



Special Delivery

from Munford, Tennessee

Mail order tomato plants
from Alainia Hagerty
at Tomato Baby Company

BY JONATHAN DEVIN
PHOTO BY MELISSA PETERSEN

In the movie *Steel Magnolias*, Shirley MacLaine as the irascible curmudgeon Ouisser enters Truvy's Beauty Spot tossing bags of tomatoes at her friends despite that fact that she says she detests tomatoes.

Asked why she grows them, she responds that she's an old Southern woman and as such is supposed to wear funny hats and ugly clothes and grow vegetables in the dirt. In other words, it's unavoidable.

In Memphis, throw a rock in any direction and you'll hit five people who cherish their tomato plants as much for the tradition as for the food they produce. Alainia Hagerty, owner of Tomato Baby Company, says it's the collecting of tomatoes that is the actual heirloom.

"There's a spectrum of flavors like grapes," said Alainia. "The purples have a richer

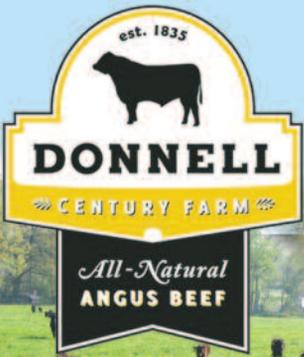
flavor...like the difference between wines. Some are sweet. Some people just like more acidic bite. The neat thing is seeing what people reorder."

There's a story she likes to tell about how her dad tricked her into getting into the business of growing and selling tomato plants. In the spring of 2003, he proposed a friendly contest.

"My dad knew somebody who gave us some tomatoes, and they were awesome," says Alainia. "We said, 'Now these are good, real tomatoes.' We had the opinion that it was because she grew her own from seed. We decided we were going to grow our own... There are about 3,000 to 5,000 cultivars of tomatoes, but I got the same kind this lady grew. I grew mine in a sunroom behind my house. My father grew his in the ground.



Alainia Hagerty in the greenhouse



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“Mine looked great, but his were puny because they were cold outside in the ground. I was bragging on mine until I put them out in the sun. I didn’t introduce them gradually to the sun; I put them out. And the next day they all died.”

Her father’s, meanwhile, became very bushy, and he won bragging rights that year. The next year he challenged her again, and she was ready for him.

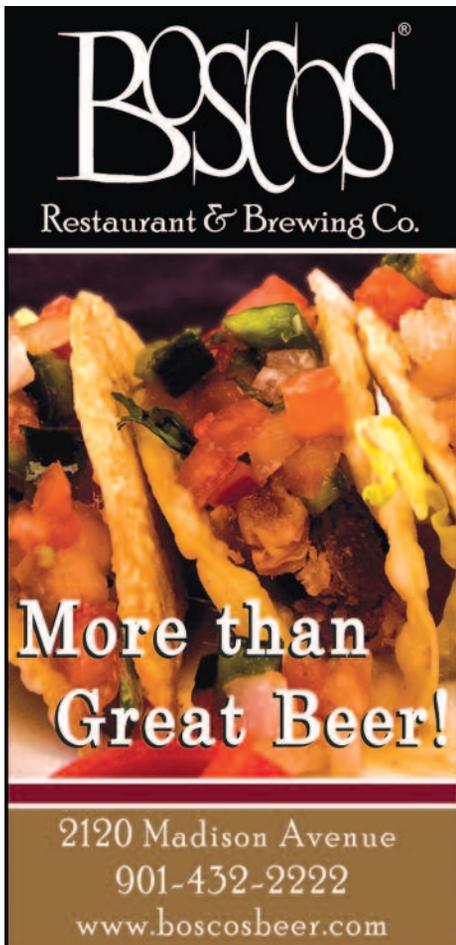
“I drove two hours east to show off my tomato plants, and I said, ‘where are yours?’ He said, ‘I didn’t grow any. I taught you what to do. What did I need to grow any for?’ He had duped me for two months.”

“They’re heirloom, and they reseed themselves. We just sent thirty of them to Massachusetts to a school for a project.”

There’s the Abraham Lincoln, a medium-sized red tomato with a dark red interior, that’s good for making ketchup, or there’s the Big White Pink Stripe tomato with a sweet taste and a tropical flavor.

At the end of each year, Alainia asks her faithful followers for feedback, so she can stock up on whatever worked best for them.

“Giant Belgium is sweet,” said Alainia. “When someone tells me they like that one, I like to be able to say ‘Oh, you have to try this other one.’ I have a customer who plants ten Giant Belgiums and ten Wolford’s Wonder. If someone has similar tastebuds to him, then I know they’ve got to try the Wolford’s Wonder.”



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In the end, the joke was still on Dad as Alainia had already sold a couple hundred tomato plants on eBay.

These days she sells her plants — tomatoes, basil, eggplant and peppers — grown in a 30’x80’ Quonset hut-style greenhouse in Brighton, Tenn., from her website.

Alainia works for the U.S. Postal Service year round, but in April and May she ships hundreds of plants across the U.S.

“I planted the types that I thought would be interesting to try myself,” said Alainia. “A yellow tomato, a purple tomato. So where I had an interest, there were other people with an interest. They didn’t buy six of one type; they would try one of each.”

And that, above all, seems to be the link between her customers — variety. Like a musician building repertoire among various genres and styles of music, the ardent tomato grower wants to build a signature collection of plants that says “me.”

Alainia also grows plants from seeds sent to her by customers, including some sent by the families of deceased tomato aficionados.

The good news for novice tomato growers is that most types want the same kind of care — even watering, not too much chill, not too much sun. Moderate care and steady she goes.

There are even some tomatoes for people with black thumbs.

Matt’s Wild Cherry Tomatoes, for example, will grow in just about any light condition. The marble-sized fruits drop and reseed themselves.

“In prime condition, they’ll get to be the size of a car, but nobody needs that,” said Alainia. “They’re heirloom, and they reseed themselves. We just sent thirty of them to Massachusetts to a school for a project.”

Some more went to a family whose father died around the Christmas holidays. The seeds were given away with memorial cards.

Alainia likes to be specific about how she cares for her plants. She uses only generic fertilizers,

not the “plant crack” as she calls it, referring to chemicals used to make plants healthy looking for the stores in which they are sold.

She doesn’t use growth retardant which some sellers use to control the size of a plant before shipping it. Both, she said, cause withdrawal symptoms for the plant when they get home. Sometimes customers of hers complain because the plants are tall when they arrive, but Alainia said there’s a quick fix for that — bury the stem lower, and roots will sprout from it.

Other customers are more worried about keeping up with the Joneses.

“The gardener is like the chef that’s creating a dinner,” said Alainia. “It’s your masterpiece; it’s your art; and it’s your creation. You’re not going to paint the same thing that someone else is painting. If your neighbor gets a purple tomato, but you get a purple striped tomato, you just beat the neighbor.”

And she can live in a world where tomato wars define personalities and boost egos just fine, thank you.

“This started as something for myself, for my garden, but there are also people out there like a network,” said Alainia. “So many people appreciate what I do; I feed off that.” *eM*

The Tomato Baby Company will open next spring for orders. In the meantime, taste as many tomatoes as you can this summer to determine your favorites for next year’s garden. www.thetomatobabycompany.com

Jonathan Devin just started eating tomatoes last year. He is not from the South. He’s a fulltime freelance writer based in Memphis, writing regularly for *The Commercial Appeal*, *The Daily News*, several Memphis monthlies and the newly-created arts blog Stage, Quill, & Palette.

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