

The Origins of Tomatoes

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There must be thousands of dishes in which the tomato is the main, or a key ingredient. Due to its colour, taste and versatility, the tomato has come a long way from the ancient Aztec civilisations to being ubiquitous in today's kitchens.

Many of today's most common and delicious dishes can be traced back to ancient times and to the exchange of food plants between the Old and New World. The tomato is a native of the lower Andes, cultivated by the Aztecs in Mexico. The Aztec word 'tomatl' meant simply "plump fruit" and the Spanish conquerors called it "tomate". The tomato, along with maize (corn), potatoes, chilli peppers and sweet potatoes was introduced to Spain in the early sixteenth century with the voyages of Columbus.

The tomato probably arrived first in Seville, a major centre of international trade, especially with Italy. In 1544, the Italian herbalist Mattioli referred to the yellow fruits of the tomato plant as 'mala aurea', the golden apple, and later, in 1554, he mentioned a red variety. Dodoens, a Dutch herbalist, gave a detailed description in 1554 and the fruit earned a reputation as an aphrodisiac. This explains names such as 'pomme d'amour' in French, 'pomodoro' in Italian and the 'love apple' in English.

The transformation from a herbal to a common culinary ingredient began slowly in the 1700's. The earliest known published Neapolitan recipe, for 'tomato sauce, Spanish-style', dates from 1692.

Although the tomato is perceived as a vegetable because of its main culinary uses, it is actually a fruit belonging to the family Solanacea. It is a close relative of the potato, the capsicum pepper and the aubergine. The tomato is one of the most popular foods/ingredients in Europe, partly owing to its versatility and its ability to blend well with cheese, eggs, meat and a wide range of herbs.

Tomatoes are nutritious. They contain significant amounts of vitamin C and folate. Tomatoes are also the most important source in the diet of a red pigment called lycopene, which has antioxidant properties and may be anticarcinogenic. Higher plasma lycopene levels are associated with reduced incidence of some cancers, especially prostate cancer. Uptake into the body depends on the type of product consumed. Lycopene uptake into the blood plasma is significantly higher when derived from heat processed tomato products than when the same amount is eaten as fresh tomatoes. Likewise, the bioavailability of the lycopene from heat-processed tomato juice is greater than from raw tomato juice.

National and international dietary guidelines recommend an increased consumption of fruits and vegetables so that we eat at least five servings a day. Tomatoes are fabulous fruits for a quick, healthy, nutritious snack or as part of a creative recipe.

References

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