of American home gardeners include tomatoes in their gardens, and many prioritize their garden space to assure room for heirloom tomatoes, the best-tasting of all varieties. The seeds and growing techniques are passed from generation to generation in order to sustain each tomato variety and keep them in the family. Fortunately, I was included in many of these generational transfers, resulting in my own garden of more than 500 varieties of certified organic heirloom tomatoes.

My love for growing heirloom tomatoes began in 1986 after more than 30 years of planting and farming them. In Carmel Valley, a Portuguese neighbor introduced me to them by offering me seeds to several heirloom tomato varieties he had gathered over the years. He advised me that my future experience of tomato gardening would be filled with treasures. Little did I know how right he would be. I fell into a passionate career in tomato farming, going on to author *The Great Tomato Book* and establishing *Gary Ibsen's Carmel TomatoFest*, a festival centered on the many facets of tomatoes. Happily, twenty years later I am now known as "The Tomato Man."

Over the years, my garden space became devoted to exploring the pronounced and distinctive flavors of heirloom tomato varieties. In 1991, I decided to share my fervor and invited a few chef friends to my backyard for a pot-luck to experience the wonderful flavors of the heirloom tomatoes I had grown that year. Each guest was asked to bring their families and a home-made tomato dish. That first tomato potluck showcased ten varieties of heirloom tomatoes and included 45 guests. Today, this potluck has grown exponentially, and on September 10, 2006 at Quail Lodge Resort in Carmel Valley, there will be more than 350 varieties of heirloom tomatoes showcased for more than 3,000 tomato lovers from around the nation.

The popularity of heirloom tomatoes has increased enormously over the last ten years. And it's all due to consumers finding the plethora of flavors in heirlooms that are absent in commercially-produced varieties. Only a few years ago, I had a difficult time selling heirloom tomatoes with all of their unusual shapes and colors. At that time I was able to sell only 40 pounds a week to a Whole Foods Market. Ten years later, I was selling close to *two tons* of heirloom tomatoes per week to that same store. I realized that consumers who had experienced the better flavors of heirloom tomatoes had become devoted customers.

An essential element of my passion for growing is my strong belief that healthy soil produces the most nutritious and flavorful tomatoes. I am a true practitioner of crop rotation, the planting of cover crops and of working the soil with compost, mineral solutions and rock dust to enhance the well-being and the diversity of micro-organisms within the soil. I grow the *TomatoFest Farm* heirloom tomatoes on nearly 80 acres of rich, organic plots in Hollister, Gilroy, Modesto and Carmel Valley.

Many of the 500 heirloom tomato varieties I grow are used to preserve the seed stock of many valued tomato varieties from around the world, to constantly trial these varieties for plant and fruit quality, and to share the best of these with other growers and tomato lovers

> "Gary Ibsen's Carmel TomatoFest® entices more than one's senses, it captures the spirit and embraces the celebration of the season's tomato harvest."

each year at the Carmel TomatoFest.

Heirloom tomato varieties that become the most popular with family gardeners and small farmers are: *Brandywine, Marvel Striped, Cherokee Purple, Kellogg's Breakfast, Tobolsk, Green Zebra, Black Zebra, Black Krim, and Sunset's Red Horizon.*

My partner Dagma Lacey and I harvest all the tomatoes for market and seed production the old-fashioned way—by hand. Our commitment to hands-on production and harvest techniques ensures the highest quality