



## Pungency plays a more routine role in marketing

Pungency, in a sense, is the new currency in the onion business, according to growers, shippers and marketing agents.

It certainly plays a role in marketing Texas onions, said Don Ed Holmes, owner of the Weslaco-based The Onion House.

“Some of the larger chains have gotten very conscientious about what they put on their racks, and they are requiring pungency testing,” Holmes said.

Retailers want to make sure a sweet onion can be distinguished from a mild onion, Holmes said.

“They’re trying to promote mild onions, and sometimes there’s some confusion with sweet onions,” Holmes said.

“Some consumers don’t know the difference between a short-day sweet and a long-day mild. Some retailers have some new guidelines where they’re testing onions for sweetness.”

John McClung, manager of the Mission-based South Texas Onion Committee, makes a point to clarify what pungency tests determine.

“What you’re taking about with onions is acidity, not sweetness,” he said. “A lot of our shippers do have testing done either in private labs or at Texas A&M. They pay for that. They do use it to promote their onions.”

Some growers and shippers from various regions across the U.S. even have onions tested to ensure the product has a certain “bite”, McClung noted.

Whatever the ultimate purpose, the Texas A&M labs are busy testing product for pungency.

Bhimu Patil, director of the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center, which is focused on foods for health at Texas A&M, pointed out there is no single method for testing.

“That’s a big challenge,” Patil said. “We have optimized three methods. We have developed some tests we can do for a large number of onions. That’s a comparison method.”

Various testing methods can produce different results, Patil noted.

“You take the onions to one place and have them tested and then test the same onions in another lab, and the readings are different,” Patil said. “So far, there is no specific best method to measure the pungency of the onion.”

The Texas A&M lab tests using different methods and compares the results, Patil said.

“We test onions from other states, too, not just from Texas,” he said.

Bill Burns, owner of Burns Farms Inc., McAllen, said all of his sweet onions are tested at the Texas A&M Experiment Station in Weslaco.

Such testing is a way to ensure his product competes well — and early — on the sweet onion market, he said.

“Our timing is beginning the first off in the U.S.,” he said. “The market knows that we have practically 100% sweet onions in this area, and we are first in the U.S. proper.

“Mexico has some sweet onions. The market knows we have that, and Frontera certainly makes the buyers aware of what we have.”

Burns partners with Edinburg, Texas-based Frontera Produce LLC.

Chris Eddy, sales and operations director at Frontera, said testing is a routine step in getting high-quality onions to market.

“We test our sweet onions here to make sure the onions we’re putting out are in fact sweet,” he said. “You want to make sure what you’re marketing is true or you won’t get the repeat business.”

Customers expect testing as a matter of course, Eddy noted.

“Testing is something you need to do to make sure you put the quality product out on the market,” he said.

“When you get varieties that come from 1015 parenting, they have the most — a vast majority of them are sweet, unless it’s stressed or diseased. It’s kicked if it’s not to standard.”

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