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 philo to philo. 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 be-
fore 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, vi-
brant, 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 employ-
ment) for two decades
but couldn’t find any-
thing resembling the
Wallises’ homegrown
Some French samples
came close—par-

larily 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 serendip-
tious drive through the mountains of Allegheny
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 heir-
loom 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, Dagnan’s Perfection, and
Bozic 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 il-
legally in his bathtub, like gin. »