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Celebrating Local Foods, Season By Season

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HEIRLOOM TOMATOES FROM NORTHRIDGE ORGANICS

KATHY RHOADS OF RHOADS FARM · FRANKLINTON'S COMMUNITY

GARDENS · LESLIE SCHALLER ON LOCAL FOOD · LUNA BURGER

FROM GRANDPA NICK'S TO CRNKOVICS

Mike and Laura Laughlin turn heirloom tomato varieties into organic happiness

By Jan O'Daniel | Photography by Catherine Murray

It's ironic that organic growers Mike and Laura Laughlin once made their home on Garden Road in Clintonville.

"The first thing we did was put in a large garden. It was a backyard garden in an urban setting, which made it an urban farm," says Mike, "but back then we didn't know what that was."

Mike, who grew up in Conneaut, Ohio, watching his grandfather raise chickens, pigs and grain to eat and sell, says the Clintonville garden gave him the opportunity to experiment with varieties and growing techniques, especially organic.

It started simply enough with Mike and Laura growing peppers, eggplant, summer squash, lettuces and heirloom tomatoes for themselves and their neighbors, and selling the surplus to Northwest Natural Foods and at the North Market. (They later moved to the Olde Worthington Farmers Market, where they've spent the past two decades.)

While on Garden Road, the Laughlins decided they wanted their own farm. Days were spent working full-time jobs, nights and weekends gardening and searching for a plot of fertile land.

But the dream eluded them for about four years, until Mike stumbled upon what is now Northridge Organic Farm.

"We found this piece of land on a whim," he says of their Johnstown-area farm in northwest Licking County. "It was the last place we looked at after a long day. I stopped the car, jumped out, walked back and saw the woods and stream. Laura didn't even get out of the car but I said, 'We gotta come back and look.'"

With just over 20 acres and a custom-built, farmhouse-inspired home, the Laughlins say they've found their proverbial piece of heaven.

John Skaggs, executive chef at Two Caterers who worked the farm for a season, agrees.

"Mike definitely has a special place on earth," he says. "It's perfect for heirlooms. I'm no soil or environmental expert but I've never tasted a better tomato than right off the vine at Northridge."

Ah. Heirlooms.

If there were such a thing as an heirloom tomato god, surely Mike Laughlin would be it.

Although Mike and Laura raise a variety of seasonal produce and grass-fed lamb, their undeniable specialty is heirloom tomatoes.

Heirlooms, which are open-pollinated varieties that have been in circulation for at least 50 years, have become über popular in the last decade or so.

"Demand for heirlooms has skyrocketed," says Mike, hoisting for evidence the phonebook-size Seed Savers catalog he uses to order a dozen or so new varieties each year. "This started as one page."

In fact, it was Seed Savers that helped launch the near-legendary Laughlin heirlooms.

In the mid-1980s, Mike went to an Ohio Ecological Food & Farm Association (OEFFA) workshop led by the late Kent Whealy, co-founder of the Seed Savers Exchange and the man credited with popularizing the term "heirloom" referring to vegetable varieties.

"I thought heirlooms sounded neat," says Mike. "I felt then, and still feel, that the whole idea of heirloom vegetables are important for so many reasons. There are varieties of seeds that become extinct every year, but there might be a trait in a seed that could be really helpful in the future. The idea of keeping them available just really struck a tone with me and what we wanted to do with the farm."

Although the Laughlins currently have 250 varieties of heirloom tomatoes in their seed bank, they also grow hybrids, the kind of tomatoes typically found in grocery stores and backyard gardens.

"Hybrids are the standard tomato most people are familiar with," explains Mike. "They have their place. But a word



FOR MOST HEIRLOOM TOMATO LOVERS,

including Mike and Laura Laughlin of Northridge Organic Farm in Johnstown, naming a favorite is like choosing among children—it can't be done. When pressed, Mike will admit to favoring black tomatoes for their rich, bold flavor. The darker the color, the more acidic; the lighter the color, the sweeter. Here's a list of some Northridge Organic Farm favorites.

Caro Rich

A medium- to large-sized orange tomato developed at Purdue University. Has a sweet-tart flavor. Ten times higher in beta-carotene than any other tomato. A great all-purpose tomato.

Great White

A large white beefsteak, origin unknown. Low in seeds, wonderfully sweet, almost melon-like. A must for heirloom tomato salads.

Pixie Peach

A small yellow-pink golf-ball-sized tomato with furry skin like a peach. Although light-colored tomatoes are usually less acidic, this one is an exception to that rule.

Russian Black

A dark reddish-black fruit of Russian origin. Extremely rich flavor. Beautiful as part of a tomato salad and one of the Laughlin's very favorites.

Valencia

A beautiful, round, 10-ounce, orange-color variety from Maine. Rich, tomatoey flavor. A good choice for cooler climates.

Crnkovic

A large pink beefsteak variety from Yugoslavia. Has a somewhat sweet flavor and meaty texture. A good slicer.

Grandpa Nick's

A large red Roma variety yielding eight- to 16-ounce fruit. Hails from Laura Laughlin's grandfather, Nick Christopher (nee Cristofaro). Low in seeds, very dense. The perfect saucing tomato.

Rose de Berne

A juicy red tomato probably from Switzerland. Excellent flavor and a great slicer. Considered by Europeans as one of the best-tasting tomatoes.

Striped German

A large red-orange and yellow streaked beefsteak, possibly of Pennsylvania Dutch origin. Has a sweet, delicious flavor. Beautiful when sliced. (One slice covers a whole piece of bread!)

of caution: A lot of companies are marketing 'hybrid heirloom tomatoes.' They look like heirlooms—maybe they're striped or black—but they're not."

At the core of hybrids is the idea of mass availability. They're cultivated to be more uniform in shape with thicker skins to withstand rigorous handling and shipping. But Mike says when growers go toward those characteristics, something else has to give—and that something is usually flavor.

Not so with heirloom tomatoes.

"I never knew I liked tomatoes," confesses Laura. "We grew up with Early Girls and Better Boys, but I never cared for the flavor or consistency. When Mike became interested in heirlooms, I couldn't believe how much I liked them. Tomatoes are now one of my all-time favorite foods."

Like Laura, many people experience instant tomato love when they taste an heirloom. But for others it's the discovery of heritage that makes them so special.

Case in point: the Laughlins' own heirloom they call Grandpa Nick's.

Tomatoey, dense and perfect for sauce, Grandpa Nick's hails from the Old Country by way of Laura's grandfather, Nick Christopher (nee Cristofaro).

"We're not sure what the original tomato was, but my grandfather brought the seeds over from Italy in the early 1900s. My aunt, who still has my dad's family farm, approached us at a picnic a few years ago and said, 'Say, you wouldn't be interested in having some seeds I saved from your grandfather's tomatoes, would you?'"

Interested? Heck, yeah.

Now Grandpa Nick's, a low-seed, giant Italian Roma, is Northridge Organic's biggest seller, in part because of the story behind it. It also has great versatility and robust flavor that Chef Skaggs says is a personal favorite.

"September can't get here fast enough," he says. "I throw them into a giant steam kettle with olive oil and let 'em stew. Then I strain the skins and seeds, and jar them. I like to get creative. Soup, marinara, ratatouille. I have one jar left on the shelf just as a reminder of what I can do."

Except for a few years back when their entire tomato crop was wiped out due to blight, the Laughlins typically boast a healthy harvest.

In season, eating up seconds (those not perfect enough to sell) means the Laughlins and their crew enjoy twice-daily tomato salads before canning or freezing extras.

"I never get sick of them," says Mike. "Tomatoes all have a similar flavor, but heirlooms have subtle flavors, kind of like microbrewed beers."

And like craft brews, cultivating heirlooms is both an art and a science.

"Heirlooms and hybrids are two different animals," says Laura. "Heirlooms are a lot fussier. You really have to baby them along."

The white, black, purple, red, yellow, striped, streaked and variegated heirloom tomatoes take months of laborious work. The Laughlins start seedlings in the greenhouse before hand-planting them