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You say tomato, I say Campari

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BY [JANET RAUSA FULLER](#) Staff Reporter

It's bigger than a cherry tomato, smaller than a Roma and, some say, as sweet as homegrown -- only you don't have to wait until late summer to get this new tomato variety.

Developed in Europe by a Dutch company, the greenhouse-grown Campari tomato accounts for just 2 percent of total U.S. tomato sales, according to the Perishables Group, the Chicago-based company marketing it.

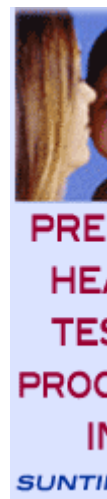
But the buzz over this little-known variety has been building. Last year, sales of Campari tomatoes totaled \$31 million, up 51 percent over 2004, said Kari Volyn of the Perishables Group.






They've even had a taste of celebrity -- as props in an episode of the HBO hit show "The Sopranos" and in the movie "In Her Shoes," starring Cameron Diaz, according to two of the three licensed growers in North America.

"There are thousands of tomato varieties out there," said Keith Neal, produce buyer for Costco Wholesale, the first major U.S. retailer to carry Campari tomatoes. "Is this No. 1 out of a thousand for this size? Maybe. Out of the known ones, we think it is."

'Right mix of sugar and acid'

The Campari, which has been in production commercially in the United States for about three years, is noticeable for its unique size, akin to a golf ball, and its fashionable name, which marketers hope strikes a chord with consumers the way specific varieties of, say, apples do.



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Gwendolyn Ford, 74, picks up Campari tomatoes last week at a Jewel-Osco in the South Loop. The store started carrying the tomatoes about four months ago. (BRIAN JACKSON/SUN-TIMES)

"The variety name is what we're trying to educate consumers on," Volyn said.

But flavor is its biggest selling point, said Dwight Ferguson, president and CEO of Eurofresh Farms in Arizona, the only U.S. grower of Camparis. The two other growers are in Canada.

"It's the right mix of sugar and acid that really gives it a true tomato taste," Ferguson said.

That's an elusive quality, especially in winter in Chicago, says Gwendolyn Ford. The retired teacher eats a tomato a day and says most tomatoes she

comes across in supermarkets are "mushy on the inside."

"Once in a while, I get a good one, but I can't tell by the feel. Now, these look good," said Ford, 74, perusing a pack of Campari tomatoes at the Jewel-Osco in the South Loop, which started carrying them about four months ago.

Camparis have competition in the increasingly crowded produce aisle from other specialty on-the-vine varieties, among them mini-plum tomatoes being sold under a label featuring celebrity chef Emeril Lagasse. And they aren't cheap -- a one-pound package at the South Loop Jewel sells for \$4.49.

Still, the store goes through a case of Camparis a day, assistant produce manager Melvin Strong said. Among the dozen or so types of tomatoes the store carries, "they're the sweetest," he said.

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