

ITALIAN AMERICAN WRITERS ON NEW JERSEY

AN ANTHOLOGY OF POETRY AND PROSE



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JERSEY TOMATO WARS

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The first salvos in the annual Tomato War at my parents' house resound early each August.

"*Ancora pumarori?*" ("More tomatoes?!") shoots my mother as my father empties the fire-colored contents of his garden basket onto the table in her cellar sewing room.

Here, Dad's vine-ripened *pumarori*—Sicilian dialect for "tomatoes"—are carefully set out to age until they're deemed the perfect shade of scarlet to boil and puree. Just about the same shade of red that slowly tinges my mother's fair Sicilian complexion whenever she surveys the latest fruits of my father's formidable gardening skills. "*Ancora pumarori?*"

When Dad hears Mom's lament, he fires back with the same ammunition he's been using for almost forty years—that is, for as long as he's been planting Jersey tomatoes: "*Basta! L'anno che viene, niente pumarori!*" ("Enough! Next year, no tomatoes!")

At this, my mother merely rolls her eyes. Just as she'd rather die before letting a commercially bottled sauce—no matter what upscale restaurant or celebrity name was on the label—pass her lips, she knows there's no way on earth that my father could ever resist putting in row upon row of tomatoes.

Each spring he shops at his favorite nurseries with the same attention most American males devote to stereo equipment. Supersonics and Big Boys, cherry tomatoes and plum tomatoes all find their way into his garden. And no matter how many tomatoes he plants, if a friend offers a few more, he never refuses. When local politicians hoping to garner his vote in the next election come to the door with free tomato plants, he always accepts.

If tomato vines sprout unexpectedly from seeds scattered the year before, my father will water them, weed them, fertilize them, and stake them, until the stragglers are groaning with plump red fruit—even if they do so smack in the middle of his carnations or roses. By midsummer, it's hard to distinguish any line of demarcation between the original tomato patches he'd laid

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out in neat formation the previous spring and the dozens of upstart plants that invariably infiltrate his ranks weeks later.

No, my father's vegetable garden isn't the prettiest. But from July to October, for its modest size it has got to be one of the meanest, greenest, most productive gardens in the Garden State.

So there you have the seeds of my parents' summertime discontent, not to mention pride and joy. For from August through November, their home-grown tomatoes accompany 'most every lunch and dinner—at their house and at everyone else's in the family. Even total strangers soon learn they can score a few kilos of tomatoes over my parents' corner fence in exchange for a compliment to the garden.

And when life tosses my folks too many tomatoes, they make sauce, an exquisite taste of summer no matter what the calendar says. Thanks to the canning my mother has taken up in recent years to keep up with my father's ever-increasing yields, the fresh tomato sauce season at their house stretches from summer to the following spring—when Dad, blissfully oblivious to the fact that he's in his eighties, dutifully tills the earth to get it ready to accept the next crop of tomato recruits.

No matter how heated the Tomato War gets in my parents' kitchen, however, not a single tomato has ever been thrown—or worse, thrown away. Both sides in this long-simmering skirmish agree on one thing: A home-grown Jersey tomato would be a terrible thing to waste.