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Tomato Fans Go the Extra Miles

By TRISH HALL

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The Marcelli family of New York, however, is devoted to providing the real thing, even in the middle of winter. Family members buy tomatoes in the South and drive them to New York, where their fruit is increasingly showing up in produce markets and on the menus of many of the best-known restaurants, including Le Cirque, Lutece, Le Bernardin and the Russian Tea Room.

The Marcellis' eight-year-old company, Sunrise Sun-Ripened Tomatoes Inc., has grown rapidly. It now delivers more than 100,000 tomatoes a week to its 200 or so customers, most of whom are in Manhattan.

Joyce Marcelli and her brother Alan, part of a family of seven siblings 12 to 35 years old, travel to wherever tomatoes are growing. They then take turns driving to get their cargo to New York - 27 hours if they are coming from Florida. They immediately go back for another shipment.

The team drops the tomatoes at their warehouse in Brooklyn, where their sister Lucky Lee and brother Marc and a few employees size, grade, box and load the tomatoes for distribution. A tomato picked Friday in Florida arrives in New York by Sunday and reaches customers on Monday.

One customer, Andre Soltner, chef and owner of Lutece, said he used to buy tomatoes only in the brief season in late summer when they could be obtained from upstate farms. Otherwise, he said, "I just didn't serve them." For the last year and a half, though, Mr. Soltner has been able to buy vine-ripened tomatoes to make dishes like tomato stuffed with sole, the dish that won him an award in France in 1968.

Prices for the Marcellis' field-ripened tomatoes vary depending on the market, the season, the size and the grade; right now, the tomatoes come from Florida and cost \$9 to \$17 for a box of 35 or so. As the weather warms up, the family buys tomatoes in the Carolinas and Georgia, and by summer the tomatoes come from New Jersey. At greengrocers their tomatoes carry little stickers that read "real tomatoes."

Shipping, storing and delivering the Sunrise tomatoes is a lot more difficult and financially risky than dealing with the kind that usually appear in stores in winter.

Ordinary supermarket tomatoes are bred to have especially thick skins so they travel well; they are picked while still green and refrigerated. Rather than ripening naturally, they are turned red with ethylene gas. Truck drivers can stay overnight in a motel and not worry about the fruit spoiling, and chefs can slice the tomatoes in the morning and not use them until evening.

The fragile Sunrise tomatoes are far more vulnerable to spoilage, and thus losses are greater. They would keep longer if they were refrigerated, but that would ruin their flavor and texture. Therefore, the company keeps its warehouse temperature between 55 and 60 degrees.

To deliver such a perishable product speedily, the Marcellis work long hours, with little time off. Though only four family members regularly work in the business, the others occasionally help, with daily advice coming from their father, Tony.

Marc, a junior at New York University, says he works part time in the business - just 40 or 50 hours a week. Lucky Lee, who was originally named Lee but later dubbed Lucky by her family and eventually dropped the Marcelli name, runs the New York end of the business.

Miss Lee, who said she enjoyed the social part of the job, was a singer for five years, doing a floor show in hotels and nightclubs with her sister Joyce. That, too, was a family effort; Alan did the sound and lights.

Every morning, she leaves her Manhattan apartment before dawn and arrives in the warehouse at 5 A.M. She takes orders, supervises workers, makes deliveries and meets with customers and finally lands back home at 10 P.M., where she writes notes for the next day, finally going to sleep about midnight.

"My father says sleep is for the dead," she said, "although I don't agree with him 100 percent."

The business started in 1980 when most of the Marcellis were in St. Petersburg, Fla., tending to an ill grandmother, and decided to pick some tomatoes at a nearby farm. When the haul proved excessive for their needs, Marc decided to bag the tomatoes and peddle them at the beach. That inspired the siblings to take a trip to New York to visit their mother, Linda, who is manager of the Rockefeller Center office of Merrill Lynch, and to pay for it by hawking 100 boxes of tomatoes door-to-door.

They liked the challenge - and the reception from chefs - and gradually built up the business, buying first a 10-foot, then a 12-foot truck. Their equipment now includes a tractor, three trailers, three trucks and a van. Still, the company tries to provide personal service.

Customers telephone their orders to the warehouse. Those who need an emergency order can call Miss Lee on her beeper, and she will show up at almost any time of day or night with the needed goods. "I love somebody to call me at 10 A.M. and say, 'Oh, my God, we need tomatoes by noon,'" Miss Lee said. "I love to be able to come through for them."

Indeed, her customers are her social life, she said, and every afternoon she looks forward to thinking about who she will see that night and what she will eat. She often eats at her customers' restaurants, which range from large restaurants like the Brasserie to small French bistros like Chez Ma Tante.

"I love food," she said. "If you feed me, I'm like a cat. I'll come back and back."

Even though her van and the warehouse are permeated with the smell of tomato, she still likes the taste. She admits, though, that Florida tomatoes, although juicy and tasty, are not as good as New Jersey

tomatoes.

"Jersey tomatoes are the best in the world," she said. "It has something to do with the soil and the weather conditions."

Miss Lee's customers are clearly happy to see her arrive in their kitchens, wheeling boxes of tomatoes on a handcart. At the Russian Tea Room, George Neal, the kitchen manager, said Sunrise tomatoes were so special that one of his customers, Sam Cohn, the theatrical agent, who orders sliced tomatoes every day for lunch, will accept no substitutes.

At Rosa Mexicano, the owner and chef, Josefina Howard, who gets six to eight boxes of Sunrise tomatoes every day, is an unabashed fan. "I give these tomatoes away as presents," she said.

At Le Bernardin one recent day, Miss Lee chatted with the executive chef, Eberhard Muller, who then walked her back to the elevator and blew her a kiss as the doors closed. "It pays to be pretty," the elevator attendant said. Miss Lee, although she unabashedly enjoys compliments, demurred. "It pays," she said, "to have good tomatoes."