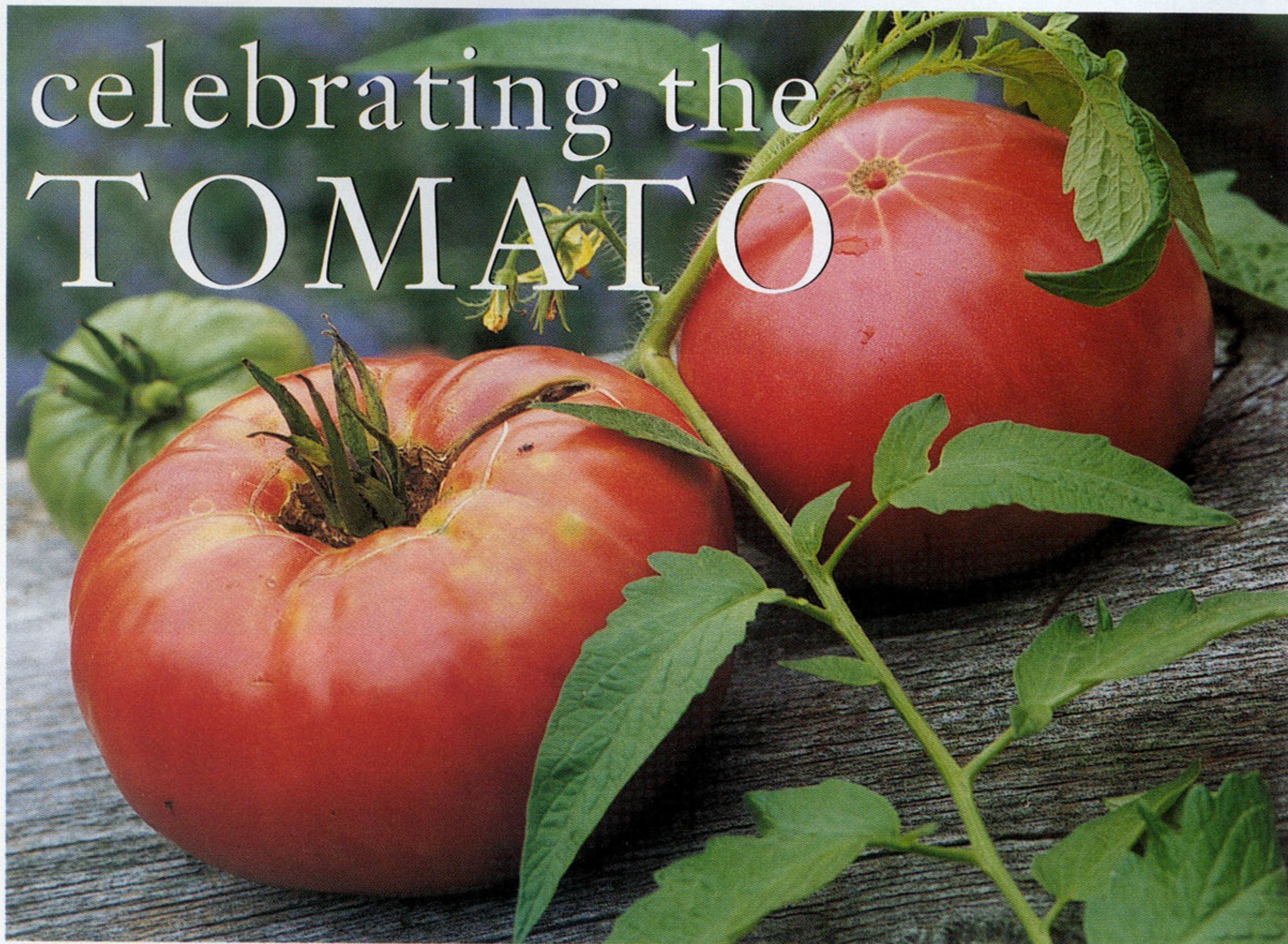




The tomato's central role in American culture and cuisine is evident in the many regional celebrations held in its honor each summer.

BY DAPHNE ROZEN



celebrating the TOMATO

Above: Considered by many to be the best-tasting American heirloom tomato, 'Brandywine' produces large, beefsteak-style tomatoes with dark pink skin. Named for the Brandywine Valley in southeastern Pennsylvania, it is believed to have been developed and nurtured by the region's Amish farmers. This flavorful tomato is not very disease tolerant, however, and it bruises easily—one reason it is found at farmer's markets but not in the grocery store. **Top:** Tomato tasting is a popular part of the Carmel TomatoFest in California.

THE TOMATO may not be native to North America, but—like the diverse human immigrants to this land—it has certainly made itself at home in the melting pot of cultures and cuisines that we call the United States. Welcoming the tomato with open arms—and mouths—Americans have, arguably, adopted the tomato as the national vegetable, although purists might insist it is the national fruit (see sidebar, "Fruit or Vegetable," on page 25).

"I think that Americans have probably enjoyed more of a diversity in tomato flavors and varieties than any other country," says Gary Ibsen, a well-known tomato grower and author of *The Great Tomato Book*.

As a long-time tomato aficionado, Ibsen attributes the tomato's popularity to its sheer beauty and delectable taste. "It's a wonderful fruit to celebrate," he said. "It's such a colorful, beautiful food to look at, and it has a romance about it." It can offer us "a variety of taste sensations from very sweet to jump-up-and-shout tomato flavor."

This national love affair with the tomato would have seemed inconceivable 300 years