



TWO SMALL FARMS

Community Supported Agriculture

October 22, 23, 24 2008

Tomatillos de Milpa, by Andy Griffin

The tomatillo is related to the tomato in the same way that you and I are related to Baboons; we share certain physiological and behavioral traits with our primate cousins, but we can't cross. Tomatillo fruits look like immature green tomatoes but they're wrapped in a papery husk. Both plant species are in the *Solanaceae*, and like tomatoes, tomatillos are used throughout Latin America to make salsa, and they're fried, baked, used in soups, or sliced thin for salads or sandwiches. The cultivar of tomatillo I usually grow is called Toma Verde. The seed is easy to get, the plants are vigorous, the harvest is generous, and the plump fruits have a pleasant sweet/tart flavor. Yet in spite of Toma Verde's impressive list of domestic virtues, Ramiro Campos told me it was an insipid excuse for a tomatillo. "Wait until you taste salsa verde made with the tomatillos de milpa that grow wild on our ranch in Jalisco," Ramiro said. "You'll never grow Toma Verde again!"

Ramiro worked with me when I was a partner in Riverside Farms, and he and his family lived with me. There's a flat one-acre field with decent soil below my house. Ramiro proposed that we go in as partners and grow a garden on it with the foods he missed from Mexico. If I donated the field to the project and the tractor to work the soil, he offered to do the sowing and cultivating. We'd split the profits equally.

I considered Ramiro's idea carefully. All I have had for water at my home ranch is a spring that was dug out by great-grandfather and lined with bricks a hundred years ago. A little domestic pump brings the water up to the house, and there's barely enough flow to wash the dishes, bathe, and flush the toilet.

"We don't have much water," I said. "If we raise a crop, but we can't clean our clothes, then where's the profit?"

"Someday you'll visit us at our ranch in Jalisco, Andrés," Ramiro said, "and you'll see how much we can do without water."

We walked to the fence and looked out across into the field that spread beneath us. "See how the field is slightly dished?" Ramiro said, pointing. "This field catches rain. A foot down the topsoil turns to adobe, and adobe holds the moisture for a long time. If we're careful when we sow, the crops will root into damp soil and follow the moisture down as the water table recedes in the summer. I'll keep the field clean, so we don't lose any moisture to weeds."

I didn't have much to lose.

Ramiro's uncle came back from a Christmas visit to Jalisco, and he brought tomatillo de milpa seeds from plants he found growing wild in the huerta and a sack of garbanzo beans. Ramiro plowed the field in the second week of February, and hilled it up

in rows. Half the rows he sowed with garbanzo beans and half the beds he left blank to soak up more rain. He planted trays with tomatillo seed in my greenhouse. When the weather permitted, he cultivated the field with the tractor, destroying the weeds that had sprouted between the rows of emerging garbanzos and loosening the soil.

The garbanzos grew green and lush and set the first flowers. Ramiro called on his brother, Renato, to come and help him weed the rows. Then the two of them transplanted out the young tomatillo de milpa plants. By the middle of spring the garbanzos began to set seed, two beans per pod. Ramiro could hardly wait for the harvest. "Nothing tastes as much like spring as fresh garbanzos," he said. "Shell the beans while they're still tender and plump and fry them in a little butter until they're bright green. Wrap them in a tortilla with a little salsita and some scrambled eggs, and you've got lonche."

"I'm sure glad I didn't sign on to do the labor for this project," I said. "With only two garbanzo beans per pod, and only ten pods per plant, it's going to take you and Renato all month to pick dinner."

"We don't pick the beans, Andrés," Ramiro said. "We harvest whole plants, and make huge bunches. Then we pile the back of the pick-up high with them. When the housewives walk down the street and see the mountains of fresh garbanzos in the truck, they'll crowd around. You watch! They buy the bunches, and they pick the beans."

I admired Ramiro's campesino logic, but I needed to know more about the Mexicana ama de casa.

"What kind of a value is that? Women don't have time to shell beans. How many beans are there per bunch, anyway?"

"When you come to Jalisco, you'll understand," Ramiro said. "It's hot during

the spring at the ranch. And after they pick the garbanzo beans out of the bunch, the women take the leaves and put them in large clay jars. They fill the jar with spring water and set it outside."

"We call that 'sun tea,'" I said.

"No," Ramiro said. "The sun's too hot. You want to put it in the shade. The garbanzo leaves exude an acidic nectar that infuses the water with a most delicious tang. When we come back to the house after a day in the sun— don't talk about cerveza— there's nothing healthier or more refreshing than cool garbanzo water!"

Ramiro picked the first garbanzos and his wife, Amparo, prepared a meal to show off the harvest. Part of me will always be disappointed when I eat in a Mexican restaurant because the meal, heavy as it may be with meat and beans and corn, never floats through my memory the way Amparo's fresh guiso de garbanzo does. It's true, too, what Ramiro said about garbanzo water. On a hot afternoon in the fields, a thermos bottle full of cool garbanzo water beats a six pack of cerveza any day, because you can drink

This Week

Tomatillos ^{MF}

Baby Bear Pumpkin ^{MF}

Tomatoes ^{MF}

Salad Mix ^{HG}

Hot Chiles ^{MF}

Cauliflower OR Mei Quin Choy ^{HG}

Leeks OR Strawberries ^{MF}

Scallions ^{MF}

Cilantro OR Radishes ^{HG}

Flowers: Mixed Bouquet ^{HG,*}

long and deep, and you're left satisfied, with a clear head. But what about the tomatillos de milpa?

Ramiro's tomatillos grew like weeds throughout the spring, even though our last rain fell on the first of April. By June, the field was a galaxy of yellow stars, as the tomatillos showed off their five-petaled blossoms. The green papery husks appeared next, and slowly, through June and into July, tiny, nascent tomatillos gradually swelled within them into round green fruits. One day Ramiro finally filled the crown of his cowboy hat with tomatillos de milpa. He held out the hat for me to inspect. The fruits were much smaller than tomatillos I was familiar with, hardly larger than a marble, and firm. Each tiny tomatillo was wrapped in a sticky, papery husk. Some of the fruits were purple, others green or yellow.

"It looks like a lot of work to prepare them," I said.

"The small size of the tomatillos de milpa doesn't come at the cost of flavor," Ramiro said. "All that's missing is the muddy taste of irrigation water. You'll see."

We built a fire in the yard and laid a comal on the coals. When the comal was hot, we peeled away their papery wrappers and spread the tiny tomatillos de milpa across it. We toasted them until the skins split with the heat. Amparo laid cebollas de rabo verde, or "green-tailed onions" around the edge of the fire to roast. She threw a handful of serrano peppers on the comal. When everything was ready she got out her mano y molcajete, or mortar and pestle. She mashed the roasted onions and tomatillos together with salt and a little flame blistered serrano chile, and served up an autentico salsita verde del rancho to complement the beans and potatoes in a brace of perfect taquitos.

"Riquissimo!" I said. "The tastiest! And the profit?"

That was a sore point. From a financial point of view our partnership hadn't been much of a success. After Ramiro and Renato had harvested the garbanzos, they'd gone to town with a pick-up load of huge, leafy-green bunches. The Jaliscana amas de casa crowded around the pick-up with their arms outstretched, hungry for a taste of home. But they balked at his prices.

"A dollar fifty a bunch? Why, I never paid that much for garbanzo in the tianguis at home!"

Ramiro ended up giving half the bunches of fresh garbanzos away to the workers on our farm.

When the tomatillo harvest came Ramiro put Renato's wife Chupina in charge of sales. He and Renato loaded my pick-up with crates of tomatillo de milpa and drove Chupina, down to the corner of Porter Drive and San Juan Road in Pajaro. An excited crowd of amas de casa crowded around the pick-up truck and admired the baskets of tiny tomatillos—"Ay, que lindo! Just like the tomatillos from mi tierra!"

But the housewives didn't want to pay any more for tomatillos de milpa than they'd pay for big, fat regular Toma Verde tomatillos down the street at the fruteria. "Un peso," they cried, "Un peso," thrusting single dollar bills in Chupina's face, and ignoring the sign that read "dos dolares por libra."

It's one thing to sell tomatillos for a dollar a basket if you can fill the basket with five plump, sweet/tart Toma Verde fruits, but it's entirely different if it takes fifty tiny, sweeter and tarter tomatillos de milpa. The cost per hour for labor to harvest remains the same, no matter the size of the fruit. For tomatillo de milpa to be as profitable as Toma Verde, they'd have to cost ten dollars a basket. Ramiro had paid Renato out of pocket to help pick the tomatillos de milpa, and on top of that, he paid Chupina for the time she spent trying to sell the tomatillos de milpa on the street corner. Ramiro was cross, but I was smiling. "We've profited equally," I said.

Ramiro scowled.

"Hey, we've both profited," I said. "Now I know how good food on the ranch can be, and now you understand why I worry about the cost of labor all the time. Not because I want to—but because I have to! Amas de casa are the center of our universe, but they're thrifty."

"Amparo isn't thrifty enough," he said.

That was true. One of the problems between Ramiro and Amparo was her credit account at Joyeria Don Roberto. I changed the subject. "On the ranch in Jalisco, where money is scarce, picking wild tomatillos de milpa in the huerta is a necessity born of poverty, but up here, where there's more money, it's time that's scarce, and eating like a campesino is a luxury!"

Ramiro got the last laugh. When their daughter, Jessica, reached school age, Ramiro and Amparo returned to Jalisco so she could get a proper Mexican education. Ramiro bought a ranch with the money he earned in California, and now he raises goats and makes cheese. His offer to host me when I travel to Jalisco still stands, and one day I'll make the trip. But no matter how novel Jalisco will seem to me, some things will be familiar—like the tomatillos. Every spring in the field below my house where we once planted out our Jaliscano garden, Ramiro's wild tomatillos de milpa sprout like weeds among my herb beds. It's my business decision to grow Toma Verde, but Ramiro might say it's my own damn fault if I choose to eat them.

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Notes and Recipes

Storage notes: Leave the tomatillos, tomatoes, hot chiles, and pumpkin out on your kitchen counter. Store the rest of your veggies in your refrigerator.

Baby Bear Pumpkins are excellent for cooking. Yes, they are of course Jack-O-Lantern-able as well. The easy way for cooking these is to cut the top off. Scoop out the seeds. Replace the top. Bake until a fork can easily go through. Serve just like that, or scrape out the sweet flesh to make soup or pie or muffins or other recipe.

Roasted Tomatillo Sauce with Greens, adapted from a recipe in the newest *Joy of Cooking*

Roast in an oven that's preheated to 400 degrees in a single layer on an oiled baking pan for 15-30 minutes, until nicely browned:

husked and rinsed tomatillos	halved tomatoes
1–3 spicy peppers such as anaheims, hungarians, or other, seeded	1–2 leeks, white parts only, or an onion or two, quartered
6–12 cloves of garlic	

Place the vegetables, including the juices, in a blender or food processor along with:

Several leaves of chard or spinach (optional)	1/3 cup chopped fresh cilantro
3/4 cup stock (vegetable or chicken) or more as needed	S & P to taste

Pulse until smooth, adding more stock if necessary to make a medium bodied sauce. Reheat gently in a small saucepan and serve immediately or store, covered, in the fridge for up to 2 days.

Everything in your box and the flowers are organically grown. From Mariquita Farm: tomatoes, peppers, tomatillos, pumpkins. From High Ground Organics: salad, cauliflower, cilantro, berries, leeks, mei quin choi, radishes, scallions.