Oh luscious tomatoes

Raw vegetables are dangerous and must be thoroughly fried, steamed, and boiled into submission. So thought our ancestors. The original sin of a recalcitrant vegetable was of course lessened by heat, but the conscientious nineteenth-century cook continued to boil it long after it had sogged into a jelly-like mass, just in case some evil remained.

In the nineteenth century an hour's cooking barely sufficed for cabbage and for corn on the cob. They did not fix broccoli at all, and I can understand why. I have tried to imagine broccoli after an hour of cooking, but the mind rares back and refuses even to approach the sheer horror.

Which reminds me of an event in the summer of 1956, when my classmate Patsy Sutherland and I lived with Grandpa Hess while we went to business college in Missoula, Montana. Grandpa was a crusty old widower, set in his own way of housekeeping, but he tried to be gracious. In midsummer he bought a whole crate of tomatoes. Luscious, red, ripe tomatoes. They sat in the cellarway for two days, and each time Patsy and I passed them our mouths watered. Each evening we thought he'd invite us to have a tomato or two, but he didn't. When we arrived home on the third evening, he said, "Girls! I fixed the tomatoes today. Help yourselves!"

He had stewed every last one of them.

Some of those old tomato recipes are good, though. The originator of Tomatoes Maryland probably had an old-fashioned wood stove that could gently simmer something all afternoon on a back burner or in the oven. Which means this was most likely a fall or winter dish rather than a summer one, as people let the cookstove fire go out on summer afternoons.

TOMATOES MARYLAND

Break into bits 2 slices of stale bread. Add to 4 cups canned or fresh tomatoes, peeled and quartered, with half an onion, chopped, and about 2/3 cup brown sugar. Salt lightly.

Bring the mixture to a boil and simmer gently for 3 hours, stirring occasionally.

My notes say, "It does need three hours to cook, even with the pan lid off most of the time. Perhaps some of the thin tomato juices could be poured off at the beginning, shortening the cooking time."

Tomatoes Maryland is the kind of sweet side dish American cooks like to serve with chicken or pork. I was going to say, "cooks from regions other than the Northeast." Then I remembered applesauce with pork, cranberry sauce with turkey, mint jelly with lamb, and baked beans with salt pork. Not to mention pancakes and syrup with sausages cuddled up close. And mincemeat pie, that ultimate mixture of meat and sweet. (And, yes, real mincemeat, as opposed to a packaged mix, does contain meat.)

I will add that some people of Grandpa's generation did eat diced raw garden tomatoes for breakfast, just as one would eat strawberries, with sugar and cream. You see, it was safe to eat them raw with sugar and cream, because the tomatoes then ceased to be a vegetable and became a fruit.

And actually those old-time breakfasters were right. Fresh vine-ripened tomatoes are good with sugar and cream. Let's face it, most things are good with sugar and cream. And of course tomatoes really are a fruit.

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