

## **PART I HISTORY, CULTIVATION AND HARVESTING**

### **Brief History of the Tomato**

The tomato, native to the Americas, has made its mark on cuisines around the world. The conquistadors encountered tomatoes, called *xitomatl* by Aztecs, when they arrived in the New World. They carried their discovery back to Spain, where the name became *tomate*. From there, tomatoes made their way to the rest of Europe. Temperate regions along the Mediterranean were particularly conducive to growing the sun-loving fruit.

Around the Mediterranean, the tomato found its way into Spanish gazpachos, French salads, Italian sauces, North African tagines, and, eventually, Indian curries and other Asian dishes.

The Spanish and the Italians hailed the tomato as an aphrodisiac (perhaps because of its resemblance to the human heart) when it arrived from the New World during the 16<sup>th</sup> century. But even though tomatoes soon became part of Spanish and Italian cuisines, many other cultures thought tomatoes to be poisonous. Consequently, their acclimation into English and Colonial cuisine followed centuries later.

While botanically the tomato is a fruit on the vine, in the kitchen, it is almost always treated as a vegetable. In fact, in 1893, the United States Supreme Court ruled, for the purpose of levying a tariff, that the tomato was a vegetable because of its culinary usage. In today's professional kitchen tomatoes are used in many traditional and contemporary dishes paired with flavors of all regional and world cuisines. The tomato also contributes to overall menu profitability given its popularity, reasonable food cost, ease in preparation and outstanding yield.

### **Where Florida Tomatoes Grow**

Like the sunny Mediterranean region, Florida has the warm temperatures necessary for cultivating tomatoes for much of the year. The state's tomato industry is believed to have started in the 1870's. Today, Florida is the nation's largest producer of fresh tomatoes. Almost every county in the state grows tomatoes, and Florida produces virtually all the fresh-market, field-grown tomatoes in the U.S. from October through June. The harvest moves from north Florida in the fall to Homestead, south of Miami in the winter, then back north through the spring, with some regions having two seasons each year. Regions with the greatest production are districts 3 and 4 (see State Production Map) in the southwestern half of Florida.

### **Growing, Harvesting and Packing**

Tomato plants are started in greenhouses, and the seedlings are transplanted to fields about five weeks later. One pound of seed produces up to 140,000 tomato plants. As they grow, nearly all the tomato plants are supported by stakes. This greatly increases production costs, but improves yields and the overall quality of the fruit. In Florida, tomatoes are entirely harvested by hand roughly 100 to 120 days after the seeds are planted. At the mature green stage, when typically picked, they have reached their full size and contain virtually all of the vitamins and nutrients of fully ripened tomatoes. Following a warm chlorinated bath and rinse, the tomatoes are graded by size and color and shipped to market.

### Facts and Figures

- Approximately 39,000 acres were under cultivation for the fresh tomato market in 2006-07
- Florida ships more than 1.3 billion pounds of fresh tomatoes to the U.S., Canada and abroad
- About 33,000 workers are needed to hand pick the fruit
- Total crop value at the farm level exceeds \$403 million
- The cost of producing and harvesting tomatoes averages more than \$11,600 per acre
- Tomatoes comprise nearly one-third value of all fresh vegetables produced in Florida each year