

SPOKANE

Nothing like a sweet, sweet onion from Walla Walla

Sun., July 30, 2017



Farm workers stop for a break in an onion field in Touchet, Washington, Tuesday, June 28, 2017. Mostly Hispanic workers manually lift and trim thousands of pounds of the popular seasonal onions every day. (Jesse Tinsley / The Spokesman-Review)

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Before Walla Walla became known for wine, it was famous for something else: “Home of the onion so sweet you can eat it like an apple.”

That line, a mainstay of marketing materials for the Walla Walla Sweet onion, graces the official promotional website for what is the official state vegetable.

Though true, it’s a bit exaggerated: While the onion is enjoyed raw, most people put thick slices on burgers or in salads rather than munching on the whole globe.

Michael J. Locati, a fourth-generation farmer descended from the Italian immigrants who first raised the onion in Walla Walla, is an exception.

“Every field, I usually try to eat an onion,” he said.

Locati, 27, has taken over the region’s largest onion-producing farm from his uncle, Michael F. Locati. He studied agricultural technology and business management at Washington State University and worked off the farm a few years before returning.

Onion farmers have dealt with the same pressure facing growers across Washington: get big or get out. Locati is part of a consortium that owns its own packing shed, and farms about 350 of the region’s roughly 500 acres, making the consortium by far the largest grower of Walla Walla Sweets.

Still, sweet onions remain a do-it-yourself heirloom crop in most ways. Farmers save their own seeds, and plants have been selected over generations of onions for desired traits: large globes, sweet flavor and winter hardiness.

Much of what happens in the fields is the result of tinkering by individual farmers.

“There’s no onion like this,” Locati said.

Sweet start

The onion’s Italian roots are still visible in the names of the region’s growers, many of whom are third- or fourth-generation descendants of the gardeners who bred the first Walla Walla Sweets. The Locatis are the biggest, but other growers include the Arbinis and Castoldis.

The official origin story for the onion is partially the result of educated guesswork undertaken by Joe J. Locati, a former district horticultural inspector and a descendant of the first Locati generation to grow the vegetable. Interviewing his uncle, he wrote down the family’s story about the onion’s origin in a 1976 essay, preserved in the Penrose Library archives at Whitman College.

The genesis of the Sweets can be traced to a Frenchman named Peter Pieri. He was a soldier stationed on the island of Corsica in the late 1800s with plans to move to Walla Walla. He’d heard the small town was good for gardening. He brought the onion seed prevalent in Corsica with him, and other Italian gardeners in the valley started growing it.

As Joe Locati recounts, the onion originally was planted for harvest in the fall, but not every onion sold, and farmers let them winter over.

“It was discovered, in this manner, that they were winter hardy,” he wrote.

Early accounts sometimes referred to the onion as a French variety brought to Walla Walla by an Italian immigrant. Joe Locati points out the irony of that account, since his research suggests the opposite: Pieri was a Frenchman, and the onion’s origin in Corsica made it Italian by heritage, if not by geopolitical boundaries.

A second strain of the onion came over with [Giovanni Arbini](#), who migrated to Walla Walla from his native Italy around 1890. He did much of the early work refining the onion and selected varieties that matured in early June, weeks ahead of the usual July harvest.

Italian gardeners planted small fields of vegetables, with the sweet onion leading the way for the cottage industry.

“That variety, more than any other commodity, was responsible for the continuance and survival of the truck garden industry for more than 70 years,” Joe Locati wrote.

Extending harvest

The original Walla Walla Sweet, planted in September, stays underground during the winter and begins to put up stalks in the spring. They’re ready for harvest when the green stalks of the plant start to fall over, Locati said, typically in early June.

The problem? That overwinter onion harvest usually lasts only a few weeks, ending sometime in July. That makes it a difficult crop for farmers to market.

“Costco’s not going to buy onions if you’re only two weeks,” Locati said.

To extend their season, Walla Walla onion farmers use transplanted and spring-seeded onions.

Sarah McClure and her husband, Dan, grow about 28 acres of organic sweet onions and sell to natural markets and grocery stores. Every year, they ship seeds to Arizona over the winter and get back small plants that look like salad onions in March. The onions arrive back at the farm in small bundles and are re-planted. The re-planted onions will be available when the winter sweets stop producing.

Many farmers, including Locati, also plant spring sweets in March to harvest at the end of the season. That keeps growers in business until August.

The hope is to get the first crops out of the ground in time to hit stores by the Fourth of July.

“If we miss that July Fourth market and we don’t have onions available then, it’s really hard to catch up because everyone wants a big slab of sweet onions on their burgers on the Fourth of July,” McClure said.

Location matters

The onion’s characteristic sweetness is related to its water and sugar content, as well as the soil it’s grown in. Sweets have a higher water content, making them unsuitable for long storage. They’re also more sugary.

Most importantly, they have lower levels of pyruvic acid, the sulfur-containing compound that gives onions their distinctive pungency. Sweet onion varieties tend to have concentrations below 5 percent, while regular yellow onions are typically above 10 percent.

The Walla Walla Valley's low-sulfur soils help give the onion its distinct sweet flavor. Farmers maintain that if you took the seed outside of Walla Walla and planted it in, say, a Spokane garden, the resulting onion wouldn't be a true Walla Walla Sweet.

In 1995, the U.S. Department of Agriculture issued a federal marketing order giving the Walla Walla Sweet region-protected status. An onion must be grown in defined boundaries within Walla Walla County and its southern neighbor, Umatilla County in Oregon, to be marketed as a Walla Walla Sweet.

There's no well-funded crop research center in Washington for sweet onions. Instead, most agricultural research focuses on storage varieties of onions grown in the Columbia Basin, said Tim Waters, a regional vegetable specialist with Washington State University based in Pasco.

The state's onion crop covers some 24,000 acres, making Sweets just over 2 percent of the state's harvest, at 523 acres.

"It's quite small, but in terms of marketing they've got the niche," Waters said.

Perhaps no one is more passionate about the Walla Walla Sweet than Kathy Fry-Trommald, the now-retired executive director of the Walla Walla Sweet Onion Marketing Committee. Before leaving the post in June, Fry-Trommald spent 16 years traveling the country to promote the signature Washington onion, which was grown on 1,400 acres in its heyday.

There was a time when Walla Walla Sweets were the only sweet onion available west of the Mississippi, she said. Before produce was a global business, Vidalia onions grown in Georgia were available on the east coast and Walla Walla Sweets dominated the rest of the country. It wasn't economical to ship across the country.

That changed in the early 2000s, when grocery stores started demanding a year-round sweet onion, she said. Shipping produce around the world got cheaper, and Vidalias, which are available earlier in the season, started appearing in the Northwest.

It's not possible to grow a year-round sweet onion in any one part of the U.S., so new varieties started springing up: the Maui in Hawaii, the Imperial Valley Sweet in California and the Sweetie Sweet in Nevada.

"We don't have our window anymore like we used to. Walla Walla Sweets used to have a few weeks in the summer where we didn't have a lot of competition, but now it seems like every state in the country has a sweet onion they put out," said Paul Castoldi, a third-generation Walla Walla Sweet farmer.

Fry-Trommald said those onions, many of which were developed by university crop research centers, just aren't as good as a true Walla Walla Sweet. Few things make her as angry as imposter onions, she said.

"People will take any old onion and put it in a Walla Walla bag," she said, a practice illegal under the federal marketing order. She recalled seeing a sign in a Whole Foods store recently advertising "LOCAL Pennsylvania Organic Walla Walla Sweet Onions," a label so nonsensical that Fry-Trommold simply shook her head.

The increased availability of other types of onions has made life harder for growers. It's one factor behind the onion's declining acreage, which has hovered around 500 acres for the past few seasons. The other reasons are common across farms all over Washington: younger generations who don't want to take over the family business and increased costs of labor.

"A lot of young people got out of it because of the money. It's too volatile now, too up and down to rely on the income," Castoldi said. His farm is one of the exceptions: He's working the land with his brother, Bob, and his nephew, Nathan, who's in his 30s and planning to take over.

While sweets were once the mainstay of Italian immigrants' gardens, today the crop is typically one piece of a diversified business. Like many crops, onions are rotated to preserve soil nutrients. The Castoldis, McClures and Locatis all grow other crops: alfalfa, pea and corn seed, asparagus and other vegetables.

Locati knows he's one of a few people his age taking over the onion business, but he's eager to keep the family tradition alive.

"You survive this long, you can't fail now. It'd be embarrassing."