

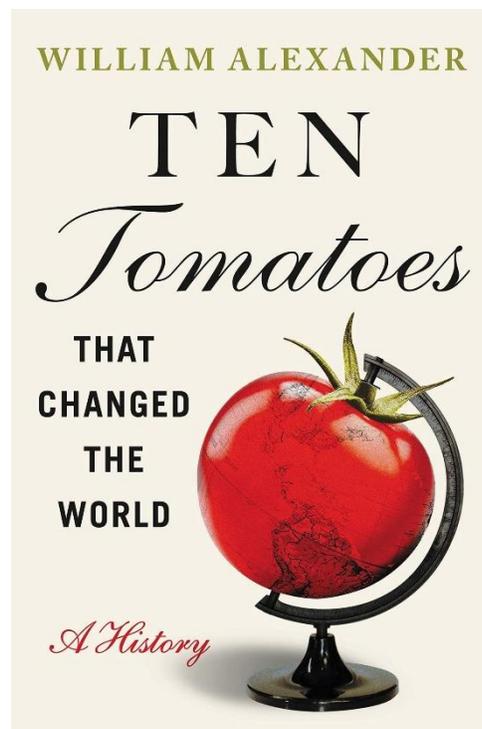
## 'Ten Tomatoes That Changed the World' Review: Slow to Ripen

The tomato found its way from Mexico to the Mediterranean, but mistrust of its flavor made it a culinary oddity at first.



"Still Life With Tomatoes" (1883) by Paul Gauguin  
Photo: Christie's Images/Bridgeman Images

By Angelina Torre - July 14, 2022



Its misshapen figure was unattractive and off-putting. Its serrated foliage was weedlike and carried a foul scent. In 1834, an editor of the Boston Courier referred to the tomato as “the mere fungus of an offensive plant,” a vine that produced “soured and putrescent potato-balls.” The tomato, today beloved by many, was yesterday abhorred by more. How did this “odious and repelling-smelling berry” make its way into America’s hearts and onto Italy’s spaghetti?

The writer William Alexander follows the winding path toward the answer in what resembles a transcontinental treasure hunt. Though Mr. Alexander has written previously on culinary topics and his own gardening misadventures in books like “The \$64 Tomato,” he remains an unlikely chronicler of the plant’s biography—he’s neither a historian, a farmer nor an agricultural academic, just a man who sometimes has a hankering for ketchup and wants to know why and how it got on his table. This spirit of curiosity proves an asset to “Ten Tomatoes That Changed the World”—the writer’s reactions and discoveries often seem to be simultaneous with those of the reader. Mr. Alexander holds forth with the goofy charm of a high-school math teacher—just swap out the trapezoid jokes for tomato puns—keeping his lessons droll, not dull. When addressing the tomato’s age-old fruit-versus-vegetable debate,

he leans toward the latter: “I eat it in a salad, not on ice cream.”

Though now a staple of Italian cuisine, the tomato was not incorporated into the everyday Italian diet until centuries after its arrival in the Mediterranean in the 16th century. The tomato was, before anything, a New World ingredient. In Aztec culture, tomatoes could be found in stews, fried with peppers or chopped fresh and tossed with chiles and herbs (a sauce, or *salsa* as the Spanish would later have it). When

tomatoes first landed in Italy, they were primarily eaten by elites who viewed them as an “exotic curiosity.” An exception would be the Italian monks who, according to diligent record keeping in monasteries, were eating tomatoes in weekly frittatas by the mid-1700s and using them as dressing on anything that “walks, swims, or flies.” It was not until the early 1800s that the crop became commonplace in Southern Italy, where the tomato went from a food for the privileged to the food of the people.

But while the monks were brunching on Friday frittatas, Americans were still skeptical of the vegetable’s edibility. That is, until 1820, when Col. Robert Gibbon Johnson, a farmer in Salem, N.J., reportedly ascended the courthouse steps in a heroic effort to prove the tomato’s harmlessness by publicly eating a whole bucket’s-worth. Though its foundations are true, the story of “Colonel Johnson’s Bucket” was written about and embellished through the years like a game of telephone. A 1908 local history stated that “Johnson brought the first tomatoes to Salem,” but by 1949 he was described eating “the lethal things . . . with dripping relish, while the gaping crowd waited to see him writhe.” The bold display was nonetheless a success; in the 1980s Salem even celebrated an annual Robert Gibbon Johnson Day—complete with tomato snacks, actors and merchandise—to honor “the very first person to eat a tomato in America.” In fact, historical records find Thomas Jefferson eating tomatoes before Col. Johnson, but who could argue with a graphic tee?

Back in Italy, families in the fertile region of Campania found perks in the tomato: It was easily grown in bulk, rich in nutrients and even provided some color to their bland-looking (and -tasting) meals. What tomatoes could not do, however, was remain ripe long enough to garnish meals year-long. Enter *conserva nera*, the mother of modern-day tomato paste. The making and canning of this thick, sun-dried sauce became the most effective way of preserving the seasonal harvest. (You can thank Italian housewives for paving the way for the ketchup and Campbell’s stored in your pantry.)

The San Marzano tomato, with its oblong shape, thin skin and small core, is the golden child of canned tomatoes. Mr. Alexander visits its namesake town near Naples, where the prized variety is still grown today. Masterfully interweaving his own travels through the Italian countryside with the history of tomato canning, Mr. Alexander highlights the early-20th-century life of Michele Ruggiero, the first San Marzano tomato farmer. In one of many amusing literary choices, Mr. Alexander writes about Ruggiero’s life as if it were an opera—devoting one paragraph to each “Act,” stage cues included (“Bring on the fat lady for a final aria”).

While Italy may be the world’s leader in canned tomatoes, China tops the charts in tomato production. Though the yield largely goes to exports, “scrambled eggs and tomatoes” remains a popular Chinese comfort food. The tomato is also a common ingredient in certain African dishes, such as the West African staple jollof rice. Lovers of Indian takeout will be interested in the origins of the tomato base in tikka masala—a recipe that Mr. Alexander notes is steeped in “colonial occupation, immigration, and invention.”

Considering the tomato’s twisting history, it is only natural that we find ourselves coming full circle in our attitudes: Today we *value* tomatoes for their ugliness. An imperfect tomato is healthy and natural, whereas a round tomato is likely modified and flavorless. Heirloom tomato gardening brought the plant back to its roots, in a rejection of smooth-skinned industrial hybrids for the quirky looks and bold taste of long-neglected varieties. In 1997, a seed-company executive made the case that the heirloom phenomenon was so fast-growing because “people are looking for something real, something that tells them about why we are on earth.” I don’t know if even the most delicious summer tomato can explain our place on the planet. But knowing more about its improbable history makes every bite that much sweeter.

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