whom had left the place for a single day in 28 years—grew and served their own vegetables. They induced me to sample their glistening backyard tomatoes at lunch one day by suggesting a sprinkling of sugar on the slices, and I instantly converted from phobe to phile. I don't remember the name of the variety, but I started requesting them at every meal (well, not breakfast). This was my introduction to heirlooms, and it wasn't long before I realized they needed no extra sweetness.

Today, American hilltops and vegetable gardens are aflame with them. After decades in which innovative shipping triumphed over the yearnings of the nation's taste buds, the authentic, undoctored love apple is slowly but decisively making its way back onto the tables of those who, like me, collapse in ecstasy over a single mouthful of the juicy, vibrant, luscious fruit that tastes like no other—and certainly not like the bulletproof pallid handballs that are wrapped in plastic and tossed like concrete blocks into most of our supermarkets.

Technically, an heirloom tomato is an open-pollinated fruit whose genealogy predates 1940 and is grown from the same single variety of seed year after year. A hybrid is a tomato produced by crossbreeding the seeds of two varieties. While hybrids are often superior in uniformity of size, resistance to rough handling, and predictability, they're almost invariably inferior in flavor.

After Vermont, I searched England, France, and the wilds of Ohio (during various stages of my ed-

ucation and employment) for two decades but couldn't find anything resembling the Wallises' homegrowns. Some French samples came close—particularly one round, red, sweetly acidic variety called the Dona—but most were more refined and less down-to-earth, and lust, not refinement, is what heirloom tomatoes are about. It took a serendipitous drive through the mountains of Alleghany County, North Carolina, on Route 21 between Sparta and Roaring Gap in the summer of '83, to reinvigorate my obsession. At a roadside stand, a grocer named Grady offered me a slice of an heirloom called the German Johnson. It was naturally sweeter than anything I'd sugared in Vermont, with a rush of salt and richness unavailable in its French counterpart, and its sensual texture burst in my mouth like liquid rubies.

I ate German Johnsons every day till I returned home to Santa Monica, where I proceeded to search every farmers' market for them. I was introduced to delectable Green Zebras, Dagma's Perfection, and Boxcar Willies—names as colorful as racehorses'!—but never found a German Johnson. When I moved back to New York, where I grew up, the results were worse: no one had even heard of them. I began to think they were something Grocer Grady grew illegally in his bathtub, like gin. »

Tomato Festivals

From beauty pageants to food fights, the humble fruit is celebrated in many ways. Below, a few more noteworthy festivals here and abroad.

ARKANSAS
Bradley County Pink Tomato Festival
All-tomato luncheon, and Miss Pink Tomato and Miss Petite Pink Tomato beauty contests. Warren, Ark.; 870/226-5225; pinktomato2. homestead.com; June.

NORTH DAKOTA
Great Tomato Festival
Tomato picnic and Dixieland jazz. Minot, N. Dak.; 701/857-8206; www.visitminot.org; August 24.

PENNSYLVANIA
Pittston Tomato Festival
A stateside version of the high jinks at Spain's La Tomatina (see below). Pittston, Pa.; 570/655-1424; www.pittston tomatofestival.com; August 18–21.

VIRGINIA
Thomas Jefferson's Tomatoe Faire
Displays of horticulture, awarding of ribbons, tomato sandwiches. Lynchburg, Va.; 434/384-8317; www.hcmga.com; August 6.

SPAIN
La Tomatina
The most bizarre—and messiest—festival takes place in this small Valencia town, which hosts what must be the world's biggest annual food fight, using 276,000 pounds of tomatoes. Buñol, Spain; 34/963-986-422; www.lahoya.net/ tomatina.com; August 31.

Juicy Fruit A festival tasting table, left. Below: Miss Hot Tomato, Tracy Griffith, holds a couple of TomatoFest's many varietals. Above: A tomato enthusiast.