Inspired by his Italian heritage and stints in American foodie havens from Arizona to Alabama, Danny Abbruzzese—executive chef of the revamped Portola Hotel & Spa in Monterey, California—has created his own inimitable style of cooking.

Over the years, Abbruzzese has cooked his farm-to-fork cuisine for countless dignitaries, luminaries, and culinary legends at places like the Bernardus Lodge in Carmel Valley, where he assisted in the opening with chef Cal Stamenov. He clearly fell in love with the Monterey Peninsula: He’s spent the past two decades here, sharing his love of the natural bounty of the land and sea with travelers and locals alike. He worked closely with Cindy Pawlcyn in implementing her cuisine at the Monterey Bay Aquarium and ran a variety of organic food operations in Santa Cruz, including the marketside Pearl Alley Bistro, the oldest running wine bar in California (sadly, now closed). Says Abbruzzese: “I’d just grab a dolly and go pick my produce at the market, at the same time building lasting bonds, appreciation, and respect for the local farmers and artisans.”
World Tomato Society: Where do you like to buy your tomatoes?

Danny Abbruzzese: Coke Farm out of San Juan Batista—they are the best. Christine and Dale Cokes started in the 1980s and are brokers for the area. I originally thought it was a collaborative or co-op. They pull from 40 to 50 farms at any time of the year for a nominal fee, and they hold the farmers to certain safety and quality standards. So, they are teaching them about market standards while moving produce from small mom-and-pop farms. It’s unbelievable the variety of produce that is available, but they will even search for stuff and plant food for customers and follow up to see how it works out. Isn’t that cool?

I worked for the largest food corporation in the world, Aramark, in 2012 and 2013. It took us two years, but Coke was the first organic farm approved through the supply chain, which was incredible. We teamed up with Sysco FreshPoint and they guided them through the process. We expanded local food into the corporate mainstream. I’m extremely committed to local and sustainable food. I don’t just talk the talk, I walk the walk.

WTS: Which tomatoes varietals do you source from Coke Farms?

DA: All the heirloom tomatoes, Early Girl dry-farmed, San Marzano, and cherry tomatoes.

WTS: What are some of your favorite tomatoes to use in cooking?

DA: Brandywine, Amana Orange, and Green Zebra are great for salads; Early Girl dry-farmed tomatoes are incredible for sauces and salsas and to eat raw. I never met an heirloom tomato I didn’t like!

Coke Farm Heirloom Tomato Salad
Yield: 4

Ingredients:
4 medium heirloom tomatoes, sliced ¼ inch thick
8 mixed cherry tomatoes
1 bunch fresh basil
1 cup capers, fried in olive oil
4 balls fresh buffalo mozzarella, sliced ¼ inch thick
½ cup balsamic vinaigrette (see recipe below)
½ cup pickled red onions (see recipe below)
Sea salt and fresh ground black pepper to taste
Instructions:
Arrange 5–7 tomato slices, alternating varieties and colors, in a circle on four salad plates. Place sliced cheese in the center and season plate with sea salt and pepper. Dress tomatoes with vinaigrette, then whimsically garnish with cherry tomatoes, pickled red onions, fried capers, and basil leaves. Serve immediately.

Balsamic Vinaigrette

Ingredients:
½ cup extra virgin olive oil
½ cup balsamic vinegar
1 teaspoon minced garlic
1 tablespoon minced shallots
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
1 teaspoon fresh thyme
Kosher salt and black pepper to taste

Instructions:
Combine all ingredients in a mixing bowl and whisk for 2 minutes. Let stand for 10 minutes. Whisk again before serving.

Pickled Red Onions

Ingredients:
1 cup red onions, julienned
1 cup cold water
1 cup red wine vinegar
2 garlic cloves, halved
2 bay leaves
¼ cup kosher salt
¼ cup sugar

Instructions:
In a medium saucepan, combine cold water, red wine vinegar, garlic, bay leaves, salt, and sugar; simmer for 5 minutes. Once cool, add red onions. Cover and chill for 4 hours. Drain before using.