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## Seasonal Eating: Why My Perfect Tomato Wasn't Perfect

Locally grown and picked by hand, the beautiful beefsteak tomato tasted great — and yet something was missing

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In America, we love our tomatoes. We grow them all summer long — in backyard gardens, and on our patios and decks. We buy them at farmers markets and roadside stands. Summer isn't summer without tomatoes. Imagine, though, if we could have them 12 months of the year, even in winter. I don't know about your state, but here in Minnesota that's become a culinary reality.

I'm not talking about those flavorless, thick-skinned, made-for-shipping tomatoes that you find in most supermarkets — the

tomatoes, if you can even call them tomatoes, that come from Florida, Mexico and other points south, the kind that are sprayed with ethylene to force them to turn red. I'm talking about locally grown, vine-ripened, handpicked tomatoes. *Real* tomatoes.

Since the mid-1990s, Minnesota farmers have been growing tomatoes in hothouses for year-round consumption. Over the past two decades, horticulturalists have been perfecting their textures and flavors. The tomatoes are grown without pesticides or herbicides, picked ripe and delivered to stores within 24 hours. And not just to Whole Foods or other specialty markets, either. They're now sold in big-chain grocery stores, for about \$3 a pound.

The tomatoes are grown on farms both large and small. Some of the farms, like the Tomato King, have only one hothouse (or greenhouse — the terms are interchangeable). Bushel Boy, the largest tomato grower, has 20 acres of greenhouses. Today these tomatoes come in three varieties: "vine-ons," grape and beefsteak.

The other day Dara Moskowitz Grumdahl, Minnesota Public Radio's food and dining correspondent, was talking about them on the air, telling listeners just how tasty and healthful they are. When it comes to good food, Dara certainly knows her stuff, having won more James Beard Awards than Meryl Streep has Oscars. Being new to Minnesota, I wasn't familiar with the hothouse tomato scene. So I listened to Dara's words with great interest.

On the weekend, when I was in my neighborhood supermarket, I noticed a bin of large, beautiful-looking red tomatoes. The sign above them said "Beefsteaks." Had I not heard Dara's radio spot, I would have ignored them, figuring they had to have been shipped here from God knows where, since it was the beginning of April. But the stickers on them said "locally grown."

How could I resist? Beefsteaks are, after all, my favorite variety of tomato. Oblately shaped like a pincushion, and usually weighing a pound or more, they're to be eaten raw, never cooked. They need nothing more than to be sliced, salted and slapped between pieces of mayonnaise-smeared bread to make a meal worthy of the gods. On nature's calendar, beefsteaks aren't scheduled to make their arrival until the hot, sticky days of August, providing a cool, glorious end to summer eating. When I lived in New York City in the 1990s, I'd rent a car every August and drive to New Jersey to buy them at produce stands.

In honor of my first beefsteak of 2012, I decided to have it as an appetizer when I had dinner that night, by myself. I didn't want to share the tomato with anyone. I sliced it, drizzled it with olive oil and put it on a green ceramic plate. I poured a glass of chardonnay to accompany it. With fork in hand, I took my first bite. Dara was right. It was everything a real tomato should be.

And yet it wasn't. It was missing a key element that no horticulturist could ever graft or duplicate in a hothouse. Because this tomato was meant to be eaten now, it lacked the excitement of anticipation and the joy of delayed gratification. As handsome and tasty as this beefsteak was, it didn't have the earthy sensuality of a sun-ripened fruit. Because I was eating it while wearing a wool sweater, I couldn't become one with the experience. Seasonality is a powerful umami.

I don't think that I'll be buying another beefsteak anytime soon — not until summer starts to wane, and I'm sitting on my patio wondering where the time has gone. It's then that I'll savor them, knowing that the warmth of their sun-ripened skin won't last long.