

HARVESTING EXCELLENCE



BY ALAIN DUCASSE

ASSOULINE

Ruby red tomatoes

The moon has set and dawn is trying to warm as Alan Marcelli begins to wander among tomato vines in Homestead, Florida. The January air, bearing a distinct chill, warns of an upcoming storm.

Despite his smile, Marcelli, president of the New York-based Lucky's Real Tomatoes, is fully aware that tomorrow the weather may cause him to lose good tomatoes. Calmly, he watches other men not so calmly pick green tomatoes in an effort to save as many as possible. Only the plain red ones interest Marcelli today. The nearly red ones, which Marcelli will pick tomorrow or the next day, are at the greatest risk of damage by the approaching cool front. But it is a risk he is willing to take—his twenty year reputation for providing only the best sun-ripened tomatoes is on the line.

"Everything that I ask a farmer to do goes against today's traditional farming," admits Marcelli. "I want them to keep the tomatoes even though there might be a storm."

Younger generations may not remember that tomatoes were not always available year round in the United States. Improved shipping has made ripe tomatoes more accessible to the public. Nonetheless, many tomatoes are still picked green and sent to mature in greenhouses, where much of the natural flavor is lost. Instead of relying on manmade ripening procedures, the Marcelli family insists on marketing only the freshest, crimson colored tomatoes that, as Marcelli describes, "explode" with natural flavor.

Among the rows of twisting tomato vines, Marcelli picks three specimens. Slicing the first, rather green, tomato in half, Marcelli points to a red spot on the top and inside. This one, he says, will be placed in a refrigerator and artificially matured for the market. He inspects the second tomato. Although red, the color is not sufficiently intense for Marcelli. The third one, round, tender and brilliantly red, but not too soft, is perfect. It will be picked as soon as it dries from the morning dew. Taken at its ripest and stored at 60 to 65°, the tomato will have a three- to six-day shelf life.

The Marcelli family works with tomato growers ranging from Homestead, Florida, up to the North Carolina mountains. "Farmers are an extension of the family," smiles Marcelli. Reciprocating the respect, growers know that Marcelli will pay top dollar for only the ripest tomatoes.

Marcelli admits that his buying methods will cost him not only expense but a lot of tomatoes, either through shipping or, simply, through time. Even when trucked to Marcelli's sister, Lucky Lee, the company's namesake, in their Brooklyn office, "we lose five to 30 percent of the vegetables," Lee says.

Unpredictable weather, however, poses the greatest threat. The weather in Homestead, sunny and dry nine months of the year, should not be a negative factor for farming. Yet, thousands of crops were destroyed by Hurricane Andrew in the early 1990s. Nonetheless, the land in Homestead remains expensive agricultural property.

"It is the southernmost spot for growing plants in the whole country," Marcelli says. There, he finds all the varieties he is looking for, from large beefsteak tomatoes to the smaller lantern-shaped yellow ones.

Holding a round, red specimen in his hand, Marcelli advises not to always look for external beauty. Sometimes the less esthetically pleasing tomatoes may very well be the most flavorful.



"Cut thick slices of tomatoes and then fry them with garlic butter."

ERIC RIPERT