

Posted on Fri, Jan. 28, 2005
UP FRONT AGRICULTURE

Trade group: Tomato has good taste but no style

In the tomato business, apparently looks matter more than taste. So said a committee that refused to let a variety of yummy -- but ugly -- tomatoes be shipped out of Florida.

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PLANT CITY - Robert Meade plucks a tomato from a box ready to be shipped to Florida supermarkets. It is round but puckered deeply like a prune. He selects another. It's smoother but elliptical in shape.

Maybe three in the box would be fit to be shipped out of state, says Meade, vice president of Procacci Bros., one of the country's biggest tomato producers: "Three out of 24."

Succulent but misshapen, Procacci's tomatoes are at the heart of a major food fight. Because the tomatoes look funny, the powerful Florida Tomato Committee deem only a rare few shapely enough to be sold beyond Florida's borders.

That doesn't sit well with tomato lovers near and far who say the rounder ones may be prettier but can sometimes taste like . . . well, cardboard.

They believe Florida's tastiest tomato is being discriminated against for a stupid reason: It is ugly.

It *is* ugly. Procacci Bros., in a nod to reality, has named its creation UglyRipes.

The New York Times wrote an editorial mocking the tomato committee's apparent reasoning that roundness trumps taste.

The committee, which takes these matters very seriously, insists it is acting responsibly.

BEST INTERESTS

Letting the ugliest of the uglies into produce sections, it fears, may turn consumers off Florida tomatoes altogether.

"The reality of the marketplace is that when you go into a supermarket, you look at 'em, you don't bite 'em," said Reginald L. Brown, committee manager. "If we didn't hold a common standard, that's not in the long-term best interest of the industry."

Determined to avoid having to plow under its Central Florida fields of UglyRipes, Procacci refuses to back down.

The company has hired a Washington, D.C., public relations firm to whip up public opinion against the committee, is considering asking the U.S. Department of Agriculture to intervene and is threatening to lobby Congress -- which created the committee in 1955 to regulate the quality of

Florida tomatoes for the USDA -- to get rid of the committee.

For Procacci Bros., time is of the essence: If it can't get action in two weeks, it will lose the whole winter growing season.

"Their regulation is working against the public interest," fumed Joe Procacci, the 78-year-old chief executive and co-founder of the Philadelphia-based company, adding that he's got the demand to prove it.

"My brother and I started this business 57 years ago and we've heard more consumer complaints that tomatoes taste like cardboard than anything else," he said. "So our goal has been a tastier tomato. We put three PhDs in a research department on this."

ON THE MARKET

Three years ago, after \$3 million and a decade of experimenting with heirloom variety of tomatoes, Procacci put the UglyRipe on the market. Scores of supermarket taste tests won over consumers despite the UglyRipe's deformed look and hefty price tag -- UglyRipes retail for about \$2.99 a pound. Sales tripled in the three years, although they still comprise only the thinnest slice of the tomato market.

"It's an excellent eating variety," said University of Florida horticultural scientist Stephen Olson. "It's got a very good name for itself. I've had people from all over ask about the ugly tomato."

The feds, for now, are staying out of it.

"We've talked with all sides," USDA spokesman George Chartier said. "We feel confident a resolution can be reached."

The state Department of Agriculture defers to the committee as well.

Until 2003, the tomato committee had granted the UglyRipe an exemption from roundness standards and Procacci Bros. could sell all it wanted.

The committee needed time to study the issue, Brown said.

A decision came last season when the committee voted 8-3 to hold the UglyRipe to roundness standards like the rest of the Florida round tomato crop.

Procacci said the ruling renders his harvest next to worthless. He has already had to destroy 600 of 700 acres and lay off 500 pickers and packers. "It cost me \$2.8 million plus potential sales profits," he raved.

He attributed the committee's change of heart to jealousy. "They feel threatened," he said. "They're all growers and competitors of ours."

Not the case, Brown said. The committee, he said, was simply holding up the standards for one of Florida's signature agricultural products as is its federal mandate. What Procacci calls special, he says, is really just "a branded round tomato with a marketing scheme."

The stricter standards may cause Procacci some "aggravation, but it's not catastrophic," Brown

said.

Brown said that almost 73 percent of UglyRipes make the grade for out-of-state shipment -- and the rest can be sold in Florida.

What Brown doesn't realize, Procacci said, is that 60 percent of his crop gets fed to cattle before it even goes before the standard-setters for judging. Why? Too ugly.

"They're so ugly, we won't even attempt to bring them to market," he said.