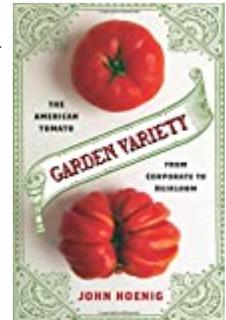


John Hoenig. *Garden Variety: The American Tomato from Corporate to Heirloom.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2017. 288 pp. \$35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-231-17908-9.



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Commissioned by Daniella McCahey (Texas Tech University)

A series of images float in my mind when I think of tomatoes in American culture and in my own life. The first comes from when I was a little girl growing up in California. Driving north on Interstate 5 from the Central Valley, one could expect to see dozens of tomato trucks—open-topped 18-wheelers headed to the Bay Area for processing and shipping—packed so high with tomatoes that they bounced and splatted all over the highway. Another image is one of contemporary organic gardening’s foremost soothsayers, Mike McGrath, declaring in almost every episode of “You Bet Your Garden” that a backyard gardener could (and really should) be arrested if they do not annually grow tomatoes in their raised beds. (My son would agree. Since before he could really talk, he would toddle out to our kitchen garden, point at the cherry tomatoes, and beg “matoes? Peez?”) A third, and the most surreal to be sure, is that in 2019 my local grocery store in Wisconsin got rid of its beer and wine section and transformed its large corner into a frozen pizza section. Frozen pizzas now take up nearly half of all the space dedicated

to frozen goods in the store. And what is a frozen pizza without the sauce? This leads me to believe that our connection with the tomato is as intimate as it is industrial. From the pulsingly fresh flavor bomb to the ultra-refined commodity, Hoenig investigates the odd confluence that is tomato culture in the United States with good success in *Garden Variety*.

First and foremost, the book is a balanced blend of food studies (focusing on recipes, foodways, and cultural use of the tomato) and agricultural history (economic, legal, and industrial change over time in tandem with the tomato). Structured roughly chronologically, Hoenig writes many times that the tomato does not fit the standard histories of food commodities in the United States, and that indeed the history of the tomato rewrites the history of food in America in key ways. He argues that the history of the tomato “suggests a more complex picture than a simple contrast between industrial and local allows” (p.

6), and it “challenges the conventional narrative of how American agriculture developed” (p. 10).

While it is generally true that “tomato breeding and improvement took place much later than other crops and often happened alongside industrialization” (p. 10), I am not sure that the author’s major points of comparison (wheat and corn) set up a fair fight. While this reviewer appreciates the chutzpah of a bold thesis, I remained unconvinced that the tomato was quite as revolutionary as the author claims. Indeed, the tomato benefited in no small way from the industrial revolution, and was transformed almost as early as many other foodstuffs. For example, Hoenig details that the tomato “achieved tremendous popularity” between the 1830s and 1900, “unrivaled by any other vegetable except corn” (p. 23). The tomato was touted as an important element in a healthy diet, and used as condiment, as sauce, and fresh in new recipes.

At the same time, agricultural journals touted new hybrid tomato varieties and encouraged the use of enhanced agricultural technologies when growing them. By the early 1830s, market season for tomatoes was engineered to be extended much longer than decades previous. It seems from this synopsis that rather than arriving late on the scene, the tomato was able to take advantage of the best of what industrialization meant for food in America: while other cash crops became more secure, the previously seasonal and limited tomato benefited by securing a place at the table. And while markets for tomatoes stayed decentralized longer than for other self-stable foods—an argument very well made in the book—tomato culture at large simultaneously enjoyed national exposure. So, on the topic of the modernization, standardization, specialization, and early industrialization of the tomato, there are overstatements, or distinctions without differences, here.

We are offered little in terms of a sense of scale throughout the book, leaving the reader with some difficulty in comparing crops and trends over time. A better comparison might have been

made, at least in the tomato’s early years, to fruits—their softness, seasonality, regionality. (It seems they align far better with horticultural fare than with cash crops until at least the mid-nineteenth century.) Some sections of the book also seem fairly rote: Italian immigration and its effect on tomatoes, as well as migrant labor in tomato fields are covered, but briefly and with no new insights.

The book is a success in other ways, however. I know of no other book that integrates so comprehensively the food object with backyard horticulture, industrial adaptation, and cultural weight. Chapter 4, “Consuming Tomatoes,” details the “new players” on the tomato scene: “corporate promoters ... immigrants and middle-class homemakers, mostly located in cities” (p. 81), all developing new ways to eat tomatoes. Tomatoes were enjoyed as pickles, ketchups, preserves, sauces, side dishes; in soups, gumbo, salads; and baked, stuffed, or fresh, and even as a dessert in sugar and cream.

Perhaps the best chapter in the book is the last: “Meet the Farmer or Become One: Challenging Commercial Food Culture.” Here, Hoenig presents a sophisticated treatment of farmers’ markets in the United States since the 1970s. The book excels in its long focus on home gardeners and farmers’ markets appreciation of the tomato. While the author does not imagine that farmers’ markets will supplant “big ag” anytime soon, he rightly sees them as a multifaceted community resource, a real food alternative, and a growing challenge to corporate processed foods.

The book would be useful in undergraduate food studies courses, either as a one-crop supplement to other readings, or as a backbone text which develops both the wider growth of industrial agriculture and changing foodways in America with a tangible fruit at its center.

In everyday use, and in industry treatment, the tomato has straddled the line between commodity and backyard favorite, vegetable and fruit, staple and seasonal treat. What we come away

with is the synthesis of corporate and ultra-local agriculture, with the love apple positioned right at its heart. Gardeners and historians shouldn't wish for it any other way.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment>

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