

the great tomato taste-off

We prowl the West's tomato festivals
to discover the most
flavorful varieties you can grow

By Jim McCausland

There are hundreds of great tomatoes to choose from, so how can a thoughtful gardener possibly narrow the field to a promising half dozen or so? For answers, *Sunset* staffers queried tomato growers and chefs around the West, attended tomato festivals, and hobnobbed with growers at farmers' markets.

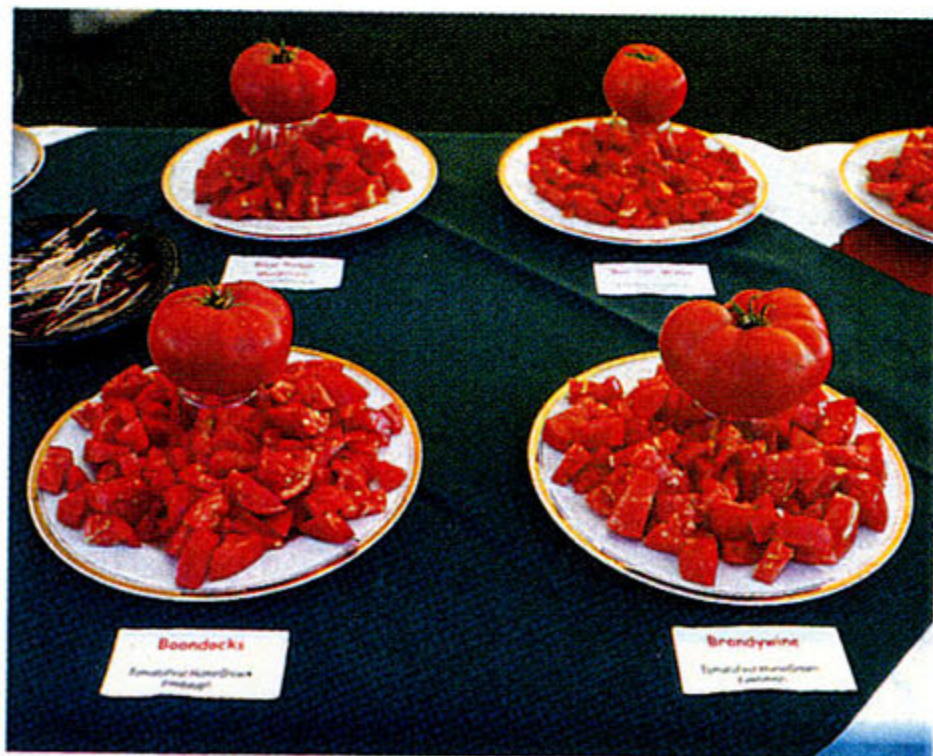
It didn't take long to discover that some tomatoes came up on winners' lists again and again, and that they fall into every possible category: big slicers; tomatoes for paste, sauce, and drying; cherry tomatoes; and even wild currant tomatoes.

A surprising number of favorite tomatoes are heirlooms—ones whose seed has been passed down

from gardener to gardener for generations. Many have great stories attached. 'Brandywine', for example, was bred by the Amish more than a century ago. 'Paul Robeson' is a variety named for the African American singer and actor, but it was

cultivated and named in Russia. 'Radiator Charlie's Mortgage Lifter' was bred by a West Virginia radiator repairman named M.C. Byles during the 1930s. He sold his seedlings for \$1 each and paid off his \$6,000 mortgage in six years.

But we don't grow tomatoes for stories. We grow them for that intense flavor you can only get from vine-ripened fruit—and for their amazing array of colors, shapes, and sizes.



ABOVE: Laid out for tasting, red tomatoes include 'Boondocks' and 'Brandywine'.
RIGHT: Cornucopia of tomatoes shows an array of colors, shapes, and sizes.

CLAIRE CURRAN LEFT, TED STEFANSKI