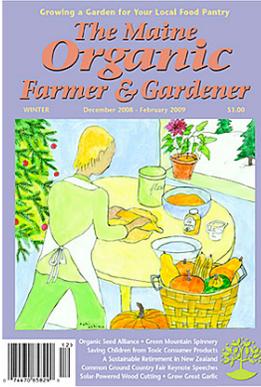


"Farmers are the only indispensable people on the face of the earth."

- Li Zhaoxing



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## The Grower-Caterer Connection: Tomato Case Study

by Kay Stephens

Each tomato has its own fascinating shape – mottled, bumpy, smooth – with harmonizing colors every hue of red, brown, orange and yellow. With names like 'Striped Stuffer,' 'Black Zebra,' 'Black Pearl' and 'Orange Banana Paste,' these strange, lopsided, heirloom tomatoes, cut and served on a white plate, are about to land on the bride and groom's table at a wedding catered by Swan's Way of Lincolnville, Maine.

These are not run-of-the-mill tomatoes bought that day from some farm stand, though: This edible art was masterminded some nine months prior and entailed collaboration among a caterer, a European seed company, Maine farmers and growers, and, of course, the fickle Mother Nature.

Anastasia "Stacey" Glassman, owner of Swan's Way Catering ([cateringmaine.com](http://cateringmaine.com)), thinks winter is the perfect time to obsess about summer tomatoes and to contact growers for those tomatoes – and other produce. As a former owner of Swan's Way restaurant in Camden, Glassman has always integrated local food into her menus, but she notes that catering is a little trickier. "Unlike a restaurant owner who decides each day what to serve depending on what is available in the market," she says, "I have to use the winter to plan a different menu for people getting married in June than I would in August or September."

In January, Glassman is likely to be sitting out a blizzard in her kitchen by her wood stove, flipping through European and American tomato seed catalogs the way some people study fashion magazines. For this event, she's got her eye on a particular palette. She envisions quarts of 'Black Pearl' cherries, 'Red Lightning,' 'Yellow Plum' and the Italian heirloom tomato 'Costoluto Fiorentino.' She thumbs through her well-worn catalogs from Johnny's, Fedco, Totally Tomatoes and Burpee. From her frequent travels through Italy, she has also discovered fantastic Italian seed catalogs (the names of which she prefers to keep a trade secret). She folds over a corner of a page in the Italian catalog where she found the perfect tomato. Each seed packet is like a little pot of paint set to bloom at the right time.

Once she gets the seeds, Glassman delivers them to Village Farm in Freedom and to Roots and Shoots in Montville, her faithful Maine growers who start seeds for her. When she needs to supplement what Village Farm grows, she relies on other local growers, including Dilly Dally Farms, Chase's Daily, Part 'n Parcel, and Peacemeal Farm. However, Village Farm tends to be the premier "costume designer" for Glassman's eclectic vision. Husband-and-wife farmers Polly Shyka and Prentice Grassi grow three dozen varieties of heirloom tomatoes for Glassman, as well as eight varieties of basil to drape around the tomatoes as decoration.

Shyka and Glassman met eight years ago when Shyka was looking for an innovative caterer to provide local meats and vegetables for her own wedding. The friendship blossomed, and Shyka gardened for Swan's Way for more than two years before striking out on her own as an organic farmer. In a symbiotic turn, Glassman began using Village Farm produce for most of her events.

"Stacey is a caterer-artist of the vegetable kind and I am a vegetable-farmer of the artist kind," explains Shyka. "I 'get' what she is after when she asks me for 'a bucket of branches.' That means I will collect 3- to 5-foot branches of whatever is in bud or bloom or particularly beautiful from my woods, and she will display them in the most outrageous vases and found object containers, and it will be a small piece of artwork. That is what I call a good time."

The mostly client-driven trend for weddings in recent years has been to use as much locally grown food as possible. "Maine has such an abundance of wonderful event venues and some of the finest seasonal ingredients grown on the many small farms. That is a match made in heaven for a caterer like Stacey," says Shyka.

Glassman admits, however, that sometimes the biggest problem with events of 200 to 300 people who want a local and organic menu is that she can't find the volume of food she needs locally. That's where her long-standing relationships with local growers fill in. "Last year for the Pop Tech event in October [in Camden]," Glassman recalls, "I was able to order in January what I wanted to serve in October. Polly knew I needed 70 brussels sprout plants, and Dilly Dally provided the 275 pounds of squash."

Another complicating issue is the growing season itself, which, in Maine, may not be robust, leaving too little supply for the increasing demand. Glassman admits, "I've had someone grow the same tomato year after year. One year it's the best you've ever had, and the next year it didn't come out the same – and that has nothing to do with the growers; it has to do with the seasons. This year everything was accelerated, everything came up early. Then we had a June drought followed by a drenching July and August. There has just not been enough hot sun to ripen everything."

"My biggest difficulty is convincing my farming partner/husband that we should grow as many tomatoes as I want to try," says Shyka. Cultivating the fruits includes spraying with compost tea and amending the soil with greensand, azomite and compost, and then hoping that nature cooperates. A grower can't expect nature to consistently produce perfection, however, and Shyka admits that a perfect tomato is not necessarily the best tomato, anyway. "We actually sell a LOT of tomatoes in their green, pre-ripe stage as well as lots of cracked ones. The under-ripe ones not only have a tart crunch, but they make a beautiful platter garnish."

Show business experts say that to be successful, one must have "the total package." Over the years Glassman has experimented with promising tomato varieties, but some never make the cut. "Several years ago I was so intrigued by the 'Snowball' tomato – a completely white tomato," she recalls. "And I kept growing them, but the flavor was such a bust, they weren't worth it." She spent years picking and choosing varieties through the seasons, keeping some "stars" while discarding others. None of this information is written down. "I can look back on what I grew and remember what I liked. I can remember the tastes of certain tomatoes even years later."

What is this obsessive fascination with the tomato? "When you talk about a great dish like Peking Duck," Glassman says, "it's got a crunch, a sweet, a sour – it's got a little of everything. So when I think about a tomato platter, I want a visual taste of every flavor – the cherries are sweeter, the bigger ones can be meatier with more intense flavors."

That's why the burl bowl containing a dizzying hue of ping pong shaped tomatoes draws immediate comments from the guests passing through the buffet. The oversized purple basil leaves fan the red, orange, yellow, mahogany and green tomatoes like a ruffled Vera Wang dress. After being tossed gently with a light basil drizzle, the tomatoes will be lifted from a large bowl onto dozens of square white plates. Nearly nine months of a journey from all parts of the world, from seed to carefully grown clusters, the tomatoes dazzle each plate. Almost too pretty to eat.

About the author: Kay Stephens is a Midcoast Maine freelance writer whose work has appeared in Maine newspapers as well as *The Maine Times*, *Face Magazine*, *Working Waterfront* and *The Real Maine*.



An array of tasty, colorful, locally grown tomatoes served with various types of basil is one specialty of Swan's Way Catering. Sean Carnell photo.



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