

## Compte rendu

### ***The Heirloom Tomato: From Garden to Table*, Amy Goldman and Victor Schrager (photog.), Bloomsbury, 2008, 272 pages**

David Szanto

- 1 I ate my first heirloom tomatoes at Tabla in New York a little over a decade ago. It was all very fusion—they were topped with a crumble of curried chèvre and a chiffonade of Thai basil—but the tomatoes' intensity in both colour and flavour blazed through undaunted. Years later, heirlooms are ubiquitous, from restaurant menus to Whole Foods flyers to farmers' market stalls. They appear in food-community listserv threads, inspiring hot debate and heady delight, and now they are the subject of a lush coffee-table book by Amy Goldman.
- 2 Part step-by-step gardening narrative, part food-porn pictorial, part historical-factual catalogue, and part innovative recipe collection, *The Heirloom Tomato* is a strange book about a strange fruit. It is also deeply personal, from Goldman's very voicy text to photographer Victor Schrager's intimate and playful images.
- 3 A preface by Cary Fowler, the executive director of the Global Crop Diversity Trust, and a short foreword by Schrager set a serious initial tone, emphasizing the importance of diversity, the exhaustiveness of Goldman's knowledge, and her commitment to high quality. Quoting 20th-century geneticist Otto Frankel, Fowler reminds us that "we have acquired evolutionary responsibility" (viii), underscoring the importance of this book as reference and inspiration. The author's own introduction completes her credibility: teen years as a tomato farmer; family heritage in growing, importing, and retailing; social and scientific knowledge of contemporary production. But it is in the subsequent sections that Goldman's expertise and attention to detail begin to show themselves.
- 4 In "Growing," Goldman gives clear and minutely detailed instructions about temperature control and feeding, seedling propagation, and pollination management. For the enthusiast, it is surely a treasure trove of information. Her prose clearly outlines the physical space and conditions for every step of the process, including descriptions of equipment, chemical usage, scheduling, land use, and seed saving. A series of photos—instructional rather than inspirational—illustrate the section.
- 5 To the amateur grower with a small garden plot, however, or a city-hardened non-grower, Goldman's specificity may run to the obsessive. The prescriptiveness is impressive, but to those lacking the land, facilities, and matching mesoclimate, it becomes abstract and inaccessible. (Amid the pH standards and Latin plant names, she does throw in the occasional "schmutz" [5] and "umph" [6], which somewhat lightens the text.)
- 6 "About the Tomatoes" breaks down the descriptor criteria used in the bulk of the book, a listing of 200 individual heirloom tomatoes grouped by shape (cherry, beefsteak, oxheart, and so on). For the project, Goldman cultivated 1,000 plants—two each of 500 different varieties—ultimately winnowing the list down by 60 percent. Each entry describes the physical and taste attributes, growing and sourcing details, origins and synonyms, and provides an editorial passage in the author's highly distinctive style. The weighting of these texts pogs from a full-page historical essay on the Big Ben (including a bit of seed-packet poetry) (95) to her rather more synthetic,

three-word dismissal of the Yellow Jumbo: “[d]oesn’t thrill me” (89).

- 7 For the reader seeking encyclopedic entries to help make growing decisions, this section is by far the most useful. The dimensions, tasting notes, plant type, maturity date, and seed sellers, aided by Schrager’s artistic and illustrative portraits, provide plenty of details. Missing, however, is a reverse look-up tool that would have been useful to growers trying to identify an unknown variety on their hands. More images of sliced tomatoes, showing the fruits’ internal appearance, might also have helped distinguish breeds, as well as evoke more visual excitement.
- 8 Goldman clearly has absolute adoration for her subject. She delights in her own description, sometimes referencing previous descriptions and stories. She infects the reader with her enthusiasm, and reminds us why a great tomato is such a thing of joy: “I feast on one pink meaty slice, followed by another . . . I wipe away the juices seeping from the corners of my mouth—but I am tempted to slather the rest all over my face” (13).
- 9 Pleasure also infuses the 55 recipes that round out the book. Inventiveness, too; the book includes a small selection of desserts (“Galette of White Peaches and Tomatoes” [241], “Roasted Tomato Crunch Sicilian Style” [242]) and drinks (“Tomato Water” [245], “Thai Tomato Cocktail” [247]), along with many tempting soups, pastas, main dishes, and other preparations. Though it seems a shame to cook such a gorgeous beast as an heirloom tomato, it highlights Goldman’s earlier message that not all are delectable raw (21) and despite their historical value and visual panache, they should not be put so high on a pedestal as to be unusable for their primary purpose.
- 10 Given the recent explosion in the popularity of heirlooms, and the accompanying confusion and debate around definitions and standards, *The Heirloom Tomato* is an important and useful document. It is also quirky and uneven, sitting outside standard publishing categories and covering almost too much territory. Yet it is in these very qualities—reflective of the subject itself—that the book finds its nature: a colourful, occasionally misshapen, and always remarkable collection of diversity and agricultural heritage.

## Biographical notice

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