



## Community Investment Partner: Red Tomato

*“We walk in solidarity with people who are poor and challenge structures that impoverish them.”*

– General Chapter ‘04

Canton, Massachusetts-based non-profit, Red Tomato stands out in a crowd. Red Tomato’s mission is connecting farmers and consumers through marketing, trade, and education. Their passionate belief is that a family-farm, locally based, incorporating ecological practices and using a fair trade food system is the way to a better tomato.

Red Tomato was founded in 1996. Michael Rozyne, one of the founders of the fair trade company Equal Exchange, wanted to explore what it might look like to apply the lessons and principles of the fair trade movement to support farmers in the Northeast. Local food had yet to grab mainstream, but it was clear that small and medium sized farms were losing their ability to compete in an increasingly consolidated, global marketplace. At the same time, fresh produce available to consumers had lost much of its flavor, seasonality, and even nutritional value thanks to standardization and long-distance transport and storage.

At first, Red Tomato functioned as a small warehouse and distribution operation, in addition to marketing, selling and helping to develop new products. Eventually, it became clear that a conventional distribution model at that scale could not compete economically. In a risky and carefully considered shift, Red Tomato closed its ware-

house, cancelled its truck lease, and began to concentrate on managing logistics through a network of farmers, independent truckers, and wholesale partners. This shift was carefully coupled with renewed focus on marketing, branding, and packaging to help give the farms and products more

visibility with consumers. Long-time supporters like the Adrian Dominican Sisters helped sustain Red Tomato through that important transition.

One of Red Tomato’s strategies for achieving its mission is to de-commodify, or add value by making products unique, hard to replace, and thus more valuable so that farmers compete more effectively in the marketplace. For decades, two generations of Bonannos, of Pleasant Valley Gardens (PVG) in Methuen, MA, followed a conventional marketing approach and shipped tens of thousands of cases of leaf lettuce and romaine to nearby supermarket warehouses. By the mid-nineties they noticed that they were being paid

the same price per case that they were getting a decade before, while the cost of boxes, fertilizer, and labor had gone up 50-200%.

“I was growing the best lettuce ever, selling to the same customers my father did,” recalls farmer Richard Bonanno of Pleasant Valley Gardens, Methuen, Massachusetts. “But the more lettuce I planted, the more money I lost.”

*(continued on back)*



**Aaron Clark, of Clark Brothers Orchards, having a discussion with Red Tomato founder, Michael Rozyne.**

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With that kind of math, something had to change. Red Tomato worked closely with this talented grower to find a way to change the math. The answer was packaged lettuce. The packaging allowed Red Tomato to tell the story of Pleasant Valley Gardens – giving the shoppers a way to identify local food in their grocery store. Today, two major supermarkets are carrying Romaine Hearts from PVG and the math looks good. Bonanno now earns more than twice per box. Best of all, his lettuce reaches the market in 48 to 72 hours, days fresher than its California counterpart.

**Innovative packaging contributed to a positive turn-around for Romaine Hearts from PVG.**



All told, Red Tomato now markets produce for a network of over 40 farms, and apple orchards (through the Eco Apple program). Over 200 retail stores in New England, New York, and the mid-Atlantic carry Red Tomato produce, as well as a few select markets outside the region. Red Tomato marketing and education efforts now reach thousands of consumers, and sales of produce grow steadily each year.

*– Laura Edwards-Orr  
Communications Associate,  
Red Tomato  
Diane Stalford, Art Director,  
Red Tomato (photos)*



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## **Red Tomato: Connecting Farmers and Consumers**



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