
FARMGIRL ANGST

BY MARILEE FOSTER

DIRECTLY FRESH?



Produce abuse. It happens most during tomato season, when there is the perfect storm of ripe fruit, green customers and the suburban proclivity to shop ahead. But leeks, berries, and even potatoes are not immune. I watch as a woman plops three, maybe four tomatoes into one bag. You can do this in the supermarket, with produce built to last, but not with these. They'll split, flatten, seep—which is O.K. if you're going home to eat them right away, but she's not. "I have to go into town for a few days, but want these for the weekend when I get back." My fear confirmed, she continues, "They'll be alright, right?"

I do not have casual relationships with my tomatoes. By the time I select them, pick them, I know each one well, having watched, patiently waiting, as its color deepened. I have plotted the course I will take, how to extract this delicate, cumbersome beauty from the thicket of indeterminate vines. When I see them worked over like this, I can't help it, I feel wounded, but explain how they are dead ripe for purposes of pleasure, a tomato as nature intended, a love apple. Despite my words, her lips fix down, undelighted; she frowns. She begins to fish the tomatoes back out of the bulging paper sack. She manhandles them, she grips and paws, struggling with their softness and size. The walls split, the tissue bruises and now as their juices begin to flow, she is visibly grossed out, revolted. She lies as she sinks into her automobile that she'll just come back on Friday.

Tomatoes do not have a shelf life; they have a season, then an hour, then a moment. I gather the damaged fruit in my arms, and go into the house. Between my mother and me, we devour the spoils immediately, closing with a plate-licking homage to their perfection

and brevity.

It's not just tomatoes. Most vegetables are particular. This is why we so commonly attach the word "fresh" to them, because everybody knows, or should, that an ear of sweet corn, still cool from night, pulled at dawn and eaten then, raw, is the quintessence of fortune. When a vegetable is fresh, it uplifts, surprises, delights. Eating this way is permissible ecstasy, a kind of guiltless pleasure thought not to exist since the Fall of man, and now evidenced in a shell pea, pulled from its vine, splayed open and empty.

There is another kind of "fresh" though, the dumbed-down fresh. Fresh, considering it came 3,000 miles in a reefer unit, fresh, because a guy keeps hitting it with a mister, fresh. But it's not fresh at all; it can't bring you to attention. It's more likely to promote reverence for innovative packing materials than for the earth. It won't make you crawl on hands and knees with a hand hoe, it won't dribble down your chin leaving sweet, sticky splatters of peach on your bare feet.

Yesterday morning, in the immediate vicinity of my farm stand, traffic in both directions was brought to a sudden halt as a large truck had pulled over, put its hazards on and began to execute a three-point turn by using my exceedingly limited parking area to back into. "Lost," I thought, "doesn't know how to drive either." As the truck came round, I saw painted on its side the trademark words "FreshDirect." Lost indeed. □

The writer is a farmer in Sagaponack.