

Tomatillo was a popular vegetable among the Aztecs.

The Tomatillo (*Physalis spp*) is not the same as a green tomato. Even in Madison, WI if



you go to a Mexican grocery store and ask for “tomatoes” you will get tomatillos, if you want red tomato (*Solanium esculentum*), then you have to ask for “Jitomate”. It is likely that the Tomatillo played a much more important role in Mayan and Aztec culture and cuisine and the tomato was really a secondary vegetable. There is abundant evidence and discussion by Spanish scribes of the use and preparation of tomatillo

and the Chili pepper cuisine, but scant discussion of the tomato. I think the Aztecs and the Mayans had put some thought into this, and had made the best decision to domesticate the tomatillo. Moreover, I am personally convinced that if the Tomatillo had been introduced earlier into southern Europe, spaghetti sauce would be a vivacious but, subtle tomatillo lime green rather than gaudy ostentatious tomato fire engine red.

The Tomatillo, or as we refer to it as the “Green Goddess” is in the same Solanaceae family as tomato and chili peppers and all are native to Mesoamerica. The Solanaceae family is characterized by production of alkaloids for protection from herbivory, most alkaloids are often very bitter and toxic, for example, tomatine in tomato foliage, solanine in green potato tissue, some are psychoactive, tropane alkaloids in jimsonweed, some are the culinary equivalent of playing with fire, Capsasin in Chili peppers. I was personally addicted to the alkaloid nicotine, and because my doctor indicted I should eat at least five vegetables a day, I considered smoking a cigar the equivalent to the consumption of one vegetable. In contrast, the Tomatillo is very low in alkaloids, its evolutionary mechanism for protection from critters was to wrap its fruit and seeds in an overgrown calyx. Upon maturity, the fruit burst through the calyx and this is the indicator to us that it is time to make salsa Verde. The beautiful calyx itself has been domesticated innumerable times as an ornamental, ‘Chinese lantern’.

Among the many advantages of tomatillos compared to tomatoes, is that they can be stored for extended periods of time in the refrigerator with no deterioration of flavor or color. Compared to tomatoes, Tomatillos are higher in total sugars and dietary fiber and citric acid, but similar in Vitamin C (ascorbic acid) content. Because of the higher citric acid content, the flavor of tomatillos is brighter and crisper than tomatoes. Because tomatillos are less watery than tomatoes, the magic really comes in the preparation of fresh salsas. Preparation is easy with fresh fruit and a blender. First, the husk is easily removed. You will then notice that the fruit are covered with a sticky film which can be easily washed off in water. Then, salsa time! My two favorites are traditional salsa Verde made with tomatillos and Jalapeño peppers and the amazing salsa verde made with the addition of avocados – unbelievable!