

What's so great about Walla Walla sweet onions?

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The tasty Walla Walla sweet onion is the official Washington state vegetable — a fact some potato fans have trouble accepting. (Steve Ringman/The Seattle Times)

They're Washington's official vegetable, and they're in season right now. Here's why you should give them a try — especially raw and crunchy.

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By

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SOME PEOPLE ARE still mad about the whole Washington state vegetable thing. Seems that a vocal agricultural contingent agitated for it to be, of all things, the potato. Sure, potatoes are great, but come on — Idaho *owns* the potato, and everybody knows it. They've even formally claimed it, in case [a million potato postcards](#), T-shirts and keychains weren't sufficient. To try to wrest the potato from Idaho's hands — it's a PR nightmare. Also, potatoes are lumps covered in eyes. And while no one sane would deny the goodness of French fries, hash browns, potatoes gratin, vichyssoise, etc., these foods aren't exactly thrilling.

Washington deserved better and, starting in 2004, kids at Kirkland Junior High, and later, Eatonville Middle School, lobbied for a more sensational choice. Then, finally, the meanies at the Washington State Potato Commission dropped their countercampaign and got out of the way of history: In 2007, Gov. Chris Gregoire declared the Walla Walla sweet onion [Washington's official vegetable mascot](#).

Next to a potato, a Walla Walla sweet is an elusive, alluring superstar, the kind with both the witty repartee and the winning smile. Rubenesque, with gossamer skin, they don't stand by, waiting for you to eat whenever you want; these delicate beauties are only

available in season, from mid-June through August. Their high moisture content means they must be harvested, lovingly, by hand. Like a fine wine, Walla Walla sweets reify their terroir; their sweetness comes from a low amount of sulfur in the soil of the region (which also happens to produce fine wine). And this matter of terroir is a serious one: An onion must be grown in the designated area of the great state of Washington to be legally called a Walla Walla sweet.

Given the appeal of this onion, is it so surprising that the potato partisans might yet harbor some resentment? Sarah McClure — who, along with her husband, Dan, wears the badge of honor of growing the only organic Walla Walla sweets — encountered a potato-grower visiting from Mount Vernon not too long ago who was still bent about the state vegetable. Standing on Walla Walla land, he declared huffily that Idaho be damned, we grow more potatoes than they do (which, [according to the Tri-City Herald](#), appears to be untrue), and that there had been a clear miscarriage of state-vegetable justice. “It was cute,” McClure says. She told the irate potato-man, “Here, have an onion. Go drink some wine. Really, it’ll be OK!”

For Idaho and Washington to both be official potato-states would be silly, McClure says. “You wouldn’t want to have two side by side!” she says, laughing. But she’s very serious about Walla Walla sweets. Do your own taste test, she urges; pit our state vegetable against a Texas or Hermiston sweet. Bite right into it — a Walla Walla sweet is wasted in a sauce or a soup or a stew, according to McClure. “It really is special,” she insists. “You *can* cook with them, but when they’re in season, and raw, and crisp, and sweet, you can’t beat ’em.

“There’s nothing better” than a Walla Walla sweet onion, McClure says. “We are consistently sweet,” she avers, feeling a oneness with her onions. She likes

them lightly grilled on “a really nice hamburger” or with a steak, or raw in salads with fresh greens, high-quality olive oil and a light vinegar “so the tastes don’t fight.” She advises that we “Let the onion, and the lettuce, and that crunch, speak for themselves.”

McClure’s [Walla Walla Organics](#) are found at PCC, Whole Foods and some Metropolitan Markets (“If you don’t see them, ask for them!” she urges.) Nonorganic Walla Walla sweets should be available all over the place. Now is the time, and this is the state.