

Heirloom tomatoes have grown into a life's work for Gary Ibsen, the man behind the Carmel TomatoFest

A LABOR OF LOVE

By MIKE HALE
Herald Food Writer

Before savvy chefs began calling tomato sauce “Brandywine and Green Zebra reduction,” before the purchase of four plump Cherokee Purples set us back \$17, and way before a Google search for “heirloom tomatoes” produced 665,000 results, Gary Ibsen stood quite alone in his field, getting a buzz off the freshly tilled earth — his goofy grin and moist eyes holding

the promise of a coming bounty.

“I took that first bite out in the garden and the flavor was so abundant and pronounced, a world of complexity I had never experienced.”

Gary Ibsen
founder, Carmel
TomatoFest

Everyone knows the silver-bearded Carmel resident as “The Tomato Man,” the blood, sweat and tears behind the Carmel TomatoFest; a man leading a revolution — a modern-day Johnny Appleseed who peeked into the

future and saw a delicious new world beyond the pale, mushy, bland tomatoes invented by a blasphemous science that sought a heartier, less-perishable, disease-resistant, hybridized version of what our grandparents once enjoyed. Ibsen, along with his wife/partner Dagma Lacey, will celebrate the 17th NatureSweet Carmel TomatoFest on Sunday, Sept. 14, at Quail Lodge Resort in Carmel Valley. The day features a grand display and tasting of 350 varieties of heirlooms, 70 top chefs from around the country using tomatoes as a culinary platform and 50 wineries pouring more than 200 vintages.

But this story has deeper roots. It's a love story. Year-round, Ibsen and Lacey passionately gather seeds from more than 600 varieties of certified organic heirloom tomatoes, many sourced from family farms around the world. With those seeds come stories



CARMEL TOMATOFEST

Gary Ibsen stands among the rows of tomato plants in a field he leases near Hollister.



HERALD FILE

The NatureSweet Carmel TomatoFest displays more than 350 varieties of heirloom tomatoes for guests to taste.

passed through the generations, and a hope that the family legacy will survive.

The Carmel couple's modest Carmel rental is a home filled with warmth and art and order. The garage is something else altogether: floor-to-ceiling shelf units filled with seed packets. Many of the golden treasures

will end up in backyards, small farms and community gardens across the globe; what's left over is donated to worldwide food programs to help feed the hungry — and to germinate self-sustaining ideals.

It took one taste

It all began with a memorable mouthful. Ibsen remembers the day his world shifted, a day decades past when an elderly Portuguese farmer in Carmel Valley presented Ibsen with a gift — two heirloom tomato seedlings.

“I took that first bite out in the garden and the flavor was so abundant and pronounced, a world of complexity I had never experienced,” said Ibsen, his eyes closed to enhance the visual.

So the man who had already shared a nightclub stage with Richard Pryor in Greenwich Village; performed musical comedy at off-Broadway venues; worked in nuclear operations aboard U.S. Navy submarines; owned an art gallery in Connecticut, an architectural design business in Colorado and a Cajun restaurant in Carmel became a farmer.

“Instead of the big acid taste, a bang of tomato flavor, these tomatoes had nuances of flavor,” said Ibsen, growing visibly animated at the memory. “Chocolate, citrus, pineapple, tropical fruit — subtle flavors in the background along with a big tomato flavor.”

Ibsen compares a ripe tomato to fine wine. “It's complex, offering more pleasures and better mouth

If you go

- ▶ **What:** 17th annual NatureSweet Carmel TomatoFest
- ▶ **When:** 12:30-4:30 p.m., Sunday, Sept. 14
- ▶ **Where:** Quail Lodge Resort, Carmel Valley
- ▶ **Tickets:** \$95; limited to 3,000 guests; children under 12 free. Ticket includes entry, all food, wine tasting, wine glasses and the day's activities. www.tomatofest.com or 800-965-4827.

feel, a better finish that lingers — and elements of surprise.”

He soon expanded his search for heirloom seeds and family stories, and began sharing his tomatoes with people in the community. Of course, heirloom tomatoes (defined as “self-pollinators that have been bred true for 40 years or more”) predate by decades Ibsen's epiphany. But the general public, many of whom had been raised on flavorless, hybridized, supermarket varieties, had never experienced the difference.

“I got a ‘WOW’ and a smile,” he said. “This delighted me.”

Next he turned to local chef friends, such as Bernardus Lodge executive chef Cal Stamenov (then of Pacific's Edge in Carmel), Chef Craig von Foerster of Sierra Mar at Post Ranch Inn, and David

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