

Tomatoland: How Modern Agriculture Destroyed Our Most Alluring Fruit

Barry Estabrook

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There are few people who don't appreciate the taste of a ripe tomato on a summer's day. Its tangy sweetness can make a boring turkey sandwich into something near remarkable, and don't even try serving a green salad without its trademark red—diners will rebel.

But what about those winter tomatoes found in the chilly aisle at the grocery store? Those fruits most often deliver a sour, mushy taste only barely related to their warm-weather cousin. Journalist Barry Estabrook delves into the reasons why commercial tomatoes—those picked while still green and ripened with doses of ethylene—taste so bad. He also reveals the path tomatoes make from chemically altered sand plots in Florida to the supermarket bin—a path replete with crime, abuse, medical horrors, and injustice.

Ultimately this is a hopeful book about the world's favorite fruit. Estabrook finds reasons to look ahead to the future of the tomato market at places like Eckerton Hill Farm in Pennsylvania, where Tim Stark and his well-paid crew deliver amazing taste through natural gardening techniques. He travels to Peru in search of the wild tomatoes on which our modern versions depend for genetic continuity and diversity. He brings readers into the heart of the grassroots organizations working to curb horrendous working conditions for the migrant workers who plant, harvest, and pack the tomatoes we devour. And he eats lots of tomatoes, some of which don't taste very good, and some of which taste divine.

One of his most compelling story lines is about modern-day slavery. Follow Estabrook to the city of Immokalee in southern Florida, where Mexican immigrants may fall into traps set by corrupt agricultural middlemen like the members of the Navarrete family. Estabrook describes the living conditions the immigrant workers endure: "Domingo's twenty-dollar-a-week rent wasn't for a room with the family in the neat house but for shared space with three other workers in the back of a box truck out in the junk-strewn yard. It had neither running water nor a toilet, so Domingo and his 'room' mates had to urinate and defecate in one corner." The workers are trapped in these deplorable living conditions by the deductions to their paychecks, so that at the end of the month they end up owing instead of earning. Attempts to escape are discouraged with violence, even murder.

Depressing, yes, but Estabrook manages to infuse an ultimately serious subject with welcome doses of respectful humor—like his description of green tomatoes flying off the truck and rolling undamaged to a stop by the side of the highway. That, plus a natural flair for storytelling, make *Tomatoland* a highly readable book.

This veteran of food writing—his publication credits include *Gourmet*, the *New York Times*, and the *Washington Post*—engages his audience on every page by making the stories personal. When he introduces us to the families of children born with tragic birth defects—possibly resulting from the mothers' work in the tomato fields during pregnancy—we make connections that filter beyond the page into our sensibilities. Their stories linger; readers will likely think of them the next time their hand hovers over the tomato bin at the grocery store.

As much as agricultural villains abound in this book, heroes rise up as well: Lawyer Andrew Yaffa, who made it

possible for Abraham Candelario and Francisca Herrera to pay for their son's medical care after he was born with extreme birth defects, and farmer Tim Stark, who sells tasty tomatoes all over New York City and pays his workers a fair wage. They and others like them do what they can to make sure good food reaches our plates in a fair and decent manner.

In the tradition of Michael Pollan and Eric Schlosser, Estabrook gives us the darker side of the fruit we so love. Readers who may not have been turned off the winter version of our collectively favorite fruit will certainly find reason here to pause before making a selection at the supermarket. Choose well, Estabrook reminds us.

ANDI DIEHN (July / August 2011)

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