



## Zion Farmers Market Veg-u-cation

### Amazing Orbs of Flavor



The amazing onion provides layers of flavor, color, and texture to a wide variety of dishes and cuisines. But, their appeal goes beyond flavor when you consider their role in history and our health. On the surface they seem like a simple vegetable, but underneath they have an interesting story.

#### **History of Onions**

Because onions are small and their tissues leave little or no trace, there is no conclusive opinion about the exact location and time of their birth. Many archaeologists, botanists, and food historians believe onions originated in central Asia. Other research suggests onions were first grown in Iran and West Pakistan.

It is presumed our predecessors discovered and started eating wild onions very early – long before farming or even writing was invented. Very likely, this humble vegetable was a staple in the prehistoric diet.

Most researchers agree the onion has been cultivated for 5000 years or more. Since onions grew wild in various regions, they were probably consumed for thousands of years and domesticated simultaneously all over the world. Onions may be one of the earliest cultivated crops because they were less perishable than other foods of the time, were transportable, were easy to grow, and could be grown in a variety of soils and climates. In addition, the onion was useful for sustaining human life. Onions prevented thirst and could be dried and preserved for later consumption when food might be scarce. While the place and time of the onion's origin is still a mystery, many documents from very early times describe its importance as a food and its use in art, medicine, and mummification.

Onions grew in Chinese gardens as early as 5000 years ago and they are referenced in some of the oldest Vedic writings from India. In Egypt, onions can be traced back to 3500 B.C. There is evidence that the Sumerians were growing onions as early as 2500 B.C. One Sumerian text dated to about 2500 B.C. tells of someone plowing over the city governor's onion patch.

In Egypt, onions were considered to be an object of worship. The onion symbolized eternity to the Egyptians who buried onions along with their Pharaohs. The Egyptians saw eternal life in the anatomy of the onion because of its circle-within-a-circle structure. Paintings of onions appear on the inner walls of the pyramids and in the tombs of both the Old Kingdom and the New Kingdom. The onion is mentioned as a funeral offering, and depicted on the banquet tables of the great feasts – both large, peeled onions and slender, immature ones. They were shown upon the altars of the gods.

Frequently, Egyptian priests are pictured holding onions in his hand or covering an altar with a bundle of their leaves or roots. In mummies, onions have frequently been found in the pelvic

regions of the body, in the thorax, flattened against the ears, and in front of the collapsed eyes. Flowering onions have been found on the chest, and onions have been found attached to the soles of the feet and along the legs. King Ramses IV, who died in 1160 B.C., was entombed with onions in his eye sockets.

Some Egyptologists theorize that onions may have been used because it was believed that their strong scent and/or magical powers would prompt the dead to breathe again. Other Egyptologists believe it was because onions were known for their strong antiseptic qualities, which construed as magical, would be handy in the afterlife.

Onions were eaten by the Israelites in the Bible. In Numbers 11:5, the children of Israel lament the meager desert diet enforced by the Exodus: "We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic."

In India as early as the sixth century B.C., the famous medical treatise Charaka " Sanhita celebrates the onion as medicine " a diuretic, good for digestion, the heart, the eyes, and the joints.

Likewise, Dioscorides, a Greek physician in first century A.D., noted several medicinal uses of onions. The Greeks used onions to fortify athletes for the Olympic Games. Before competition, athletes would consume pounds of onions, drink onion juice, and rub onions on their bodies.

The Romans ate onions regularly and carried them on journeys to their provinces in England and Germany. Pliny the Elder, Roman's keen-eyed observer, wrote of Pompeii's onions and cabbages. Before he was overcome and killed by the volcano's heat and fumes, Pliny the Elder catalogued the Roman beliefs about the efficacy of the onion to cure vision, induce sleep, heal mouth sores, dog bites, toothaches, dysentery, and lumbago. Excavators of the doomed city would later find gardens where, just as Pliny had said, onions had grown. The bulbs had left behind telltale cavities in the ground. The Roman gourmet Apicius, credited with writing one of the first cookbooks (which dates to the eighth and ninth centuries A.D.), included many references to onions.

By the Middle Ages, the three main vegetables of European cuisine were beans, cabbage, and onions. In addition to serving as a food for both the poor and the wealthy, onions were prescribed to alleviate headaches, snakebites, and hair loss. They were also used as rent payments and wedding gifts.

Later, the first Pilgrims brought onions with them on the Mayflower. However, they found that strains of wild onions already grew throughout North America. Native American Indians used wild onions in a variety of ways, eating them raw or cooked, as a seasoning or as a vegetable. Such onions were also used in syrups, as poultices, as an ingredient in dyes, and even as toys. According to diaries of colonists, bulb onions were planted as soon as the Pilgrim fathers could clear the land in 1648.



## **How & Where Onions are Grown**

### ***From Seed to Table***

Onions are grown commercially in more than 20 states, literally border-to-border and coast-to-coast. The National Onion Association estimates that less than 1,000 growers produce onions commercially in the United States, including organic. Virtually all onion producers grow other agricultural crops.

### ***Domestic Onion Production***

U.S. farmers plant approximately 125,000 acres of onions each year and produce about 6.2 billion pounds a year. This includes organic production, but excludes bulb onions for dehydration.

The U.S. has 4.5% of the world's population, accounts for 1.6% of the world onion acreage, and produces about 4% of the world's annual supply. The U.S. dry bulb onion crop value exceeds \$1 billion at farmgate and generates \$5-7 billion dollars at consumer purchase level.

The top three onion producing areas are California, Idaho-Eastern Oregon, and Washington.

## **Colors, Flavors, Seasons & Sizes**

Onions vary in color, flavor, time of year harvested, and size. These differences make onions very versatile.

### ***The Color of Onions***

Bulb onions can be yellow, red, or white. Approximately 87 percent of the crop is devoted to yellow onion production, with about eight percent red onions, and five percent white onions.



### ***Yellow Onions***

Yellow Onions are full-flavored and are a reliable standby for cooking almost anything. Yellow onions turn a rich, dark brown when cooked and give French Onion Soup its tangy sweet flavor.



### ***Red Onions***

Red Onions, with their wonderful color, are a good choice for lots of fresh uses or for grilling, charbroiling, and roasting.



### ***White Onions***

White Onions are often used in prepared salads, white sauces, and is the traditional onion for classic Mexican cuisine. They have a golden color and sweet flavor when sautéed.

### ***Seasons***

**Yes. Onions are seasonal!** Based on when they are harvested, onions grown in the U.S. can be divided into two categories.

### **Spring/Summer Onion Traits**

- Available in yellow, red, and white from March through August
- Can be identified by their thin, lighter-colored skin
- Typically higher in water content, which reduces their shelf-life and makes them more susceptible to bruising
- Range in flavor from sweet to mild
- Best to use in salads, sandwiches, and fresh, lightly-cooked or grilled dishes
- Many specialty sweet onions are part of this category and are sold under a specific trade name or label
- **Note:** Some domestic and all imported onions with these traits are offered other times of the year.

### **Fall/Winter Onion Traits**

- Available August through May in yellow, red, and white
- Easy to recognize by their multiple layers of thick, darker colored skin
- Commonly lower in water content, they have a longer shelf-life
- Range in flavor from mild to pungent
- Best for savory dishes that require longer cooking times or more flavor

### ***Onion Sizes***

Onions range in size from less than one-inch in diameter to more than 4.5-inches in diameter. The most common sizes sold in the U.S. for retail are between 2 to 3-3/4 inches in diameter.

#### **Super Colossal**

4-1/2" and Up    Yellow, Red, and White

#### **Colossal**

3-3/4" and Up    Yellow, Red, and White

#### **Large/Jumbo**

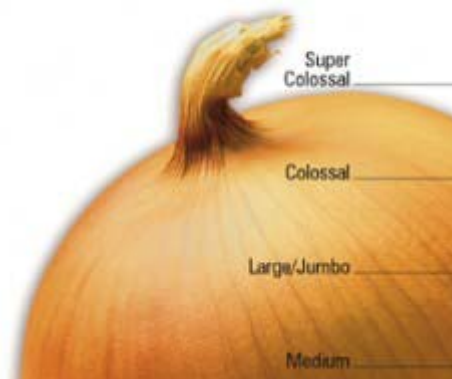
3" and Up    Yellow, Red, and White

#### **Medium**

2" to 3-1/4"    Yellow, Red, and White

#### **Pre-Pack**

1-3/4" to 3"    Yellow and White



### Small

1" to 2-1/4"      Yellow, Red, and White

### Boiler

1" to 1-7/8"      Yellow and White

### Creamer

Under 1"      Yellow and White

## How to Select, Cut, Prepare & Store Onions

Onions are the third most consumed fresh vegetable in the United States and available in grocery stores all year long. Ranging in size from less than one-inch in diameter to over 4.5 inches in diameter, bulb onions can be yellow, red, or white in color.



### *How to Select*

Dry bulb onions should be firm for their size and have little to no scent. Avoid bulbs with any cuts, bruises, or blemishes. When purchasing whole peeled onions, select ones with an outside layer that does not show signs of being dehydrated. Fresh-cut onions should be purchased before the expiration date.

### *How to Cut*

With a few simple tips, and a little practice, these techniques for cutting an onion will save time, tears, and uneven cooking.



### *How to Prepare*

A staple in the kitchen, onions can be prepared in a number of ways and can be found in almost every cuisine. Aside from the many ways onions are used raw, these are the four most common methods found in recipes: saute, caramelize, grill, and roast.

### ***How to Store***

Whole dry bulb onions should be kept in a cool, dry, dark place with plenty of air movement. Do not store onions in plastic! Lack of ventilation will reduce their storage life. Refrigeration is only necessary when trying to extend the shelf life of sweet or mild onion varieties with high water content, but be sure to use a low humidity setting, they must be kept dry.

1. Whole peeled onions should be refrigerated after purchasing.
2. Cut onions can be stored in a sealed container for up to 7 days.
3. If you buy pre-cut onions, always keep refrigerated and use before the expiration date.

