

NEW ORLEANS NOSTALGIA

Remembering New Orleans History, Culture and Traditions

By Ned Hémard

You Like Tomato and I Love Creole

"You like tomato and I like to-mah-to," sang Fred and Ginger in "Shall We Dance?" Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald also tried to "call the whole thing off" in another memorable duet. The House Select Committee on Crime crooned "crime boss" and the late Carlos Marcello replied "tomato salesman." When Harry Connick, Jr., recorded his version of the Gershwin tune on his "When Harry Met Sally" album, he added "creole tomatah" to Ira's lyrics.



No matter how you pronounce it, botanically speaking, the tomato is a fruit. But legally speaking it is a vegetable. The Supreme Court in 1893 rejected botanical truth in *Nix vs. Hedden* in favor of the culinary vernacular of the common people. The issue was important because a ten percent duty was then levied on imported vegetables.

Probably originating in Peru, the tomato worked its way to Central

America. There the Aztecs called it *xitomatl* and wild Central American tribes called it *tomati*. Aztec writings mention concoctions made of peppers, salt and tomatoes, purportedly the original salsa recipe. Cortez conquered *Tenochtitlan* (Mexico City) in 1521 and the tomato found its way across the Atlantic soon after. First mentioned in European literature in 1544 as *pomi d'oro* (golden apple in Italian), the tomato became popular in Mediterranean countries. Spanish usage of the tomato provided the name *pome dei Moro* (Moor's apple), which likely evolved into France's similar sounding *pomme d'amour* (love apple).

For more than a century, it was treated as more of a curiosity than a love interest in the northern European countries. Some thought it was poisonous because of its resemblance to the herbaceous plant known as *Belladonna*, or Deadly Nightshade. European folklore had witches using extracts of these plants to evoke werewolves, a practice known as *lycanathropy*. Because of this, Carl Linnaeus named the tomato *Lycopersicon esculentum*, which means "edible wolf peach". This is also why one of nature's most powerful anti-oxidants is called *lycopene*, because of its presence in this vine-ripened gem.

The Creole tomato is the *crème de la crème* of the tomato crop. Just like a reigning Mardi Gras monarch, the Creole has an imposing corona on top. Sometimes these crowns split a bit and the skin is often mottled with green. But inside, with an excellent meat-to-water ratio, is the meatiest, juicy and flavorful treat awaiting the summer gourmet. Originally imported from the West Indies, it thrived in the rich alluvial soil and sub-tropical climate of South Louisiana, almost all in St. Bernard and Plaquemines parishes. French and Spanish influences, along with cuisine ideas from refugees from Saint Domingue, helped New Orleans become one of the earliest American cities to use the tomato. Thomas Jefferson grew ribbed Spanish tomatoes in Virginia as early as 1781, and his daughters left numerous recipes for gumbos, cayenne-spiced tomato soup, green tomato pickles, tomato preserves and tomato omelettes. Seems Jefferson knew a lot about Louisiana before the big purchase.

A few words must be mentioned about the term *Créole*. When it is used to describe either tomatoes or the cuisine itself, it is in connection with the people who (through the years) established this form of cooking: Creoles.

Créole is a term that still confuses people, mostly outside of New Orleans. It derives from the Spanish *criollo* (which comes from the Latin *creare*, meaning to create or beget), denoting a person native to a locality – born there, that is, as opposed to back in the mother country. Creoles were the offspring born in the colonies, in this case Louisiana, usually to French and Spanish parents (but not always). The mother of General Beauregard, known as "The Great Creole", was

of noble Italian ancestry. The d'Arensbourg family had Swedish and German roots. This definition of Creole would also apply to the descendants of these early native-born people. In many cases, these were - and are today - (what Leah Chase likes to say) Creoles of color. They may be of pure or mixed race and still be called Creoles, if descended from those born in the colony. There is Creole language (*patois*), Creole culture and (as we've seen) Creole cuisine.

From people to tomatoes, the history of all things *Créole* has always been colorful. For example, Creoles were known to paint their dwellings bright eye-catching colors (rather than the white associated with the Greek Revival architecture then popular throughout America). Laura Plantation in St. James Parish is a great illustration of this, today restored to its original multi-colored Creole appearance. Creoles also painted their tombs lively colors instead of the white preferred by the Americans. Restoring Creole tombs in St. Louis Cemetery No. 1 (removing layers of whitewash) has revealed their colorful past.

For more on tomatoes, here is a story which many historians doubt ever happened. In September of 1820, Colonel Robert Gibbon Johnson announced he would eat a bushel (or basket) of tomatoes in front of the Old County Courthouse in Salem, New Jersey. Thousands of spectators arrived on the scene expecting his demise from the poison. He survived the ordeal, proved the edibility of the tomato, and it's been popular ever since. An old farm journal was the source of this entertaining story.

Had they been Creoles, there would have been no doubts. Their unique robust flavor and texture is from the climate and the soil of the lower Mississippi River parishes in which they grow. The Creole tomato does not come from any particular tomato cultivar. There is no actual pedigree necessary for a tomato to be deemed a "Creole," but you'll know by the look and taste. The season after Hurricane Katrina, with crowns a bit askew, the Creoles reigned once again - and just as good as ever.

And even though Creole tomatoes are grown in those parishes situated below the Crescent City, they are also planted in and around New Orleans in backyards and side yard gardens (even in pots in patios). These delectable tomatoes range in size from medium to quite large. Remember, it's all about the climate and soil:

The amiable and knowledgeable George Lafargue, Jr., proprietor of George's Produce on the Westbank, knows all about what makes Creole tomatoes taste great:

"It's not about the tree you put in the ground - it's about the ground you put the tree in," explains George, who also had a glorious reign as King of the Krewe of Endymion in 2012.



*King George Lafargue, Jr., expert on the "King of Tomatoes"
Photo by Ned Hémond copyright 2012*

The first box of succulent Creole tomatoes of the season (ready for sale and direct from the farm) was customarily offered to the highest bidder among local chefs in the city's French Market. This annual auction became a feature of The French Market Corporation's Creole Tomato Festival held each June in the French Quarter. The event was eliminated after Katrina, but reinstated a couple of years ago to raise money for Children's Hospital. After a successful "French Quarter Festival", look ahead to June this year when, once again, the king of all tomatoes will return triumphantly.

Vive Le Roi!



Yours truly, Ned H., panelist (far left) at the Creole Tomato Festival

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