

Unlimited Onions

Onion growers and suppliers deliver the information U.S. consumers crave.

By Howard Riell
howard@riell.net

Onion growers and suppliers have a story to tell — and Americans are avid listeners.

As with everything from wine and spirits to coffee, exotic produce, seafood, steaks and more, Americans want to know everything there is to know — and will respond positively to that knowledge. For the onion industry then, the key to winning over consumers is to entice them with the tastes, textures, varieties and even soils associated with what the industry brings to market.

"I think that's an accurate assessment," says Wayne Mininger, Executive Vice President of the National Onion Association [www.onions-usa.org]. "Onions historically, and in many, many countries of the world, are fixed the same way, and a part of people's diets the way they have been for 1,000 years or 5,000 years or however long they've been cultivated."

In America, however, "we have one of the most versatile onion markets in the world," Mininger continues. "We believe education has helped contribute to that. We have a market that uses all the colors of onions, all the sizes of onions, uses standard pungent onions, mild flavored onions; it uses onions in so many different ways, and how did we get there?"

We got there, Mininger explains further, in two ways. "Number one, through education, and number two because we are a multi-ethnic country. Everybody brought a little bit of what they did with onions from their corner of the world. You bring it over here, and we stir the pot, and we've got onions fixed all kinds of ways."

"Points of origin are often used to describe a dish, and to tell about the culinary point of view," confirms veteran restaurant consultant Arlene Spiegel, FCSI, President of Arlene Spiegel & Associates [www.arlenespiegel.com], in New York City.

"I think what you could really exploit from a restaurant standpoint is [information] about the onion varieties you're using," says John Erbs, Product Specialist with Nunhems USA [www.nunhemsusa.com], a supplier of vegetable seeds based in Parma, ID. "At your salad bar, for example, you could put something there that says, 'Today we're serving sweet vidalias, or sweet red onions, or artisan onions.'"



Displaying information about the onion variety used in a dish is a valuable tool to help boost consumption.

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Growers in New York State have created New York Bold, LLC, marketed as the "Home of the Onions with Attitude!!" The group's site [www.newyorkbold.com] trumpets the fact that New York Bold Onions have "a lower water content than most, so they caramelize faster and can be safely stored for months at a time." The state's muck soils, it continues, are "abundant in sulfur containing compounds that give the New York Bold Onion its intense flavor and consistent character. And, since these golden onions have nearly twice the soluble sugars of a Vidalia, cooking them just unleashes the bold character sending your dish to a new level of taste enhancement."

Turns out that Americans hungry for onions are even hungrier for knowledge, a fact that hasn't been lost on the industry. "When we get a chance to educate about onions," Mininger concludes, "their versatility, their nutritional value, the dietary benefits, the flavor profiles — hey, we're going to get on the soap box." 🍷