



When the first Spanish explorers arrived in Mexico it was being ruled by the Aztecs. The Aztecs had been in control of Mexico and Central America since 1325. And they enjoyed conquering their neighbors: it was a great way to spend the day—out in the fresh air, good exercise, lots of looted treasure. Conquering was their thing. But if the Aztecs couldn't conquer you they had a fallback offer. How about we do a little business? We'll trade stuff.

Between conquering and trading the Aztecs came in contact with many different cultures, which exposed them to lots of new foods. The Mayas probably introduced the Aztecs to the tomato, which they immediately accepted because it reminded them of something they were already eating—the husk tomato. They juiced them, added some chili peppers, ground up a little pumpkin seed, and had what we call salsa.



The Spanish were also pretty good at conquering and eventually conquered the Aztecs. The first time the Spanish ran into the tomato was when Cortés marched into Mexico in 1519. The Spanish called it a *tomate*.

YOU SAY TOMATO AND I SAY TOMAHTO

The Spanish sent tomatoes from Mexico to their settlements in the Caribbean and from there back to Southern Europe. The tomato did well in the Mediterranean climate. Today there are more than five thousand varieties. One reason is that the tomato is self-pollinating: it can reproduce on its own. And every once in a while it accidentally changes its genetic code. If the new code is good for the tomato, it keeps it.

The earliest published description of a tomato in Europe appeared in Italy in 1544. It came to be called a *pomo d'oro*, which means “golden apple.” Tomatoes were associated with the yellow fruit of the mandrake plant, which was described in the Bible as an aphrodisiac. In many European countries

the tomato became known as a “love apple.”

The English who encountered the tomato in Jamaica corrupted the Spanish word *tomate* into to-mah-to. Noah Webster, however, the compiler of Webster's Dictionary decided that “tomato” should rhyme with “potato” and so Americans eat to-may-toes while the British eat to-mah-toes.

THE TOMATO CONQUERS EUROPE

Tomatoes did well throughout southern Europe—Spain, Southern France and Italy slowly incorporated them into their diets. The tomato was around, but no big deal. That changed during the 17th century when famine swept through Italy. Suddenly the tomato was hot stuff.

“When famines occurred, they needed foods quickly and the tomato has the interesting characteristic that you put it in the ground, and three months later you have a plant bearing fruit. And so the southern Italians very quickly found out that one, they liked the tomato, and in addition to that, it was a famine food that could be used in so many different ways.”

—Andrew F. Smith

But tomatoes weren't used in northern Europe. The English had a particular dislike for them. They were different from the other fruits and vegetables that grew in Great Britain. And they didn't match up with the diet recommended by most physicians.

For centuries doctors practiced Humoral Medicine. All foods were divided into two groups—hot and cold. And doctors used these foods to balance the humors of the body. If you were having a hot time, doctors prescribed cool foods to bring you into line. If you were too cool, then hot foods were given to warm you up. In general, the more water a food held, the cooler it was. Tomatoes were very cool.

“For the humoral system of medicine, what you do not want to do is eat a cold food in a cold country. And they identified England and northern Europe as cold countries, and so you wouldn't want to eat them. But it was perfectly all right for an Englishman to go to Italy or to Spain and eat a tomato, because then they were in a hot country, and therefore the

balance between the hot country and the cold product was one that was good.”

—Andrew F. Smith

When the English took their holidays along the Mediterranean coast where tomatoes were part of everyday menus they brought a taste for the tomato back to England. By the middle of the 1700's the tomato, as an edible plant, was being cultivated in England. Within a few decades most other Northern European countries had added the tomato to their ingredient list.



THE TOMATO PILL

Back in America, the acceptance of the tomato was divided along the Mason-Dixon line. In the South, tomatoes were part of the daily diet. In New England, however, they were not very important. They didn't grow well, the varieties took longer to mature, and they were unlike any other foods that New Englanders were eating.

But that all changed in 1834 when Dr. John Cook Bennett declared that the tomato would cure just about everything from dyspepsia to cholera. His claims were published in newspapers and magazines throughout the country. Bennett took a bunch of theories that had been circulating in the medical community and created a popular craze.

At one point Dr. Bennett met Dr. Alexander Miles, who was busy selling a patent medicine called the "American Hygiene Pill." Bennett suggested to Miles that he change the name of his pill to "Extract of Tomato."

Miles began advertising his extract of tomato and newspapers in virtually every part of the country came through with



headline articles on miraculous tomato cures:

"We knew an instance of a very severe case of dyspepsia, of ten years standing, cured by the use of the tomato. The patient had been unable to get any relief; he could eat no fresh meat, nor boiled vegetables. Reading an account of the virtues of the tomato, he raised some, and used them as food in the fall, stewed, and made some in a jelly for winter use. He was cured."

—*The Boston Cultivator*, 1843

A publicity wave surged through every region of the nation and all Americans—lower, middle, and upper classes—were infected with tomato mania. Even those who did not believe in tomato miracles believed the tomato to be a wholesome

and delicious food.

Around 1840, the medical profession decided to investigate the tomato pills and find out what was really in them. All of their research suggested that there was nothing related to the tomato in any of the pills or liquid medicines. Ironic headlines, such as "Tomato Pills Will Cure All Your Ills," began to appear in the press. But in the end the pill was unimportant: what was important was that Americans started eating more tomatoes.

THE QUEEN OF AMERICA'S VEGETABLES

Tomatoes became even more important in North American cuisine when thousands of southern Italians immigrated to the United States. They planted tomatoes in their gardens, ate them raw, cooked with them and introduced



them to their non-Italian neighbors. Many Italian immigrants worked in grocery stores and restaurants and continued to spread the tomato. But it had to be in a form that was acceptable to mainstream America—Italian-American cuisine was born.

By 1905 the first pizza parlors were opening up in New York City and the tomato hit the top of the charts—and the grocer's shelves.

The tomato had become the "Queen of America's Vegetables"—which was bizarre because the tomato is a fruit, not a vegetable. The definition is very straightforward. Parts of edible plants that do not carry a seed used for reproduction are vegetables—carrots, celery, lettuce, beets—no seeds. The portions of a plant that carry a seed used for reproduction are fruits—apples, pears, grapes, and watermelons all come with seeds. The tomato has a seed for reproduction, therefore, hence, ergo, and accordingly, the tomato is a fruit.

HOW A FRUIT BECAME A VEGETABLE

Before the War Between the States, most commercially grown tomatoes were raised in the South and transported to northern cities. During the war that supply was cut off, so farmers in the Bahamas and other parts of the Caribbean started planting tomatoes and exporting them to the States. After the war, the Caribbean tomato trade expanded and began to threaten the profits of many U.S. growers. To protect American growers against this competition, Congress passed the Tariff Act of 1883. It levied a ten percent duty on imported vegetables.



In the spring of 1886, John Nix imported a shipment of

tomatoes from the Caribbean to New York, maintaining that they were a fruit rather than a vegetable. Nix paid the duty under protest and then brought suit to get his money back.

After six years of winding through the courts, the case of *Nix v. Hedden* was argued before the Supreme Court. The court in its supreme wisdom decided that even though the tomato was botanically a fruit, it moved through commerce disguised as a vegetable and being a tender vegetable it had to be protected. A ten percent duty was its protection. Based on this logic, the Supreme Court turned a fruit into a vegetable.

TIME TO PLAY KETCHUP

The word *ketchup* comes with an image of a thick, sweet, tomato-based condiment, which is poured, spooned, and squirted onto most of our foods. While it's standard operating practice for restaurants in the United States to have bottles of tomato ketchup, Americans neither created ketchup, nor, in its origin, was it thick, sweet or tomato-based.

The word ketchup is originally from the Chinese. And *kê-tsiap* is the original word. It originally meant a fermented fish sauce, or fermented soy sauce. What ketchup referred to was simply a "sauce" on the continent. But it meant a single product that was spiced, and initially fermented into a very thin, liquid-y sauce that was used mainly in cooking. It was not used as a condiment.

"It migrated from China into Southeast Asia, and into Indonesia. And the Indonesians fell in love with this product, which by then was called *ca-chop*. And it's still available in all sorts of different variations in Indonesia today."

—Andrew F. Smith

British explorers, traders and colonists moving through Asia came into contact with *ca-chop*. And when they got home they attempted to recreate the recipe, which became ketchup. Soybeans did not grow easily in Europe, so British cooks substituted other products, like anchovies, mushrooms, kidney beans, and, later in the 18th century, walnuts. British colonists brought their ketchup recipes to America.

"It's really not until about 1800 that Americans start fooling around with other products, just like the British did, and created a whole series of other ketchups... fruit ketchup, cherry ketchup, peach ketchup, and so forth. Somebody found that



tomatoes made good ketchup, too. Up until about the Civil War, the three main ketchups, which were all gourmet foods, were walnut ketchup, mushroom ketchup and tomato ketchup. If you went into the best restaurants of America at that

time, at the bottom of their menus, they proudly announced that they had all three of these ketchups available."

—Andrew F. Smith

After the War Between the States, the price of tomatoes dropped dramatically. A quart of tomato ketchup, which sold for \$2.50 in 1870, was selling for ten cents by the turn of the century. The price of mushrooms and walnuts remained high, and by 1896, the *New York Tribune* had declared tomato ketchup America's national condiment.



SOUP'S ON

Ketchup was only one of the foods that were being mass-produced in the United States during the late 19th century. The War Between the States required an enormous supply of food that would stay fresh and could travel. The American canning industry came of age and one of its most successful products was canned soup.

Tomato soup would have been just one soup among many had it not been for the condensing process pioneered by John T. Dorrance. In 1897, Dorrance began producing condensed soups. There were five flavors in the first year: tomato, vegetable, chicken, consommé, and oxtail. By 1904, there were 21 different flavors and Americans were buying 16 million cans a year. The canned soup business began to grow and tomato soup was by far the most important.

When the Depression hit in the early 1930s, canned soup had a major advantage. At twelve cents per can, soup could provide a healthy and inexpensive meal. Even if you bought fresh tomatoes and made your own soup you couldn't do it as inexpensively. During the 1930's tomato soup became the largest single canned food item consumed in America.

SOME JUICY TOMATO

During the summer of 1917, Louis Perrin was the French-American chef at a resort in French Lick Springs, Indiana. One day he started serving his guests tomato juice.

It was just an experiment, but the Chicago businessmen who spent their vacations in French Lick Springs loved it and spread the word: Tomato juice was great stuff.

By the 1920s, tomato juice was being promoted as a health drink. Canned tomato drinks were getting more popular, but



none of the products yielded juice with just the right color and flavor and the tomato solids settled at the bottom of the can, or glass—not what the public wanted.

In 1924, Ralph Kemp of Frankfort, Indiana began looking for a way to break tomato pulp into minute particles that would float in the juice. His solution was to use a viscolizer—previously employed in the manufacture of ice cream. It required a great deal of adaptation to can tomato juice successfully. It took four years of experiments before Kemp finally succeeded. In 1928 he initiated the first national advertising campaign for tomato juice. It was an instant nationwide hit.



One reason tomato juice was so successful was that it arrived as Prohibition left. A cocktail made of tomato juice and vodka was probably introduced by Ferdinand "Pete" Petiot at Harry's Bar in Paris. During the 1930's, Petiot moved to New York and introduced his creation to America. Eventually, he added Worcestershire sauce and called it a Bloody Mary.

Ernest Hemingway claims that he personally introduced the Bloody Mary to the bars of Hong Kong. He and his pals spent their evenings going from bar to bar teaching the bartenders how to properly prepare and serve the Bloody Mary. Someone once told me that Hemingway was a founding member of a group called the "Inebriationists," a non-profit society devoted to the cross-cultural exchange of recipes based on distilled spirits.

GOOD GOD, HOLMES, THAT TOMATO WAS MEANT FOR YOU

During the late 1940s, tomato throwing became an organized event in Buñol, a town 25 miles west of Valencia, Spain. The Tomatina festival, held on the last Wednesday in August, has been officially sponsored by the city since 1979. During the festival, more than 30,000 people pelt each other and the city with tomatoes.

Throwing tomatoes is an American tradition that dates back to the middle of the 1800s. It started in rural areas at the end of the season when tomato prices had dropped so low that the tomatoes weren't worth picking. People just tossed them at each other for sport.

Eventually it moved into urban theaters where it became one of the responses available to the audience—the critical counterbalance to throwing flowers. In recent years, target acquisition has been expanded to include politicians and other public figures.

TO LEARN MORE

PURE KETCHUP: A HISTORY OF AMERICA'S NATIONAL CONDIMENT

By Andrew F. Smith

Published by Smithsonian Institution Press

The Tomato in America: Early History, Culture, and Cookery

By Andrew F. Smith

Published by University of Illinois Press

Souper Tomatoes: The Story of America's Favorite Food

By Andrew F. Smith

Published by Rutgers University Press

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