



You say tomato, I say tomahto

The end of summer means it's tomato season!

BY KATHY MARCKS HARDESTY

“Did you know that black tomatoes have the highest amount of lycopene?” asked Ralph Johnson of Johnson Farm, a farmer for more than 25 years, who grows some of the finest lettuce and heirloom tomatoes I’ve had on the Central Coast. “Lycopene is a great source for antioxidants in darker brown and purple-colored tomatoes, and it’s stable whether the tomatoes are served fresh or cooked.”

Even if you don’t care about the health benefits of the fruit of the vine (not the veggie some people believe it is), a great tomato makes everything it tops taste that much sweeter.

Fortunately, I don’t have to wait for prime season for tomatoes when I do my weekly shopping at the SLO farmers’ markets. My favorite sources are SLO Grown Produce, owned by farmers Phil and Nancy Langston. They farm in their own fields outside as well as greenhouses; the latter allows them to sell their sweet, delicious tomatoes nearly year round. When tomatoes are in season at this time of year, I also buy Johnson’s myriad varieties of heirloom tomatoes. Both farms carry a variety of excellent heirloom produce that I recommend highly. And I love the fact that Johnson can explain the health benefits of everything he grows.

I recently attended a media luncheon titled “Ode to Tomatoes” with my peers from other local papers and *Sunset Magazine* at Sycamore Mineral Springs to see their blossoming vegetable and herb gardens in Avila Valley. This beautiful resort is one of the Boutique Hotel Collection, which includes Apple Farm in SLO, the Cliffs in Shell Beach, and Sea Venture in Pismo Beach; each one has an excellent restaurant featuring a very talented chef. Those chefs are working together on a culinary event that will open to the public Sept. 22 through Oct. 6, their inaugural tomato festival.

This project celebrates tomatoes at the peak of their season. The expansive gardens at Sycamore Mineral Springs provide each of those chefs with his or her own raised garden beds in which they’ve planted tomatoes, herbs, and vegetables used to create seasonal menus. Of course, it’s hardly enough to supply these busy restaurants completely, but the chefs fill their kitchen larders with fresh veggies from many local farmers, such as Johnson, who is now the Boutique Hotel Collection’s gardening consultant and advisor.

The creative chefs prepared a special menu at their restaurants that not only pays homage to the noble tomato, but also shows off their culinary skills and a bit of their personalities. They're also working with *Sunset Magazine's* Savor the Central Coast, which takes place within that time frame (Sept. 29 through Oct. 2). Chef Pandee Pearson at Gardens of Avila in Sycamore Mineral Springs and her fellow chefs from the Boutique Hotel Collection shared Pearson's kitchen to cook up some of the treats for local media, and editors from *Sunset* who are in town preparing for their monumental event. They provided a sampling of what guests will find on their menus during the tomato festival.

They made the luncheon even more appealing when Gardens of Avila sommelier Patricia Borgardt paired four courses with wines that *Sunset* named semi-finalists for its Western Wine Awards Gala that takes place on Pismo Beach Pier on Sept. 28. It started in the spectacular Avila Valley garden with chef Gregg Wangard of Marisol at the Cliffs serving fresh, sweet, juicy heirloom tomatoes over bruschetta. It was beautifully paired with Clayhouse Winery's 2010 Adobe Pink, a dry Rosé that earned the "steal of the year" rating in *Sunset*. What's nice about this delicious promotion of gourmet treats and award-winning wines is that it will all be available to the public on special menus at each of these four restaurants. Each chef will offer a unique menu, and no two menus are alike. That said, the amazing desserts and the wines will be available at each restaurant.

During a sit-down lunch in the Gardens of Avila dining room, the meal we sampled began with a refreshing heirloom tomato gazpacho by chef Stephan Walls from Apple Farm, with croutons, spinach, and avocado cream paired with Robert Sinskey 2010 Scintilla Abraxas Vin de Terroir. Among the dishes diners can look forward to, I was impressed by Wangard's appetizer: a pineapple-tomato Napoleon served on seared Texas toast topped with a fried (over-easy) egg, drizzled with white truffle oil, and a scatter of bright green arugula. It was expertly paired with Washington State's Chateau Ste. Michelle 2009 Riesling Eroica. Chef Casey Walcott of Sea Venture presented his warm tomato tartlet with buffalo mozzarella on basil puff pastry, and he earned applause when he explained he made the mozzarella cheese that morning. It was paired with the Oregon-based King Estate 2009 Pinot Gris. Pearson's roasted heirloom tomatoes with short rib ragout and Parisian gnocchi with parmesan cheese, and pistou was very well matched with Porter Creek 2009 Old Vine Carignane Mendocino.

Sunset will honor 22 West Coast wineries that made it to the semi-finals, eight of which were from the Central Coast, during its awards dinner. But you can taste them first by visiting Gardens of Avila, Marisol, and Sea Venture restaurants during their inaugural tomato festival. Those three restaurants have a special wine list featuring each one of these notable wines available by the bottle. At Apple Farm and Sea Venture, you can choose a flight of specially selected taste samples of some award-winning wines they're offering, which only costs \$12.

The biggest surprise, I dare say, came at the end with the tomato-based desserts by Apple Farm's outstanding pastry chef, Willie Vey. She prepared a chocolate tomato cake drizzled with a chocolate Burgundy syrup that would satisfy any chocolate lava cake aficionado. Far more amazing was Vey's upside-down, green tomato, caramel pecan pie with gorgonzola crème anglaise sauce; it impressed a rather large number of food-obsessed professional writers. Δ