

WHAT YOU'LL EAT

HEIRLOOM-TOMATO SALAD

from
SEAN REMBOLD OF DINER
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK

There's not a lot of pomp at Diner, and that's how chef Sean Rembold likes it. Dishes are straightforward (your salad won't come to you in the form of sorbet), because the ingredients pretty much stand on their own. Rembold sources from the best providers in and around New York, and for his tomatoes, he stays as local as possible—the Queens County Farm. "Growing your own tomatoes," he says, "is the only way to get them at peak ripeness. That's the best part—letting them obtain as much natural sweetness as they can."

Serves 4

3 large, ripe* heirloom tomatoes
Grey sea salt
Fresh ground black pepper
8 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
3 tablespoons sherry vinegar
 $\frac{1}{4}$ pound aged firm goat cheese
8 to 10 sprigs fresh dill

> Rinse the tomatoes under cold water and let dry, then core using a paring knife and slice. Gently arrange the slices on a plate and dress liberally with the sea salt, pepper, and olive oil, then douse with the sherry vinegar. (Tomatoes are mostly water; use a lot of salt and oil.) Grate the cheese over the slices and sprinkle with dill.

* You'll know your tomato is perfectly ripe when you squeeze it gently and it yields. If it really yields, eat it that night, or right there in the garden.

YES, YOU CAN GROW FROM SCRATCH

THOSE PALE, FLIMSY seedlings stacked just outside your local grocery store? They're the vegetable equivalent of a TV dinner: convenient but flavorless. But if you start your plants from seed instead, you can pick the most delicious varieties to grow. Each winter places like Seed Savers Exchange (www.seedsavers.org) and Johnny's Selected Seeds (www.johnnyseeds.com) send out catalogs that read like some old Victorian encyclopedia called *All Species of Plant Known to Man*. It's simply a matter of deciding what you'd like to eat in three months and ordering your seed packets accordingly (even now, late spring, is not too late). Johnny's sells a starter kit (\$28) that includes plastic germination trays and a bag of nutrient-rich soil. All you need is a sunny window and water.



WHAT YOU CAN LEARN FROM MEN WHO DO THIS FOR A LIVING

Colin McCrata

(above), founder of Seattle Urban Farm Company, which installs and maintains gardens in urban backyards:

"One of the biggest mistakes first-time gardeners make is to think that everything goes in the ground in the spring. They don't leave space to keep planting throughout the season. Things like salad greens are short-season crops, so you can get in multiple harvests."

Toby McPartland

(right), farm manager of Santa Barbara's Fairview Gardens Farm, a thriving twenty-two-and-a-half-acre spread sited smack in the middle of sprawling California subdivisions:

"You really can't spend too much time improving your soil. I like to say that what you actually grow is your soil and that if you do that right, the soil grows your plants."

Dominic Palumbo

founder of Massachusetts's Moon in the Pond Organic Farm, who after fifteen years of landscaping New York City rooftops and terraces started one of New England's premier teaching farms:

"One of the most common mistakes backyard gardeners make is thinking that

they need to water lightly and often. They should do the opposite: water thoroughly about once a week. With containers, the only way to tell for sure that your plant has enough water is to stick your finger into the soil—if you don't feel moisture, water. But don't water so much that you turn the container into a mucky swamp."



A GARDEN AT GROUND ZERO



"TOMATOES DON'T GROW

here," said Mark, a personal-injury lawyer with whom I share a terrace garden in Lower Manhattan. Mark doesn't lose arguments. When the neighboring twin towers collapsed, he defied evacuation orders, staying behind to shovel debris until our terrace was clear. That experience left him pessimistic about what could grow in our harsh urban environs. Cucumbers? He'd tried. Eggplant? Forget about it. But summer after summer of planting inedible begonias had gotten old. Last year I vowed that a tomato would grow at Ground Zero.

True, obstacles existed. For starters there was the 743-foot black monolith at One Liberty Plaza, which robs us of all but four hours' sunlight—two shy of the tomato-growing minimum. All summer long, a salty wind rips up from New York Harbor. ("It's a harsh marine environment," Mark says.) Clearly, I needed a tough mother of a tomato. I chose a variety called Cosmonaut Volkov. Bred by the Soviets, it accommodates short summers and other deficits. Hedging my bets, I also bought a bruiser named Mexico Midget and a variety known simply as Ace. But no matter how tough the tomato, I would need more light. In Chinatown I found ten yards of reflective party Mylar, which I fashioned into an ad hoc solar array.

I started my seeds in March, inside a closet under grow lights. Mark asked if I was cultivating pot. I ignored him, and my seedlings sprouted strong. But once they went outside, I worried that Mark may have been right. The Mylar panels boosted the light but also cranked the heat. By June the Russian Cosmonauts were wilting, and the Mexico Midgets had contracted a fungus. Somehow, though, the Aces thrived, and by the time the good rays of summer disappeared behind One Liberty Plaza, they were fruit-laden. Mark edged over to my side of the garden. "You have done the impossible," he said, seeming a little softened by this runty tomato. He had seen our terrace at its ash-covered worst, with not a green thing in sight. And from this had emerged the beginnings of a salad. —PAUL GREENBERG

Gardening, like most hobbies worth doing, is best enjoyed with a beer.

Stake your tomatoes, peppers, and eggplants early, and remember to keep tying the stakes to the plants' main stems as they grow.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A BROWN THUMB.

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