

FROM THE GOOD EARTH HEIRLOOM HARVEST

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALEXANDRA STAFFORD

No signboard marks the Valdivia Farms produce stall at any of the San Diego farmers' markets. Many marketgoers likely have never even heard the name. But if, during a weekly farmers' market jaunt, these regulars have stumbled across a table piled high with fava beans, spilling with pattypan squash, lined with crates of fragrant strawberries, and overflowing with bright orange blossoms, then they certainly know Valdivia Farms. And likely, a weekly visit to this produce stall is not optional.

For local chefs, too, this Carlsbad farm has become a source for specialty produce, inspiring menu items their patrons remember season after season: Homemade agnolotti filled with fresh fava bean purée and Ricotta-filled tempura-fried squash blossoms come to mind.

Never, however, does the farm stand draw such a following as it does in early July, when the first batch of Hillbillies, Green Zebras and Cherokee Purples join the party. Brilliantly dressed sporting stripes and colors spanning the gamut, these curvy globes quickly steal the spotlight from their springtime forerunners. For many customers, winter and spring dragged on without these beauties in their lives.

Indeed, heirloom tomatoes have developed a bit of a cult following. And rightly so. Anyone who has tasted one of these sweet, meaty "pre-round, red perfect tomatoes," as described by Lulu Medina, daughter of Francisco Valdivia who started the farm in 1981, understands the obsession. Heirloom tomatoes have been known to convert non-tomato eaters into the most ardent of fans and tomato lovers into the fussiest of consumers, eschewing any watery mass-marketed likeness grown between the months of December and July.

For the five-month-long heirloom tomato season we enjoy as San Diego residents, we can thank the strategic location of Valdivia Farms. What began as a squash and flower farm in Vista on five acres of land has expanded to 60 acres of rolling hills in Carlsbad, located two miles inland with crops ranging from blueberries and strawberries to crooked neck squash and haricot verts. Valdivia Farms' proximity to the ocean in sunny and warm Southern California allows for two plantings of the heirloom seeds a year. During a good year, heirloom tomatoes can be found at the farmers' market as late as November.

While "location, location, location" certainly holds



true, the hard work of Francisco Valdivia and his family cannot be overlooked. Over 30 years ago at age 18, Valdivia left his home in Guadalajara for Los Angeles, where he began helping a friend tend his farm. Recognizing his green thumb, says Lulu, her mother encouraged her father to start his own farm. Shortly thereafter, he complied.

With every successful harvest, Valdivia Farms and its offerings grew. About 10 years ago, responding to demand from both chefs and consumers, the Valdivias experimented with their first batch of heirloom tomatoes on approximately 15 acres. Today roughly 40 acres—two-thirds of their farm—are devoted to these prized tomatoes.

Growing heirloom tomatoes, as their above-average price suggests, is no easy task. The work begins indoors about six weeks before the seedlings are transplanted to the earth. Heirlooms, unlike the ubiquitous hybrids bred to resist pests and disease, are more susceptible to these threats and require constant attention. Javier Valdivia, Francisco's son, says the plants must be inspected daily for whiteflies, thrips and any other pest that may jeopardize the harvest. "If the plants aren't healthy," he said, "we don't have product. And without product, we can't run a farm."

After 90 days in the ground, if all goes well, a dozen or so varieties of heirloom tomatoes will be plucked from their vines, carefully packed and transported to market, a long-anticipated day for many San Diegans.

But if heirloom tomatoes taste as good as they do, why then have Americans (and not nearly enough of us) only just discovered them? Surely, heirloom vegetables are not a modern phenomenon. The decline of heirloom plants in our food supply can be traced to the early 20th century, with the invention of refrigerated boxcars and trucks and the subsequent advent of a market for off-season produce on the East Coast. Vegetable farmers answered this demand and dropped thousands of heirloom vegetables from their repertoires, electing instead to grow varieties that would tolerate long-distance travel. It is estimated today that modern American consumers have access to less than 1 percent of the vegetable varieties that were grown in this country a century ago.

Thanks to farmers like the Valdivias, heirloom vegetables are enjoying a resurgence. Young Americans are learning what tomatoes tasted like when their grandparents and great-grandparents were young, when seeds were passed down from one generation to the next. While many farmers still save their seeds and several large seed-saving networks exist throughout the country and world, heirloom seeds can also be ac-

quired from specialty companies. Today, the term *heirloom* describes plants that are open-pollinated—plants whose seeds can be saved and planted year after year producing offspring that share the same characteristics of the parent plants. (Hybrids, in contrast, are the product of a forced cross between dissimilar varieties of a plant and yield predictable offspring for only one planting. Because subsequent generations of hybrid seeds will produce plants with undesirable characteristics, they must be purchased year after year from the companies that develop them. Hybrid tomatoes dominate the commercial market.)

By buying Valdivia Farms' heirloom tomatoes, consumers are not only encouraging the continued production of some of the tastiest foods in the county, but also promoting biodiversity, an idea widely believed to be paramount in maintaining ecosystems capable of withstanding any number of shocks. Thanks to seed savers worldwide and farmers like the Valdivias, diversity of food crops is now on the rise in the United States.

To ensure this trend continues, the best move consumers can make is to keep consuming. To any skeptics out there, consider this: Think of the Valdivia Farms' produce stall as a gelateria. Go there at your earliest convenience and sample the various flavors, being sure to include Cherokee Purple, Chocolate-Cherokee and Hawaiian Pineapple in the mix. Savor every bite—each sweet, yet each with its own taste, texture, tang.

After this, I can say with confidence, your only challenge will be picking a favorite.

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