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SHAKEN & STIRRED

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Like a Salad in a Cocktail

TOMATO growers in the Northeast, many of whose crops have been decimated by an outbreak of a plant illness called late blight, could probably use a stiff drink right about now. Today's column, alas, is not for them.

That's because tomatoes, regardless of the regional blight, have all but exploded onto cocktail menus this summer, as bartenders increasingly embrace a philosophy, called "farm to bar," in which fresh local produce plays as important a role as the liquor. Long the stars of farmers' markets, heirloom tomatoes have caught bartenders' fancies in a major way. The result is a slew of tomato-based cocktails that leave the Bloody Mary way behind.

"The tomato, as most people now know, is a fruit," said Adam Seger, the general manager and sommelier at Nacional 27 in Chicago, whose monthly cocktail class at the restaurant was focused this month on mixing heirloom tomato cocktails. "It has a natural balance between sweetness and acidity, and lends itself



STEVE KAGAN FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

FLAVOR EXPLOSION The Heirloom Tomato Mojito, at Nacional 27 in Chicago.

wonderfully to drinks."

Mr. Seger reserves a plot of fruits and vegetables at a Wisconsin farm strictly for the restaurant's bar. He features a trio of tomato cocktails on his menu, including an Heirloom Tomato Mojito in which muddled tomatoes and herbs are mixed with gin then topped with a bracing fizz of tonic water: the cocktail as salad, or vice versa.

At Barbounia, a Mediterranean restaurant on Park Avenue South in Manhattan, the restaurant's third annual "tomato festival," which continues through Aug. 30, features an addition to its tomato-themed menu: cocktails, including a dill-infused Greekjito, in which muddled tomatoes are mixed with ouzo.

More complex was a cocktail I tasted last week at L'Artusi, in the West Village. That drink, the El Pomodoro, is a mixture of tomato water (made by straining puréed tomatoes for several hours, to capture the pink, delicately flavored juice), Calabrian chili oil and Sombra mezcal, served on the rocks; the drink was so savory it almost seemed meaty, less a salad than a main course.

Mr. Seger said that gin, with its botanical edge, and tequila, with its "rich herbaceousness," were ideal foils for tomatoes. But vodka, too, has a role to play, especially when mixed with tomato water. "With vodka, you can elevate that pure tomato essence," he said. Case in point: the Bloodless Mary at Vue, the restaurant at the Hotel Le Bleu in Park Slope, Brooklyn, in which tomato water is spiked with vodka, dry vermouth and hints of lemon juice and hot sauce. It's like a Bloody Mary cranked down to a low, elegant whisper.

Vodka also lends its soft voice to the Summer Crush, at the greenhouse-equipped restaurant Summer Winter in Burlington, Mass., in which heirloom tomatoes are muddled with Thai basil, basil-infused simple syrup and chunks of watermelon, then shaken with vodka.

This year's bumper crop of tomato cocktails, Mr. Seger said, is symptomatic of a larger trend, with Americans moving away from sweeter cocktails toward more savory and adventurous drinks. That may spell good news for area tomato growers — for next year, anyway.

HEIRLOOM TOMATO MOJITONICO

Adapted from Nacional 27

Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper, for rim

1/2 lime, cut into sections

1/2 cup heirloom tomatoes, roughly chopped

1/4 cup fresh herbs (like basil, tarragon, thyme, chives or mint) loosely packed and not chopped

1 1/2 ounces gin

2 ounces tonic water, or to taste.

Rim a 16-ounce glass by moistening the edge with a lime wedge, then dipping the glass into a small plate filled with equal parts salt and pepper. Into the same glass add the tomatoes, herbs and lime sections, then muddle, gently, until the mixture is equal parts juice and solids. Add ice, stir, then add the gin, and stir again. Top with the tonic water.

Yield: 1 drink.