

# BACON, LETTUCE, AND PERFECTION

BY ERIC FRANCIS

I came to the BLT late in life.

There's no excuse for that. When it comes to sandwiches, the BLT is fundamental—after all, it's known by its initials alone. Walk into just about any kitchen in America and mention that you've got a hankering for a BLT and they'll know what you're talking about. The only other sammie I can think of that works the same way is the PB&J, another hall-of-famer. But, to be frank, I wouldn't touch either as a kid, seeing as one had peanut butter (which I disliked) and the other had tomatoes (which I distrusted). Even the lure of bacon couldn't tempt me, and that's saying something.

Eventually my palate grew up and I succumbed to the wonder that is the fresh tomato. Once I was in the fold, the answers to many of life's mysteries became clear: the allure of the BLT, the reason tomato soup is the soup so many other soups are based upon, and why the state's oldest ongoing festival is the Bradley County Pink Tomato Festival. There's no better fruit to eat fresh off the vine and still warm from the sun. And here we are in high summer, when the absolute best selection makes its way to roadside stands and farmers' markets and those grocery stores that care enough to stock local 'maters.

Given how long sandwiches have been around—since sometime in the mid-1700s—it strikes me as odd that the BLT didn't gather any steam until last century. Perhaps the Right Honorable John Montagu, the Fourth Earl of Sandwich and reputed inventor of the hand-held meal that bears his name, still harbored the British squeamishness toward the tomato, despite the fact that its reputation for being inedible at best (and poisonous at worst) had long been overcome by Europe's culinary powers. That's the only explanation for why he didn't have some nice, juicy tomato slapped between those two slices of bread along with the meat.

As it happens, the BLT was a Baby Boomer, so to speak, gaining in popularity on our shores after World War II. The Internet tells me this is thanks to the growing ubiquity of supermarkets, which meant people could get the ingredients nearly year-round instead of having to wait for the requisite flora to be in season. That may have established the BLT in our national consciousness, but it also led to the mass-production mentality that dooms so many good foodstuffs. After all, when a national chain needs tomatoes by the millions every year, quantity will ultimately trump quality.

And, hey, I admit to being guilty of supporting that system. I've bought plenty of those flavorless red softballs that pass for *S. lycopersicum* over the years, and my excuses are lame. I have a black thumb, so trying to grow my own really amounted to a death sentence for the poor plants. I'd see roadside stands while

driving out in the country, but be in too much of a hurry to stop. I'd get hungry for a BLT *right now* and the supermarket tomato was the path of least resistance.

No more! A few years ago I made a discovery while browsing the stalls at the farmers' market in Argenta. There's a Russian fellow named Val who brings in some mighty fine produce, and on that particular summer day I was craving a BLT and looking for the prime ingredients. There, on Val's table, I beheld a lovely, fist-sized tomato that was as yellow as a lemon. Its very appearance spoke to me of sun-soaked days in an Arkansas field, and I swear I could almost see the flavor. I bought two of the beauties, some good-looking lettuce from another farmer, and a loaf of oat-molasses bread (it's not as dreary as it sounds, I swear!), then headed for the house. Mayo I had, as well as bacon from some folks in Morrilton who have a way with pork bellies. I wasted no time in frying up the pig, slicing the bread nice and thick and the tomatoes nice and thin, and

bringing it all together into a whole that was way, way greater than the sum of its parts.

One bite into that sandwich and my mind was blown. Never had I tasted a tomato that was so... so... well, *perfect* was the word that came to mind that day. Its flavor was sublime, yet wasn't lost to the potency of the bacon. It was firm yet yielding, and just juicy enough. What I had in my hands was the BLT that reduced every other one that I'd eaten to just a sandwich with some tomato and bacon and lettuce on it. I'm not ashamed to say that I scarfed that sandwich and immediately made another. I wish I'd bought ten of those sunny, yellow tomatoes from the Russian

farmer; heck, I wish I'd followed him home and pulled a few of his tomato plants up while he wasn't looking.

In short, I'd finally come to appreciate why the French call the tomato *la pomme d'amour*—the love apple.

The yellow tomato certainly seemed to be the zenith. But being a journalist, I must be thorough in my investigations. Since then I've delved into every heirloom tomato at my farmers' market. I mean no disrespect to the Bradley County Pink—a magnificent creature in its own right—but I'm finding folks from all around Arkansas who are turning out the most decadent varieties, be they pink or yellow or red or green or (trust me on this one) practically purple. Indeed, I recently stumbled upon a tomato labeled as a Carbon Black and, to my great astonishment, it went and knocked that yellow one clean off the pedestal I'd erected for it. Never have I had a tomato so flavorful and robust, and never have I eaten a BLT so divine.

I wonder if the people who grew it would miss a couple rows of plants.  
*Columnist Eric Francis makes his BLTs in North Little Rock.*

