

A Beginner's Guide to Heirloom Tomatoes

Common Heirloom Varieties

When you're browsing the farmers' market, the sheer number of heirlooms can be a bit intimidating. Here are some of the most common (and delicious) ones you're likely to find.

Brandywine

These are large heavy tomatoes with a nice balance between sweetness and acidity.



Black Brandywine

These beefsteak-style tomatoes, blackish to purplish in color, are among the most popular heirlooms. They're extra large and juicy, with an earthy, sweet flavor that makes them ideal for just about anything from sandwiches to salads.



White Tomesol

These are alabaster tomatoes; super sweet and juicy.



Cherokee Purple

Sometimes included in the “black” category—a tomato with a deep purple or black skin—this variety is known for its complex flavor: sweet and a bit smoky.



Green Zebra

These bright green tomatoes are sometimes striped with yellow and have a signature super-popular zippy tang of acidity.



Mortgage Lifter

Known for its mild sweet flavor and meaty texture, this pink-fleshed beefsteak can tip the scale at two pounds. NYC chef Bill Telepan explained the name this way: “The story goes that these tomatoes were such a great variety that the guy who started selling them paid off his mortgage,” he said. “They are really good.”



Amish Paste

This is a good cooking tomato. Telepan says it would give a San Marzano a run for its money.

**Striped Cavern**

Shaped more like a pepper than a tomato, these heirlooms are beautiful with bright cherry red skins and sunny yellow stripes. Like peppers, they actually have large open cavities and are terrific stuffed and baked.



Tips on Choosing, Storing, and Eating

Choosing

Keep in mind that heirlooms are more fragile than ordinary tomatoes; their skin is very thin, so handle with care. No squeezing! Give them a once-over and make sure the skin is not broken—cracks are okay, but avoid those seeping juice. Telepan says he feels them by weight. “If a tomato feels heavy that means it’s going to be juicy.” Also, better to get a tomato that’s a bit underripe than one that’s overly ripe and might spoil before you can use it.

Storing

To keep your tomatoes in peak condition, Telepan has one strict rule: never put them in the fridge. “It’s a golden rule. They get kind of spongy and Styrofoam-y when they get cold.”

Eating

Heirloom tomatoes are delicious and best eaten raw; most are not suitable to cooking. Slice them thick for a BLT, or a simple Julia Child special—tomato and mayo between bread. Their color palate makes them ideal for a striking summer salad, with olive oil, sea salt, and torn basil. Telepan says he takes heirloom cherry tomatoes and marinates them in red wine vinegar and garlic and tosses the mixture over a penne with pesto. He says they are also great tossed in spaghetti, with sautéed garlic, basil and pecorino.