

Whoever Has Tried a Sweet Onion Comes Back for More

Detail Introduction :

Sweet onions are the perfect niche product: they are more expensive due to their better taste quality and lower volumes and are also the preferred onion of a select group of consumers. Sweet onions, however, have a shorter shelf life than standard yellow onions. "But whoever has tried it comes back for more," says Joost de Jong, a buyer of Gourmet, a Dutch company specializing in the year-round cultivation and marketing of shallots, onions, and garlic.



Since sweet onions are mostly short-day onions, they are not grown in the Netherlands, but in countries further south.

"While other conservation onions become more pungent over time, Sweet Onions become sweeter; in fact, the product remains stored for a certain time before it is marketed to ensure its most favorable characteristics," they say at BASF Spain. It's the "first onion that doesn't make you cry when you cut it." This improvement in storage is undoubtedly due to the fact that it is "a long-day onion, which is harvested from July to September," says the breeding company.

Further north, near Zaragoza, Fuente de Ebro PDO onions are grown. "Its water content is so high that it caramelizes on its own when grilled," according to Jumosol, the company that sells this onion from July to December.

Peru, a large producer of this type of onion, annually exports more than 150,000 tons of sweet onion, 90% to the United States and the remaining 10% to neighboring countries and the European market. Sweet onions are more popular in the US than in Europe. After the Peruvian season, the United States switches to Mexican production and then to domestic product, mainly from the state of Georgia.

"In Spain, we work on a contract basis," explains Joost. "The first volumes arrive around May-June and hold out until the end of November, which is when the quality deteriorates slightly. We start with Peru in October/November and on April 1 we switch to Mexico to have Spanish sweet onions again. We don't usually

import American sweet onions, as they don't reach us with the right quality."

"The differentiating characteristic of the sweet onion is its flavor, but due to its limited shelf life, with a skin tissue paper, its high water content, and the absence of post-harvest treatments, such as sprout inhibitors, small item. It is not possible to move large volumes on this product. Since the turnover rate is not high or guaranteed, some supermarkets are hesitant to offer this product with a shelf life of only three weeks. The that offer them generally have a well-established sales pattern. In fact, some of our customers buy five tons of sweet onions from us per week, as they have some regular buyers who come back for these onions on a regular basis."

According to Joost, consumption in the Netherlands has been stable for years, with sales roughly equal in summer and winter, although demand is not growing. "Of course, the pandemic has shaken consumption patterns. At the end of the day, shoppers are back to basics." However, since sweet corn and avocados were already popular in the United States, when there was hardly any demand in Europe, sweet onions could still become more popular. In general, Gourmet prefers to buy its produce from European farmers, and sweet onions in particular, as the time from Spain versus Peru makes a difference. "I would prefer to import all products from Europe, but obviously that is not possible." Labor shortages are another challenge for sweet onions, since they are harvested by hand. And the Spanish sector, like the Dutch, does not find a sufficient number of workers.

"Last year, for example, there was a time when both onions and garlic had to be harvested in the Spanish region, but everyone opted for garlic," recalls Joost. Labor is cheaper in Africa, so Morocco could become a competitor. "Morocco, in fact, already grows sweet onions, and there have been projects in Senegal. However, produce grown on African soil, in order to be marketed on the European market, have to meet the specifications of European supermarkets and have the certificates export documents," Joost concludes. Gourmet offers its sweet onions in boxes to the catering sector and in various smaller packs to retailers.