

Old Time Heirloom Tomatoes

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If you are looking for something different to toss in your salad or pile on your hamburger, you may want to try an heirloom tomato. Unlike conventional tomatoes, heirlooms come in a variety of shapes, colors and flavors. Imagine biting into a tomato that has a hint of tropical fruit or a rich, smoky flavor. Generally speaking, heirloom tomatoes are varieties that have been available for more than 50 years. But these old-time tomatoes seldom make it to the grocery store. They bruise easily and can't survive the rigors of shipping.

It's been backyard gardeners, chefs, and entrepreneurial Valley farmers who have reintroduced these big, sometimes, odd-looking tomatoes, into the mainstream. Today, heirloom tomatoes can be found at specialty grocery stores and farmers markets. At the Kaiser Farmers Market in Fresno, the hefty, red-colored beefsteak tomatoes sit next to the yellow-striped pineapple tomatoes and the deep-colored Cherokee purple.

Farmer Yeng Her brings these heirloom varieties to Kaiser along with his regular crop of red and cherry tomatoes. "People like to have choices with tomatoes, just like with other things they buy," Her said. "And we like it when people try something different." One of his customers, Dr. Grace Inouye, is an heirloom tomato convert. She favors the pineapple variety. "It is just so juicy," Inouye said. "And it is just bursting with flavor."

Longtime tomato grower John Teixeira of Firebaugh has been producing heirloom tomatoes for more than a decade. He farms about 50 varieties each season, but has a seed collection of 250 varieties. Teixeira has been raising the awareness about heirloom varieties for years through food festivals and in-store sampling. "I always find people who say that they don't like tomatoes, but if I can get them to try just one bite, they end up loving it," said Teixeira of Lone Willow Ranch.

When shopping for heirloom tomatoes, the same rules apply for grocery store tomatoes. If you plan to use the tomatoes within a few days, look for something that is somewhat soft. And avoid storing tomatoes in the refrigerator. The cold temperature will break down the inside and make it mushy, said farmer Rocio Agraz of Vine Ripe in Hanford. Agraz also grows several heirlooms, including the yellow stuffer -- a variety that still confuses some of her customers. The tomato is yellow and shaped like a bell pepper. "People still pick it up thinking it is bell pepper," Agraz said with a chuckle. "But once they try it, they keep asking for it."

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