



JACQUE GRAY RHS TRIALS



Tomato taste test

In the third part of her series on taste, **Christine McFadden** joins the panel to sample and compare mini-plum and cherry tomatoes.

Photography by
Tim Sandall



THESE DAYS, TOMATOES are available year-round but, as most home-growers will testify, buying and eating a super-market tomato falls far short of the sheer pleasure of plucking a sun-warmed fruit of your own from the vine and biting into it. The glowing colour, the heavenly aroma and the explosion of flavour and juice stimulate all the senses at once.

Small-fruited tomatoes are particularly satisfying in this respect. Pop a whole one in your mouth and appreciate simultaneously the complex variations of flavour in the outer skin and flesh, the juice and the seeds – ‘the complete tomato experience’, in the words of Raymond Blanc, Chef Patron of Le Manoir aux Quat’Saisons restaurant, Oxfordshire.

Anyone who enjoys cooking will appreciate the benefits of home-grown mini tomatoes. Their jewel-like colours

look glorious in salads; lightly crushed and warmed through in a little olive oil they make a colourful pizza topping, but their intense flavour also lends itself to more sophisticated recipes such as Le Manoir’s clear tomato-essence appetiser (recipe, p545).

Last August, I joined a tasting panel led by Raymond (see box, p545) to sample a selection of mini-plum and cherry tomato cultivars. We were in search of a fruit *par excellence* – one with a tomato aroma, flavour and texture that would satisfy cooks and gardeners alike.

Tasting trial

There is a fascinating choice of cherry and mini-plum tomatoes available, with a wide spectrum of colours and flavours. Those selected for our tasting session included new cultivars as well as better-known ones that are available to home



AN EXPERIENCE TO SAVOUR Chef Raymond Blanc discusses flavours with Sarah Wain (main picture), one of the tasting panel. Of the 11 cherry and mini-plum tomatoes tasted, Sarah grew nine at West Dean Garden in West Sussex. Among the wide spectrum of colours and shapes, the overall favourite was 'Floridity' (far left), a mini-plum cultivar that Sarah finds grows well in a pot under glass

gardeners (suppliers, p545). Some are tall-growing, others short, but all crop well and are relatively easy to grow.

The panel carried out a ranking test on 11 cultivars in all (see box, right): nine grown for us by panel member Sarah Wain at West Dean Garden, West Sussex, and two others.

The tomatoes were presented at room temperature, so as not to diminish their flavour. There were five different cherry tomatoes and six mini-plums with their characteristic oval shape. Each was assessed for appearance, aroma, flavour, texture and overall performance. Their sweetness, acidity, skin texture, seed-to-flesh ratio and 'mouth-feel' (the tactile sensations perceived by the tongue and lining of the mouth) were also rated. The rich spectrum of colours ranged from yellows, through vermilion, to deep ruby reds and even chocolate brown.

Keen to discover if flavour matched the impact of colour, the tasting panel

kicked off with 'Golden Gem', one of three yellow-fruited cultivars tasted. 'Great flavours are based on the optimum balance of sweetness and acidity,' said Raymond. In this respect, the tasters agreed with him that 'Golden Gem' was 'middle-of-the-road; no wow factor'.

We went on to sample 'Golden Santa', a greenish-yellow mini-plum. This cultivar was considered to be 'reasonable', but was hampered by low acidity compared to sweetness.

The best of the yellows on test was 'Snowberry', which Neil Wingfield, Le Manoir's Head Vegetable Gardener described as a 'lovely jelly yellow'. Its looks also impressed Raymond, who praised it for its 'good balance of acidity, good flesh, good flavour, good tomato finish'.

Continuing with unconventional colours, we tried Chocodel ('Brown Berry'), a brownish-red cherry tomato. Sarah felt its flavour was 'artificially smoky' while Raymond thought 'bacon, eggs and sausages with a hint of sage' was closer. ▶

'TOP OF THE LEAGUE WAS 'FLORIDITY', A MINI-PLUM WITH A STRIKING TOMATO AROMA'

WHICH WERE THE BEST?

The panel's order of preference (M-P = mini-plum; c = cherry; AGM = Award of Garden Merit.)

Boxed numbers denote seed supplier; see p545

'Floridity' F₁ AGM. Outstanding flavour. Fleishy and juicy. Perfect acid/sugar balance. **M-P 2 6**

'Snowberry' Long-lasting, clean flavour with citrus notes. Good acid/sugar balance. Juicy/fleshy. **c 3 4**

'Chiquita' Excellent flavour, aroma, texture. Acid/sugar balance good, but slightly too sweet. **M-P**

'Santa' F₁ Clean, meaty flavour. Well-balanced acid/sugar. Juicy fleshy texture. **M-P 1 4 5**

Chocodel ('Brown Berry') Unusual, meaty, slightly smoky flavour. Not enough sweetness, slightly too much acidity. Dry; seedy in the mouth. **c 3 4 5**

'Golden Santa' Average flavour. Slightly weak and watery. Too sweet. **M-P 5**

'Sweet Million' AGM. Reasonable flavour and acid/sugar balance. **c 1 5 6**

'Golden Gem' F₁ Low acidity, little flavour, mild aroma, slightly watery. **c 3 4 5**

'Tumbling Tom Red' Uninspiring flavour and acid/sugar balance. Watery. Tough, dry skin. **c 1 3 4 6**

'Juliet' F₁ Poor sugar/acid balance. Thick skin and flesh. Cooking improves flavour. **M-P 3 5 7**

'Garden Pearl' Lacking in tomato flavour. Soft, fleshy texture. Possibly over-ripe. **c 1 3 5**

'CHERRY AND MINI-PLUM TOMATOES ARE REMARKABLY TROUBLE-FREE TO GROW AND SATISFYINGLY PROLIFIC'

Moving on to 'Sweet Million', a deep-red cherry tomato, Raymond said this gave 'a good tomato experience... juicy, excellent mouth-feel'. Sarah thought this particularly sweet cultivar might be worth growing for children.

'Chiquita', a low-growing, bushy cultivar, suitable for pots or containers, was also notably sweet, but did not wholly gratify Raymond's finely tuned palate. 'This is excellent: good tomato taste,' he commented, 'but maybe too sweet, maybe lacks a little acidity.'

Also ideal for pot culture was 'Garden Pearl', a deep ruby-red cherry tomato, but Raymond considered it to be 'pappy and juicy' with an over-ripe, cooked flavour.

Opinions also differed over the tasting quality of heart-shaped 'Tumbling Tom Red'. Sarah and Neil were not overly impressed, though Raymond thought it 'very good'. Sarah, who grows this bush cultivar in a hanging basket, said it certainly lives up to its name, producing copious tumbling trusses of fruit.

Plum choice

We sampled the remaining mini-plums, noting that their flesh tended to be thicker than that of the cherry cultivars. 'Juliet', a striking tomato-red, was rated as too fleshy, although Sarah thought it would be good for cooking. Raymond agreed. 'When tomatoes like this are heated the acidity is stronger,' said the chef. 'It is more tart, good for a beautiful tomato sauce.'

Raymond described 'Santa', another vibrant red mini-plum, as 'meaty, juicy, good'. Sarah thought it was 'fresh and different', while Neil found it had 'a real hit of flavour, good balance'. We had all given this one more-or-less equal ratings for sweetness and acidity, giving further credence to the theory that a good balance results in a superior flavour.

CORDON ROUGE Small-fruited tomatoes do not always grow on small plants. At West Dean Garden, Sarah Wain grows tall cultivars trained as cordons (right), creating spectacular fruiting arches in the glass-house (centre).

CORDON BLEU Two Michelin-starred chef Raymond Blanc (far right) uses tomatoes in many recipes



Of the 11 small-fruited tomatoes we tasted, top of the league by a whisker was 'Floridity', a mini-plum with a striking tomato aroma. 'This is the best so far, good texture, excellent tomato experience,' Raymond decided. The rest of us agreed unanimously, with Sarah adding that 'Floridity' had the longest cropping season of all the cultivars sampled and that, being of medium height, it would grow and crop well in a fairly large pot.

Best possible taste

Throughout the tasting sessions, both Sarah and Raymond stressed that tasting trials are an inexact science with many variables. It is important to bear in mind that the same cultivars, if picked slightly under- or over-ripe, or grown in another location, would give different results.

By and large, cherry and mini-plum tomato cultivars are remarkably trouble-free to grow and satisfyingly prolific. They seem determined to produce fruit regardless of any ineptitude on the grower's part. This forgiving nature makes them an especially rewarding crop for novice growers, whether adults or children. Most

youngsters are not daunted by eating the bite-sized fruit, and, as Sarah pointed out, when children experience the freshest possible flavours it helps to give them 'taste benchmarks' for later in life.

Given adequate warmth and light, the plants are not too fussy about location. Although the finest flavour is probably produced under glass (see box, right), it is worth trying some smaller cultivars in pots, growing bags or hanging baskets. Their gleaming trusses of fruit bring gorgeous cascades of colour and vitality to even the plainest of outlooks. ■

Christine McFadden is a food writer and a fruit and vegetable enthusiast

? Which small-fruited tomatoes do you grow? What are the tastiest cultivars? Write to: The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT. Email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address

i Further reading For a detailed insight into tomato growing, Sarah Wain recommends *Tomatoes* by Terry Marshall (Whittet Books, 2006, ISBN 9781873580721)



THE TASTING PANEL

- Raymond Blanc, Chef Patron of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons
- Sarah Wain, Gardens Supervisor at West Dean Gardens, West Sussex
- Neil Wingfield, Head Vegetable Gardener at Le Manoir
- Christine McFadden, food writer

SEED SUPPLIERS

- 1 Mr Fothergill's Seeds 0845 166 2511; <http://fothergills.co.uk>
- 2 Medwyn's of Anglesey Llanor, Ffordd Hen Ysgol, Llanfairpwll-gwyngyll, Anglesey LL61 5RZ; www.medwynsofanglesey.co.uk
- 3 Nicky's Seeds 01843 600972; www.nickys-nursery.co.uk
- 4 Plants of Distinction 01449 721720; www.plantsofdistinction.co.uk
- 5 Simpsons Seeds 01985 845004; www.simpsonseeds.co.uk
- 6 Suttons Seeds 01803 696363; www.suttons.co.uk
- 7 Thompson & Morgan 01473 688821; www.thompson-morgan.com

TOMATO ESSENCE

A popular appetiser at Le Manoir is Raymond's tomato essence, made from wonderfully clear, intensely flavoured tomato extract. Prepare one day in advance.

In a bowl, combine

- 2.5kg halved cherry tomatoes
- 1 stick finely chopped celery
- ½ bulb finely chopped fennel
- ½ clove sliced garlic

Add

- 2 chopped thyme sprigs
- 4 chopped tarragon leaves
- handful (20g) of chopped basil

Season with

- 5 drops Worcestershire Sauce
- 3 drops Tabasco
- 1 tbsp sea salt
- 2 tbsp sugar (only if tomatoes are under-ripe)
- 2 pinches cayenne

Cover and marinate in fridge for three hours. Quickly 'blitz' batches using the pulse button on a food processor (too long gives an unwanted pink hue). Hang in a jelly bag or three layers of muslin and leave to drip overnight.

GROWING TOMATOES FOR FLAVOUR

Although cherry and mini-plum tomatoes are easy to grow, getting the best flavour depends on factors such as feeding, watering and light.

Location

All tomatoes are half-hardy and need some protection. They can be grown under glass (or plastic), or outdoors, in pots, growing bags or the open ground. That said, most small-fruited cultivars do best under glass, though they will cope in the open, especially if planted close to a south-facing wall.

Feeding

Each stage of development requires a different cocktail of nutrients. Sarah Wain recommends starting off with a weak dilution of Maxicrop Seaweed Plant Growth Stimulant to boost root production, then moving on to a fertiliser with equal amounts of phosphate, nitrogen and potash to encourage productive growth. 'A little and often is the secret,' she says.

Soluble fertiliser can be given at half or even quarter strength, so long as the manufacturer's weekly maximum dose is not exceeded.

Once the plant has developed some flower trusses, swap to a high-potash fertiliser such as Tomorite. The correct balance of nutrients

is vital for the all-important sugar/acid balance. Potash is essential for acidity; growing the plants in full sun increases sweetness.

Watering

Tomatoes have a morning growth surge, so this is the prime time to feed and water. It may be necessary to water twice a day in high summer as the plants grow bigger and thirstier, but overwatering can result in a bland, unbalanced flavour. If using a growing bag, take care that it is evenly hydrated and that the roots do not become exposed.

Harvesting

The most obvious sign of ripeness is the change of colour (from green to orange, yellow, red or even purple-black, depending on your chosen cultivar). In general, a tomato is ripe when it comes away easily from the stalk. If it is left on the vine after ripening, its sugar and acid levels will start to decrease and the fruit will lose flavour.

Late crops may not ripen on the plant. You can bring immature tomatoes indoors to ripen (although their flavour may be diminished).

● For common tomato problems and their remedies, see RHS Advice, pp558–559