

Aaron Smith



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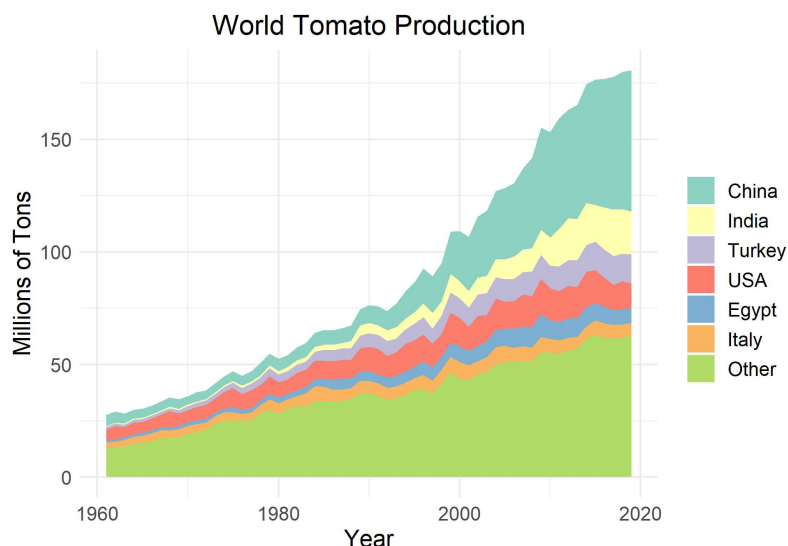
Mexican Tomatoes are Winning the American Market

by Wenjie Zhan and Yuhan Wang | November 24, 2021

This article was written by UC Davis ARE PhD students [Yuhan Wang](#) and [Wenjie Zhan](#). It is the fifth in a series of excellent articles written by students in my ARE 231 class this fall.

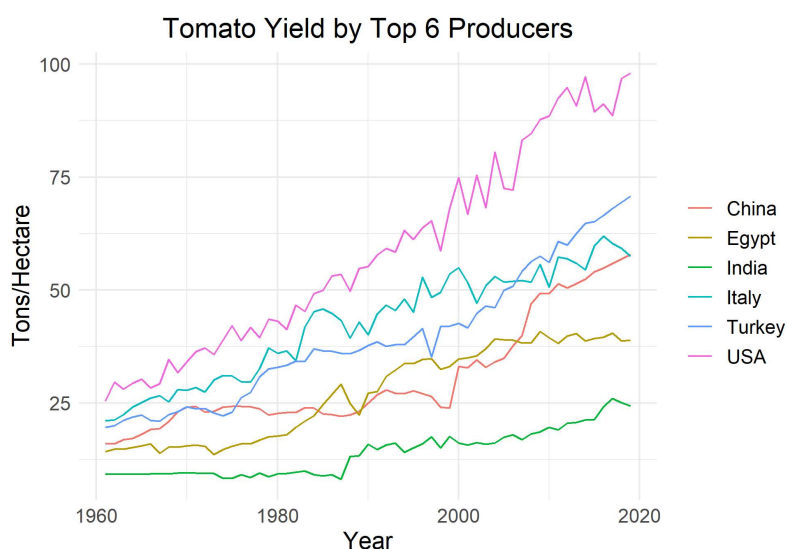
The tomato originated in western South America and Central America and spread around the world following the [Columbian Exchange](#). Containing many health-promoting compounds, tomatoes are now one of the most-consumed fruits in the world. The average American eats about 20 pounds of fresh tomatoes per year, two-thirds of which now come from Mexico.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), worldwide production of fresh and processed tomatoes was 180.8 billion metric tons in 2019. China is the world's largest producer of tomatoes, by far, followed by India, Turkey, the United States and Egypt. These top five countries produce 70% of global supply.



Source: FAOSTAT and R code at end of article

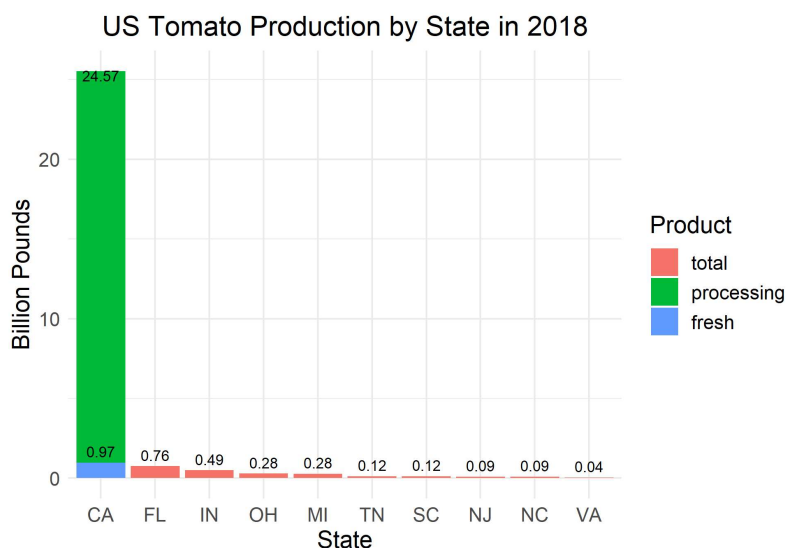
The US has the highest tomato yield among the top six tomato producers. Tomato yield in the US, which has almost quintupled over the past six decades, was about 100 metric tons per hectare in 2019.



Source: FAOSTAT and R code linked at end of article

Tomato is a warm-season vegetable crop. California produces 90% of US tomatoes, about 4% of which go to the fresh market and the remainder into processing. Since 2015, USDA has only reported total tomato production for states outside California, likely because essentially all production in those states is for the fresh market.

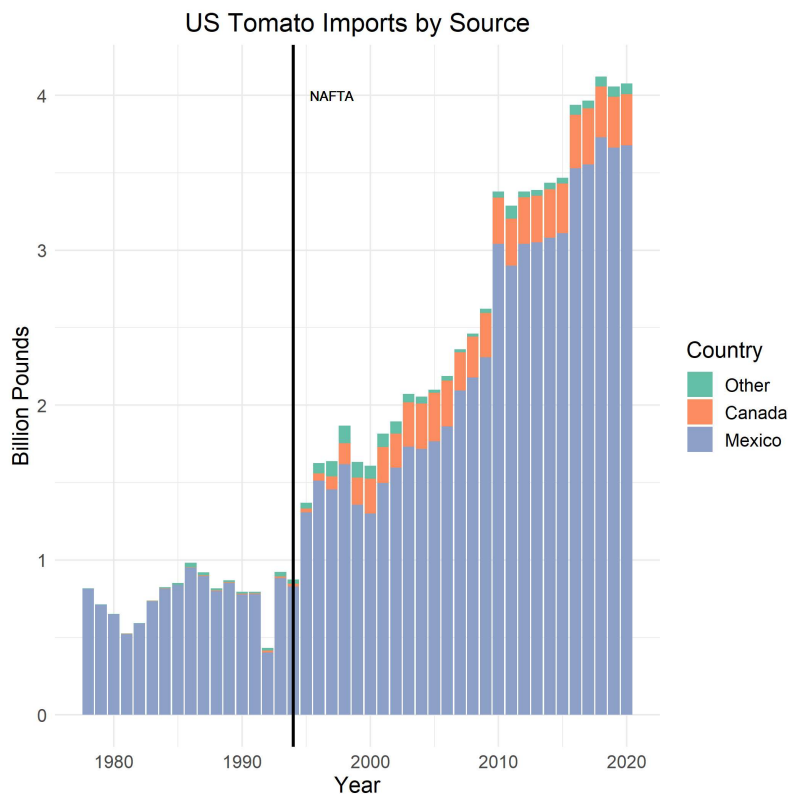
Florida used to be the largest producer in the US fresh tomato market, but its production has diminished gradually since 2000. One of the main reasons is that the use of methyl bromide, a soil fumigant used to control pests, was banned in Florida. [Methyl bromide](#) is blamed for depleting the earth's protective ozone layer. In 2010, California surpassed Florida as the largest fresh tomato producer in the US. California now produces about 1 billion pounds per year.



Source: USDA NASS and R code linked at end of article

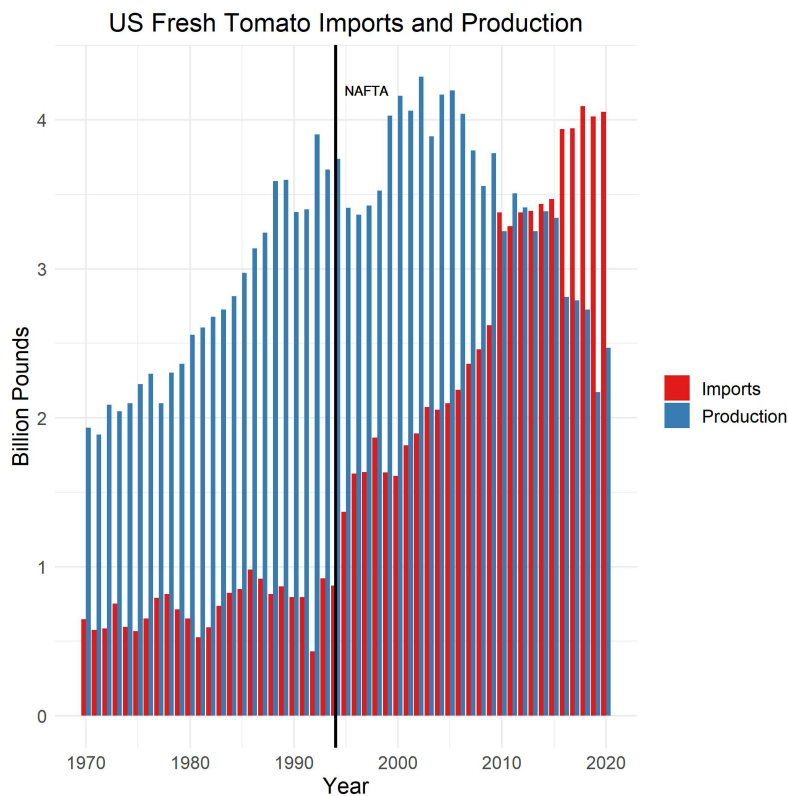
In the last 25 years, US imports of tomatoes have risen by 6 times from 0.6 billion pounds to 4 billion pounds. Mexico has been by far the largest exporter of fresh tomatoes to the US with Canada a distant second. Imports from both countries started to grow substantially after the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) signed in 1994. NAFTA was replaced by the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement, or USMCA in short, on July 1st, 2020, with only small changes in provisions.

Compared to 1994, the volume of imported fresh tomatoes from Mexico immediately jumped from 0.8 billion pounds to 1.3 billion pounds in 1995, which amounts to a 50% growth. The imports from Mexico continued to grow dramatically in the following decades, and reached 3.7 billion pounds in 2020, which accounts for 90.7% of US total imports of tomatoes.



Source: USDA and R code linked at end of article

In contrast, US fresh-market tomato production has declined substantially from 4.3 billion pounds in 2002, the year when US domestic production peaked, to 2.5 billion pounds in 2020. In 2016, US domestic tomato production was surpassed by imports for the first time. After that, the gap between domestic production and imports grows further, amounting to 1.4 billion pounds in 2020. US processing tomato production remains at 1995 levels, although it has declined 20% in the last five years after increasing from 1995-2015.



*Source: USDA Vegetables and Pulses Yearbook Tables and R code
linked at end of article*

NAFTA eliminated trade barriers for most agricultural products, and since that time US fresh tomato production has declined by almost 50%. Similarly to [avocados](#), US fresh tomato producers are losing ground to their Mexican counterpart, whose production and exports are still expanding rapidly.

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