Tomatoes

**About** – Tomatoes are perhaps one of the most important commodities in the produce department for a variety of reasons. As a category, tomatoes consistently rank among the top ten fresh produce purchases. Perhaps of greatest significance according to the University of California at Davis, the tomato is the single most important fruit or vegetable in terms of an overall source of vitamins and minerals. That brings us to the age-old controversy - is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable. Botanically speaking, tomatoes are a fruit or to be precise, they are a berry. However, from a culinary (and cultural) perspective, tomatoes are a vegetable since they are typically served as a main course rather than as a dessert.

The origin of the tomato appears to be Central America although a body of evidence does suggest that Peru could also be considered. Regardless, it was the Spanish Conquistadors that brought the tomato to other parts of the world and gave it global significance. In North America, it wasn't until the 1700s that the tomato began its rise to popularity. Today, the United States leads the world in production with Florida, California and Georgia our top producing states.

**Varieties** – There are over 4000 varieties of tomatoes from very small cherry tomatoes no bigger than a marble to gigantic heirloom tomatoes. In today's supermarket customers are confronted with this ever-increasing and often-confusing variety from which to choose. Tear drop shaped, round, oval, yellow, orange, red, purple - the tomato choices and flavor profiles that accompany them continue to multiply. Here are some, but by no means all, of the more popular offerings:

- **Romas**: Sometimes known as plum tomatoes, Romas are an oval shaped variety that is highly regarded for its flavor and their high solids content. Romas are excellent for sauces and cooking.
- **Gassed-green**: These are the familiar, round tomatoes that are picked green and ripened in storage rooms using natural ethylene gas. Because they are picked green, they lack the flavor intensity of vine ripened varieties.
- **Vine Ripe**: These tomatoes varieties have been allowed to ripen (or at least start to ripen) on the vine. The flavor will be more intense than a gassed-green tomato.
- **Grape**: These tomatoes are a hybrid variety developed in Southeast Asia. They have a thick skin and very intense flavor. They were so named because they grow in clusters on the plant. Proprietary grape tomato varieties like Santa Sweets™ are so sweet they could almost be called a "snack" tomato.
- **Cherry**: Cherry tomatoes are small round tomatoes that are usually less than an inch in diameter. Slightly sweet, they are great for salads.
- **On the Vine**: These tomatoes are, as the name implies, sold still attached to the vine. Because they are left to ripen on the vine they are extremely flavorful. Offerings include red, yellow, and orange beefsteak as well as grape, cherry and Romas. The yellow and orange varieties have less acidity.
- **Heirloom**: Heirloom varieties are produced from "old-fashioned" seed stock. Often times, they closely resemble the misshapen and scared tomatoes grown in a garden. Heirloom varieties can vary in size from small cherry tomatoes to large beefsteak varieties weighing over a pound. They also can vary in color from red to yellow to brown and everything in between. One thing they all have in common, though, is their distinctive "tomato" flavor that is reminiscent of a "homegrown" eating experience.

**Selection** – Look for tomatoes that are firm and blemish free (unless it is a Heirloom variety). Like other fruit, it should be heavy for its size.

**Storage** – NEVER refrigerate a tomato. Tomatoes have a flavor enzyme that will permanently stop producing flavor if the body of the tomato falls below 55 degrees. Store tomatoes on the kitchen counter and if they are a bit on the green side, they can be easily ripened in a paper bag. Try to purchase tomatoes using consumption as a guide to determine the right size and quantity. In other words, use the whole tomato once you have sliced into it. This way, you can avoid having to refrigerate the unused portion and you will always be able to enjoy the greatest taste. Tomatoes should be stored with the stem end up to avoid bruising the delicate "shoulders" of the fruit.

**Preparation and Uses** – Always wash tomatoes under a stream of cold water prior to use. Using a sharp knife is essential when slicing or dicing tomatoes. The uses for tomatoes are almost too numerous to imagine. Whether eaten raw in salads, sandwiches, and fresh salsas or cooked in one of literally thousands of recipes, the tomato is one of the most widely-consumed culinary ingredients in America.

**Nutrition** – As mentioned before, the tomato is of paramount importance when it comes to nutrition. Tomatoes are a tremendous source of vitamins A and C. In addition, they contain significant amounts of thiamine, niacin, potassium, beta-carotene, magnesium, riboflavin, iron, and phosphorus. The biggest news in tomato nutrition is that they contain lycopene, a powerful antioxidant, which has been shown to reduce the risk of certain forms of cancer. You get all of these nutritional benefits with just 26 calories and 7 carbohydrates per serving.