

The perfect harvest party

Gather your favorite tomatoes, invite friends who love good food, and celebrate the bounty of summer

by ELAINE JOHNSON

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■ Gary Ibsen has been up since 3:30 A.M. on this September Sunday. That was when he strapped a lamp to his forehead and walked into his still-cool, dark fields to pluck a few more perfectly ripe tomatoes from his 1,000 plants. Now it's late afternoon and his annual TomatoFest in Carmel, California, is about to begin. "I've been waiting for this day all year," he says excitedly.

He's invited 260 guests, as passionate about tomatoes as he is, to wander the fields, taste the harvest, and share a dinner that celebrates this food. With wine glasses in hand, we tromp off to a comparative tasting inside a 175-foot-long tomato arbor. "Man, this one is like sex!" enthuses a taster. Flavors run the gamut from earthy and rich to intensely sweet. It's like sampling a 96-color box of crayons: lime green, sunny yellow, shocking orange, blood red.

Preparations began in December with Ibsen poring over garden catalogs. "Flavor totally drives what I select. Nearly all are heirlooms," he explains. Ibsen settled on 63 varieties this year, up from 35 last. "My friends are ready to have me committed."

Through the winter and spring, Ibsen nurtures seedlings, first in a spare bedroom, later in a makeshift greenhouse; finally they go into hand-dug, carefully amended holes. Then he waters, feeds, and trellises each vine as high as 10 feet.

As the tomatoes ripen, Ibsen survives on four hours' sleep a night, sandwiching his work in publishing between tending plants and carting tomatoes to local chefs and markets—"a feeble attempt to make my hobby pay for itself," he laments. "Racing sports cars would be cheaper." From his car filled with jewel boxes of tomatoes, Ibsen dispenses samples, tips, and stories to friends, chefs, and chance acquaintances, like the woman he met at the laundry and invited to the party.



Guests contribute to a tomato buffet, a veritable nirvana of the raw, the cooked, and the frozen. We sit down to overflowing plates and strolling musicians. Kids scamper through fragrant fields strung with red balloons and green streamers.

Was it all worth it? Ibsen replies with a big smile, "Today is the day where it all comes together."

Gary Ibsen (left) shares his obsession for tomatoes. Guests sample his work from a table under the arch of a 175-foot-long tomato arbor (above, right).

Roma-Goat Cheese Tarts

Prep and cook time: About 2½ hours, including chilling

Notes: Lisa Magadini, executive chef of Club XIX restaurant at Pebble Beach Resort in California, and Benjamin Brown, sous-chef, created this recipe.

Makes: 2 tarts; 12 servings total

- ¾ cup pine nuts
- 2 cups whole-wheat flour
- About 1 cup all-purpose flour
- 2 teaspoons minced fresh thyme leaves
- About 1½ teaspoons salt
- ¾ cup (½ lb.) butter or margarine, cut into chunks
- ¾ cup solid shortening
- 1¼ pounds Roma tomatoes, rinsed, cored, and cut into ⅛-inch slices
- 3 large eggs
- 3 tablespoons pesto
- About ½ cup (4 oz.) fresh chèvre (goat) cheese
- 1 cup whipping cream

1. In an 8- to 9-inch-wide pan, bake nuts in a 350° oven, stirring often, until golden, 5 to 7 minutes; let cool.

2. In a bowl, combine whole-wheat flour, 1 cup all-purpose flour, thyme, and 1 teaspoon salt. With a pastry blender or your fingers, cut or rub in butter and shortening until particles are pea-size. Stir in pine nuts. With a fork, gently stir in ½ cup ice-cold water, 1 tablespoon at a time.

3. Gather dough into a ball, divide in