

Historian studies quest for the 12-month tomato

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A doctoral candidate in Penn State's Department of History, John Hoenig has focused his research on the evolution of the tomato industry, adding to our understanding of America's consumer culture. Credit: Patrick Mansell

(Phys.org) —Is there an item on the average household's dinner table so roundly scorned as the wintertime tomato? The plastic-like red globe is typically so barren of authentic taste and texture that it epitomizes the industrialization of food, says John Hoenig, a doctoral candidate in

history at Penn State. Yet he points to that very same tomato as a symbol of victory—tangible evidence of Americans' success in transcending traditional patterns of seasonality in their diets.

Hoenig has made "the quest for the 12-month tomato" the focus of his research.

Farmers and consumers, rather than big business, drove that quest, he asserts. It's a notion that runs contrary to the views of most historians of food and agriculture, who use the tomato as an indicator of the cultural, political, and economic control that a relatively small number of [large corporations](#) have over the food Americans consume.

"Evidence shows that the tomato industry remained highly decentralized and geographically dispersed, at least through the 1930s," Hoenig explains. "It did not follow the same route as the meat and grain industries, where a handful of corporate giants dominated production by the late 1800s."

Although some historians have cited Heinz and Campbell's as proof that big business ruled the tomato, in truth, Hoenig continues, those two companies marketed primarily ready-to-serve products, such as ketchup and tomato soup, and did little with fresh and canned tomatoes. He notes that in 1909, for example, the U. S. Department of Agriculture reported that consumers purchased an average of six pounds of canned whole tomatoes, but only three-tenths of a pound of canned soups and so little ketchup that it was statistically insignificant.

Canned tomatoes represent the other component in the search for the 12-month tomato. The canned product was desirable as a year-round staple because it could easily be adapted to most ethnic and cultural preferences for tomatoes as part of recipes for other dishes. On a per capita basis in 1920, a typical year, Americans consumed on average 27

pounds of canned tomatoes annually, along 14 pounds of fresh, commercially grown tomatoes and many more pounds of fresh, homegrown tomatoes.

In the form of canned or fresh tomatoes, the industry was remarkably dispersed geographically and in ownership. Canning technology was relatively simple, and entry into the field did not require a huge up-front investment. In 1925, there were more than 1,500 companies nationwide operating canneries, and many of them operated multiple plants. Canneries had to be located close to farms, since ripe tomatoes did not ship well. Early in the 20th century, large quantities of tomatoes were grown commercially from New Jersey, Delaware and Maryland to Indiana and Illinois, and also in Florida and Texas. Some for fresh consumption included those raised in greenhouses, which further extended seasonal availability and supported decentralization among growers in the northern states.

"Many people think of having fresh tomatoes as a kind of post-World War II phenomenon," Hoenig says, "but fresh wintertime tomatoes were commonly available as early as the 1920s, though at prices that only fairly affluent families could afford. The Zuck Greenhouse in Erie, for instance, produced 150,000 pounds of tomatoes in 1924."

Those tomatoes may not have been especially tasty, Hoenig admits, but there was another factor in play besides the innate need to have food available year round.

"Americans, in particular, have fallen in love with the 12-month tomato because it means we have conquered nature, and that is something especially appealing to our nation's traditional 'can-do' spirit," he says.



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

'... how we as people change through the process of industrialization ...'

John Hoenig describes himself as a cultural historian, rather than a specialist in food or agricultural history. He came to Penn State in 2007 after finishing undergraduate work at Southern Methodist University in his native Texas. He's studying with Gary Cross, Distinguished Professor of Modern History.

Cross aims his own work in cultural history toward audiences beyond the academy and has authored several well-received books on topics related to consumers and consumption. "I encourage my students to ask probing questions about the present that can be explained by the past," Cross says.

Hoenig says he's interested in food because "it gives me a way to delve into a variety of subjects and to look at the lives of ordinary people, not just the elites. I'm especially interested in how we as people change through the process of industrialization, and how our culture has shaped [industrialization](#)."

A description of Hoenig's work defies neat compartmentalization. The interdisciplinary nature of his scholarship is reflected in his article, "A Tomato for All Seasons: A Study in the Geography of American Tomato Production, 1900-1945," accepted by the journal *Business History Review* for publication later this year. He also presented a paper at a recent meeting of the Agricultural History Society.

In pursuing his research, Hoenig has delved into a wide variety of source materials—publications and other archival documentation from various state agricultural experiment stations and the U.S. [Department of Agriculture](#) and Bureau of Agricultural Economics; trade periodicals; census data; and record samples from canneries. Later this year he expects to visit the University of California at Davis, long a center for tomato research, and examine archival records and personal papers of a number of leaders in plant breeding and genetics. He's also made extensive use of restaurant menus from about 1880 to 1920, which can give a good indication of the availability and cost of fresh tomatoes, and of popular periodicals such as *Good Housekeeping* magazine, which include recipes that reflect popular food preferences.

'We have a different culture for tomatoes . . .'

Around the time of World War II, the tomato industry started to catch up with meat and grain, becoming more centralized as many canneries went out of business or were bought out, and many farmers turned to other crops. Large companies such as Hunts and Del Monte became well-known to millions of Americans. In defining the restructuring of the

tomato industry, Hoenig's research is still a work in progress, as he continues to assess factors that underlay centralization.

"War-related shortages of labor and fuel, and demand by the military for tomato products of consistent quality and in enormous quantities certainly had an impact, but the specifics are still not clear," he says. He is weighing the impact of the introduction of mechanical harvesters in the post-war era, changes in patent laws that protected—or did not protect—new tomato varieties, and the shifting role played by state agricultural experiment stations, many of which were tied to land-grant universities.

"Since the late 19th century, the ag experiment stations were generally among the forces that encouraged decentralization," Hoenig explains. "They disseminated research-based information on soil quality, plant diseases, breeding, and many other topics that ultimately persuaded many farmers to adopt tomatoes as a cash crop. A grower in rural Ohio, for example, might rely on station bulletins for information on selling his crop at the best price in the New York market—to know when to ship and what varieties were the most desirable in that market."

But experiment stations' influence waned as agricultural research became more complex and expensive, and corporate funding of research emerged.

When asked what "take-away" his dissertation might have for the average consumer, Hoenig points to something called the "doctrine of natural advantage." In food production, the doctrine assumes that intense concentration of production—in this case, of tomatoes—is an inevitable result of the advantages of geographic location. Thus southern California has the advantages that best suit it as the nation's low-cost, year-round tomato-grower, Iowa is naturally an ideal place to grow corn for the nationwide market, Nebraska specializes in meat-packing, Idaho has the

advantage for potatoes and so on.

Hoenig questions the validity of that assumption, noting that the history of tomato production suggests that concentration is not always the best course or the one that yields lowest cost. Tomato growers and canners followed traditional methods and worked in a decentralized environment for nearly a century, and they satisfied consumers' desires. "The very fact that we have a 12-month tomato is proof of their success," he declares.

He emphasizes that he does not reject big business or corporate agriculture, nor is he necessarily advocating going back to old ways. Instead, the history of the tomato industry should make us think about the way our food culture has evolved and the way we want it to continue to evolve.

"We have a different culture for tomatoes than we do for, say, meat and grain, and we should recognize that," he explains. "We think about tomatoes. We think about the varieties we want, how we'll prepare them, who we'll serve them to, how they might complement certain ethnic dishes, and so forth. The popularity of the organic and all-natural and buy local movements, and the ease of growing tomatoes in our own backyards, all mean that the tomato industry will continue to be decentralized and dispersed to a significant degree."

Given his scholarly immersion in [tomatoes](#), does Hoenig the consumer have a taste for them? Yes indeed, he says. "I used to grow them—not currently, I don't have the space—but I hope to grow them again."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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