The tomato’s central role in American culture and cuisine is evident in the many regional celebrations held in its honor each summer.

BY DAPHNE ROZEN

THE TOMATO may not be native to North America, but—like the diverse human immigrants to this land—it has certainly made itself at home in the melting pot of cultures and cuisines that we call the United States. Welcoming the tomato with open arms—and mouths—Americans have, arguably, adopted the tomato as the national vegetable, although purists might insist it is the national fruit (see sidebar, “Fruit or Vegetable,” on page 25).

“I think that Americans have probably enjoyed more of a diversity in tomato flavors and varieties than any other country,” says Gary Ibsen, a well-known tomato grower and author of The Great Tomato Book.

As a long-time tomato aficionado, Ibsen attributes the tomato’s popularity to its sheer beauty and delectable taste. “It’s a wonderful fruit to celebrate,” he said. “It’s such a colorful, beautiful food to look at, and it has a romance about it.” It can offer us “a variety of taste sensations from very sweet to jump-up-and-shout tomato flavor.”

This national love affair with the tomato would have seemed inconceivable 300 years