



country, or the mystique of that homegrown tomato vine, the smell and feel and even the texture of tomatoes manage to get under almost everyone's skin. Still, despite what the organic-obsessed Cassandras might have us believe, the tomato is thriving, even at Safeway. The recent nationwide alarm after hundreds of consumers were sickened after eating fresh tomatoes contaminated by salmonella bacteria (see opposite page) underscored consumers' intense attachment to the fruit. "Business is down 50 percent," Bob Pizza, chief executive of What a Tomato Produce Company, told me at

Purveyor to chic eateries and gourmet markets, Full Belly Farm in California (farmer Andrew Brait in a patch of Sun Gold cherry tomatoes) epitomizes the organic way: bats eat the bugs, sheep fertilize the fields.

the San Francisco Wholesale Produce Market. "But sales will come back. People can't do without their tomatoes."

The tomato, *Solanum lycopersicum* (formerly *Lycopersicon esculentum*), is a peculiarly flavored species of the nightshade family, which also includes potatoes, eggplants, peppers and the deadly belladonna. It is a product of what is known as the Columbian exchange, that unequal sharing of genetic material following the conquest of the New World. The Old World got tomatoes, potatoes, chocolate, squash, corn and peppers. The new one got coffee, sugar cane and cotton—and the African slaves to cultivate them—as well as smallpox, measles and other previously unknown contagious diseases that devastated the native population.