

“People ask me all the time, ‘why don’t you make hybrids and own the seeds?’ But to us it’s not about owning, it’s about sharing.”

— Gary Ibsen, founder, Carmel TomatoFest

Ibsen

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Fink, then an upstart restaurateur who now owns a trio of fine local restaurants.

“I looked at them tasting my tomatoes and I saw the machine going,” Ibsen said. “It was like handing an artist a whole new palette of colors.”

Stamenov remembers the moment.

“It intrigued me,” he said. “I never saw a tomato that looked like a bell pepper, hollow inside; my first thought was to stuff them. Or a peach tomato, fuzzy-skinned; it felt like velvet. It gave us an opportunity to work with different colors, textures, sizes and tastes. Suddenly you could create a mosaic with greens, yellows, oranges and purples.” (Read the long list of chef-inspired menu items from past festivals, and it’s easy to see how this simple fruit has inspired: heirloom tomato gazpacho gelee with peekytoe crab; heirloom tomato beignets with foie gras ice cream; tomato confit foccacia sandwich; heirloom tomatoes with watermelon, basil and white balsamic vinegar.)

“Tomatoes were never something that we considered as a center-of-the-plate item,” said restaurateur Tony Tollner (Tarpy’s, Montrieo Bistro, Rio Grill, Willy’s Smokehouse). “Now, every good restaurant has a great summer dish featuring heirlooms.”

TomatoFest roots

With the demand growing, Ibsen expanded his tomato patch, and he began delivering his crop to chefs from the trunk of his car. That led to what are now legendary backyard barbecues at Ibsen’s Carmel Valley home — parties with friends and family that



CARMEL TOMATOFEST

Gary Ibsen carefully drains the bucket, leaving the sterilized golden seeds behind. The seeds are packaged and sold all over the world — or given to schools and/or community gardens.

were, in effect, seeds for what would become one of the first, and certainly most successful, celebration of tomatoes in the country.

The barbecues outgrew Ibsen’s backyard, so he moved the summer ritual to an old Carmel Valley egg ranch, where he grew heirlooms in between concrete beds that once housed chicken coops. With years of natural fertilizer built into the soil, his tomato vines created amazing walkways, a literal tunnel of

tomatoes that produced a stunning rainbow of colors — red, orange, green, yellow, purple.

It didn’t take long for someone to tip off Sunset magazine, and Ibsen became a media darling, later appearing on “Good Morning America.” The event grew to 250 people and Ibsen’s friend, KGO radio personality Gene Burns, who hosts the weekend show “Dining Around with Gene Burns,” advised Ibsen to open it up to the public.

“I couldn’t possibly afford to,” Ibsen said.

“Gary, charge for it,” Burns said.

And so he did, creating a charitable organization that would benefit from any profits after expenses (to date, the fest has donated \$235,000 to charity, Ibsen said).

Recent years have seen “a perfect storm” of negativity — high gas prices, rising food costs and Ibsen’s health concerns — that have threatened the future of the festival. Ibsen, 64, has already



CARMEL TOMATOFEST

Squeezed tomato pulp is allowed to ferment in buckets.

announced he is stepping down as executive director of the festival in order to focus on his sprouting seed program, grow tomatoes for local chefs and produce markets, work on his next book (he previously published “The Great Tomato Book”) and spend more time with his combined eight children and their children. So far, no group or individual has stepped forward to take the reins, so the 17th festival could be the last.

“That would leave a huge hole,” said Tollner, on hand at the first “festival” in Ibsen’s backyard. “It’s been a local tradition that celebrates the tomato and the whole community.”

Every seed a possibility

But Ibsen sees the future in his seeds (every pack is stamped with the motto “every seed a possibility”).

The early years saw Ibsen and Lacey hand-picking the finest tomatoes from the fields and squeezing them by hand into five-gallon buckets. Allowed to ferment (which sterilizes the mix), the pulp is carefully washed away, leaving the gold seeds behind. Later the two graduated to metal mop squeezers, and now use two automated, seed-extractor machines. Ibsen has spent countless hours at his dining room table, counting seeds and sealing packets.

“People ask me all the time, ‘why don’t you make hybrids and own the seeds?’” Ibsen said. “But to us it’s not about owning, it’s about sharing.”

And sharing is a two-way street. Ibsen has saved many of the letters: one from someone

trying to grow tomatoes atop a roof in Manhattan; a handwritten letter with seeds stuck to a paper towel; a family in Iowa sending him some seeds simply called “Our Favorite Tomato”; a man with one year to live, requesting something new and usual for his last tomato season.

“They are tomato love stories,” he said.

Bottom line, Ibsen wants to leave a legacy, and he wants all of us to join in.

“Try new varieties that have been around for hundreds of years,” he said. “If you like them, pass them along to a friend or family and assist sustainability of this wonderful food. It’s both a responsibility and a pleasure.”

The great Julia Child knew the importance of sustainability, and loved the sheer simplicity of a dead-ripe tomato. The culinary icon grew fond of Ibsen while each served on the board of American Institute of Food and Wine. Ibsen made her a guest of honor at the 2000 TomatoFest.

“I told her once, ‘I’d love to name a tomato after you,’” said Ibsen, who procures a half dozen or so unnamed tomato seeds every year. “I asked her, ‘What kind shall it be?’”

Ibsen’s eyes sparkle, and he unleashes his best Julia Child warble — her one-word response.

“Tasty.” Child died in 2004, pleased that her namesake tomato seeds would go on without her. It was the only time she ever lent her name to anything; not a chef’s knife or a sauce pan — a tomato. Simple.

Enduring. A perfect legacy. And Ibsen’s point exactly.



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