

tiful green dye, its ability to diminish skunk odors and remove a variety of stains, its cure for pigs' scours and its natural pest-repellent capabilities." And by the early 1850s, he says, tomatoes finally had become *sine qua non*—an intrinsic part of—American existence.

CULTURAL ICON

Now, more than 150 years later, the legacy of the "Great Tomato Mania" lives on through its place in our popular culture. After all, how many vegetables have been the subject of a cult movie like *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (1974)? But the tomato's true role in American culture is exemplified by the abundance of late summer and fall festivals that celebrate tomato harvests throughout the country.

DUELING TOMATOTOWNS

In three American cities—Carmel Valley, California; Pittston, Pennsylvania; and

Reynoldsburg, Ohio—the tomato is not only celebrated but it is at the center of a friendly rivalry over which city has the right to stake its claim as the tomato capital of America.

In his hometown of Carmel Valley (population: 10,000), Gary Ibsen is once again hosting the annual **Carmel TomatoFest** (September 12), which attracts thousands of tomato lovers and some top-names in the restaurant business. Now in its 13th year, the Carmel TomatoFest has been proclaimed the world's largest tomato tasting arena, featuring more than 300 tomato varieties from around the globe and an ever-changing buffet of tomato dishes created by some of California's best chefs. Visitors can also pick up hundreds of varieties of tomato seeds, including some rare heirlooms.

The TomatoFest, which started as a family get-together, continues to provide



A Little Miss Pittston and a Little Mr. Pittston are crowned at the Pittston festival each year.

a family-friendly atmosphere fueled by live music and dancing. "I want to keep it a community event that has a sense of a quality experience," said Ibsen, who estimates he turns away an average 1,000 visitors each year in order to maintain the festival's original small-town feel. "It's a great experience for the family to share."

In addition to being a fun celebration, the Carmel TomatoFest serves as a community fundraiser. Since 1999 the annual event has raised in excess of \$160,000 for local children's charities.

On the opposite side of America, in Pittston, Pennsylvania (population: 8,000), residents also gather to honor their town's claim to being the "Tomato Capital of the World," which it earned in the 1930s by meeting the high demand for tomatoes from New York City. "We're proud of what we do," said Lori Nocito, a chairperson for the Pittston Tomato Festival Association. "We're into making it bigger and better each year."

This year's 21st annual **Pittston Tomato Festival** (August 21 to 24) pays tribute to the region's tomato growers with a celebration that is expected to bring in more than 40,000 people. "The tomato festival gives people a reason to come and spend a few days in Pittston," says Mayor Mike Lombardo. Adds Nocito, "It's all about the festivities. It's all about the people."

Pittston's festival includes such crowd-pleasers as a five-kilometer race, live entertainment, square dancing, a grand-prize raffle, a children's sing-along, the annual Tomato Competition—in which prizes are awarded for the largest, smallest, ugliest, and most unusual tomato entries—and pageants such as the Tomato Queen



The Carmel TomatoFest in California is a one-day event packed with activities for the entire family. More than 300 tomato varieties are offered for tasting, above left, and California's top chefs use their culinary wizardry to create some spectacular tomato dishes, such as the tomato and bread tower, above right.

Right: The festival's host and founder, Gary Ibsen, left, with actor and Carmel's former mayor Clint Eastwood, a regular TomatoFest attendee.

