

# Farm Notes

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Potomac Vegetable Farms  
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## *It's TOMATO SEASON at last!*

### Heartbreak in the Tomato Tunnel

By Foster Gettys

I'm a plant person first and foremost, at my core. And so the heirloom tomatoes we grow in our high tunnels have lodged themselves deep into my heart and soul. Unlike a lot of the plants we grow on this farm, I get to give specific, intentional and individualized care and attention to each and every heirloom tomato plant we grow almost every week. I know that I've cared for and touched each and every one to help them grow well and tall, to feed them, and protect them from disease. You can't help but to get attached. I love everything about them - that they grow with such strength and vigor, that they are massive and ultimately, wildly untamable no matter how hard you try. And they die with equal vigor and enthusiasm, susceptible to a whole host of bacterial and fungal diseases. No matter how hard you work to keep them going, they'll eventually succumb. I admire their equal measures of vitality and vulnerability. And the fruit! I fall in love every day with their shapes, their colors, and it breaks my heart to have to give up an otherwise perfect, immaculate tomato to the compost because it sucked up a little too much water, split a little bit, is leaking and definitely won't last long enough to make it into anyone's hands -- within hours it'll rot, attract every fruit fly on the planet, or viciously grow over with mold. Maybe all three! But it's worth it for the perfect ones, the ones you almost can't stand to look at for its beauty, the ones you get to take home and eat after spending months preparing a plant to produce it. It's so worth it for that, and I'm happy and grateful that for the most part, we get infinitely more precious and beautiful heirlooms out of the tunnels than the defective or bad ones. And that's the balance I hope to strike in life. These heirlooms will never stop breaking my heart and I will never stop loving them.

I have somehow learned a lot about living in the tomato tunnels. And I've certainly learned how to wax poetic about them. But Louise Erdrich put it best. Just replace apples with tomatoes.

"Life will break you. Nobody can protect you from that, and living alone won't either, for solitude will also break you with its yearning. You have to love. You have to feel. It is the reason you



Foster in the tomato tunnel

are here on earth. You are here to risk your heart. You are here to be swallowed up. And when it happens that you are broken, or betrayed, or left, or hurt, or death brushes near, let yourself sit by an apple tree and listen to the apples falling all around you in heaps, wasting their sweetness. Tell yourself you tasted as many as you could." Louise Erdrich, *The Painted Drum*



## The Cult of the Tomato

By Stephen Bradford

Here at Potomac Vegetable Farms, we are tomato worshippers. We know that there is no path to spiritual bliss more direct than taking a big bite out of a juicy ripe tomato straight off of the vine. Our generations of devotion have been rewarded with great prosperity, the Cult of the Tomato has spread wherever there is a local food movement, and yet it is no longer possible to deny that the gods have become restless.

We have been diligent in upholding the tradition, our springs and summers remain structured around elaborate rituals to honor the tomato - seeding, transplanting, mulching, staking, weeding, all done with the utmost reverence to guarantee fertility. The height of our custom is best witnessed in the Trellising ritual, an intricate twirling dance to uplift the divine vine, that very few worshippers are qualified to practice. And then there is the harvest, our prayer and our meditation. How have the gods rewarded our devotion? Each tomato honored as a manifestation of the spiritual transcendence, each basket a work of art. And then at the end each week we cart them off to market and sacrifice them all at the altar of capitalism.

This is the unholy union that has kept our cult thriving. Frenzied consumers who have been starved of our tomatoey bliss all winter long, squeeze in like pigs at a trough to fill their



Heirlooms at Dupont Farmers Market, August 2, 2020



August 11, 2019, before COVID, displays were flamboyant

bags while paying top dollar. The seasonal tomato boon has remained vital to the financial solvency of small farms across the country, but in recent years the magic of this moment has begun to dwindle. Tomatoes grown in greenhouses available year-round have flooded the farmer's markets, desensitizing customers to the seasonal thrill of the tomato harvest. In response we have built our own high-tunnel temples to extend the holy harvest season, and we have begun worshipping the vengeful and demanding heirloom deities as market competition has become increasingly stiff. Every year the prices climb higher and higher but the sales have been stumbling.

Last week at market, for four long hours, timid customers picked sheepishly over an abundant, overflowing tomato table and I was sure that I had witnessed the demise of our way of life. How could we survive in this era where the frenzy and fervor we always relied upon was no longer possible? As I repacked every tomato on the table I felt as if I had dishonored them, bringing them here to be passed over in this profane market place. At the end of this long miserable market, I had one last order of business to buy a bulk order of oats from a farmer friend and to my surprise and delight rather than money they asked for payment in seconds tomatoes for canning. A revelation! We will never properly honor these holy tomatoes by exchanging them for US dollars – the path forward is for tomatoes to become the basis of monetary exchange! Driving home from market with a truckload of liberated, tomato-dollars, I could sense that gods were very happy.

## The Life of a Cherry Tomato Plant by Dick Clement

Planted as a seed, I sprouted in an incubator inside the greenhouse. I am then lovingly transplanted into a seed tray, then transplanted again and again by gentle hands, eventually into a larger container. My roots can now grow stronger in the carefully prepared soil mix. Incubator to large container, soon to be moved out of the greenhouse to be hardened to the environment. I'm now about 60 days old. Then it's late April – time to be planted in rows prepared with drip tape for irrigation. Tucked in with hay for mulch. Left to grow in the April sunshine and showers.

## Tomatoes with Quica

by Kimberlina Gomez

When I first mentioned moving to Virginia to work on a farm, my grandma was confused. She's always been very supportive of my endeavors and this time was no different. Although she supported my decision, she was not thrilled, her reply was along the lines of "I worked on a farm so you wouldn't have to". It is important to mention that my grandmother worked almost her whole life as a farm laborer, starting at the age of 17 picking dates to eventually work in a canning factory. My grandmother is by far the hardest working person I have ever met, while also being the sweetest and most gentle. My grandmother is my favorite person in the world.

Working with tomatoes on the farm gave me something in common with my grandmother, canning tomatoes was a job of hers for decades. Every time we used canned tomatoes, she



Kim and her Grandmother

always told me labels didn't matter, that the tomatoes all came from the same factory and the only difference was the names on their labels. This makes me laugh because she was so insistent. Tomatoes were also more than just something used in cooking, the factory gave my grandmother stability and benefits, something that led to opportunity. Although we are generations apart, and have a 75-year age gap, working with tomatoes gave

us something to share. I've always admired my grandmother's strength and work ethic, but I feel that now I can listen to hear stories with new ears. I only have one season of farm experience; my grandmother has decades. I may never fully understand what it was like for my grandmother to work nearly 50 years doing labor-intensive work, while also accomplishing so many other things in life, but I can share our mutual adoration for tomatoes. My grandmother is 91 and lives in California's Central Valley, every year she still plants tomatoes in her garden, and I hope the next time I see her we will pick them together and she can share some of her tomato stories.

## Farm History: Tomato Picking Bonanza

By Hana Newcomb

On August 28, 1989, we picked 750 half bushel baskets of tomatoes. It was a once in a lifetime event. 1989 was one of those remarkable years when vegetables grew like magic, and we had more than enough of everything, and there was food just lying on the ground, waiting to be collected up. We got behind schedule on our tomato picking – perfectly normal for the end of August. Our second child, Alissa, was born on August 17, which probably contributed some to our picking delinquency. I could see that the magnitude of our task was quickly getting out of hand, so I called all our most devoted associates, including local old workers and family members who had retired from tomato picking.

I am not sure we knew what we were setting out to do, in terms of numbers, but we had every truck and trailer and basket empty and ready. There were about twelve or fifteen of us, maybe more. Alissa, just a puddle in a basket, sat in the shade in the back of the Subaru station wagon, staring vaguely around. It wasn't too hot out, but it was a normal August day. I wasn't supposed to be lifting much weight yet, so I had the luxury of filling baskets and letting other people carry them out of the patch for me. I don't recall what other people picked, but I remember my total for the day was 50 ponies. Other people probably picked more because I got to take those nursing breaks.

It felt like such a momentous day. By the end, we had finished every one of our tomato patches and we had no more containers. The area behind the stand was completely jammed with wooden baskets filled with ripe, half-ripe, green, pink, and yellow tomatoes, and all the trucks and trailers were full. It took us three weeks to sort and sell all those tomatoes.

## Life of a Cherry Tomato, continued

But wait. A new development is taking place. Poles and a wire are installed, then along comes that special lady Hiu to attach a slip-knotted string around my stem then to the wire. I'm trimmed and trained by those gentle hands to grow upward around the string. Six weeks after sprouting in the incubator, yellow flowers appear. Soon tiny green tomatoes replace the yellow flowers. It's mid June. The first red cherry tomatoes appear. A long-awaited treat for farm workers. Chattering groups of them show up with small buckets tied to their waists to pick my fruit of delicious cherry tomatoes.



## Shakshuka Base

By Isabel Hulkower

This recipe is my ultimate ace. It is, of course, incredible as a fast and delicious dish for a weeknight dinner or impromptu brunch, but I tend to use it for home food preservation. Instead of canning enormous jars of tomato sauce, every summer I sit down with a huge bucket of seconds tomatoes and freeze about 20 containers of this shakshuka base. It's the most versatile and handy thing to have in your freezer. You can make it traditionally (poaching eggs in the tomato sauce) or throw in chickpeas instead to keep it vegan, serve with crusty bread or a gluten free grain, and add or subtract feta and labneh depending on who you're feeding. All winter I'll pop one of these babies in the microwave if a meal looks sad or boring, and whatever I'm eating turns into a tangy, spicy treat.

As a freezer meal, they're also a great gift. This spring I was at a loss for what to bring for a vegan PVF community member as she went into labor, and the frozen shakshuka pods were a wonderful thing they could throw in the freezer and use as needed. This recipe is a great way to squirrel away the summer bounty for enjoyment through the cold months!



Who couldn't love that face?

### Ingredients:

- 2 tablespoons olive oil
- 1 teaspoon harissa (which they sell at Trader Joe's!)
- 2 teaspoons tomato paste
- 1 small onion, diced
- 2 large red peppers, diced in 1/4-inch pieces
- 4 cloves garlic, finely chopped
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 5 cups very ripe tomatoes
- 1 pinch salt
- 8 farm eggs or 1 can of chickpeas

### Directions:

In a large frying pan over medium heat, warm the olive oil and then add the harissa, tomato paste, red peppers, garlic, cumin, onions, and 1/2 teaspoon salt. Sauté for about 10 minutes, until the peppers soften. Add the tomatoes, bring to a gentle simmer, and cook for another 10 minutes, or until the sauce has thickened. Turn off the heat and let cool. Dole into pint sized bags or containers, and freeze

### Traditional preparation upon reheating:

Defrost base in skillet over medium heat. make eight little dips in the sauce. Gently break the eggs and carefully pour each into its own dip. Do the same with the yolks. Use a fork to swirl the egg whites a little bit with the sauce, taking care not to break the yolks. Simmer gently for 8 to 10 minutes, until the egg whites are set but the yolks are still running. Remove from the heat, leave for a couple of minutes to settle, then spoon into individual plates. and serve with feta, labneh or yogurt.



Mid-August tomato pick (2019, but the faces and names are the same)