

HOW SCIENTISTS GET YOU TO EAT YOUR VEGETABLES

by MANDY OAKLANDER, **Prevention**



Every seat in the College Station, Texas hall was filled with scientists and folks from the food industry, gathered for one reason: to wish a happy 20th birthday to the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center.

No birthday cake appeared, but there was a giant shrine made entirely of produce, with strawberries spelling out “VFIC” in berry-shaped font.

When you first hear that such a place exists, nestled inside of Texas A&M University, the name sounds ridiculous. How can you improve upon a vegetable? I imagined subterranean laboratories where veggies are injected with a secret bacon-flavored serum, a mutant supergarden where veggies are crossbred with kale to make super superfoods.

What I learned was that the VFIC wasn’t just a place where scientists aim to make vegetables healthier (though they often do by boosting antioxidant and vitamin content.) Above all else, it’s where they try to get people to simply eat their vegetables. The best way to maximize the health benefits of vegetables, of course, is to get people to put them in their bodies.

“The final end product of this whole center is to provide healthy, tasty, and flavorful vegetables and fruit, which will eventually reduce healthcare costs,” said Bhimu Patil, director of the Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center. Studies have shown that fruits and vegetables help inhibit diseases of all stripes, from cancer to obesity.

But getting people to eat them is a huge challenge. David Katz, director and co-founder of the Yale Pre-

vention Research Center and keynote speaker at the conference, lamented the consumption challenge: Only 1½ percent of us meet the dietary recommendations for fruits and vegetables, which is 5 cups a day. Most Americans eat only 1.8 cups, a number that hasn't budged for the past two decades.

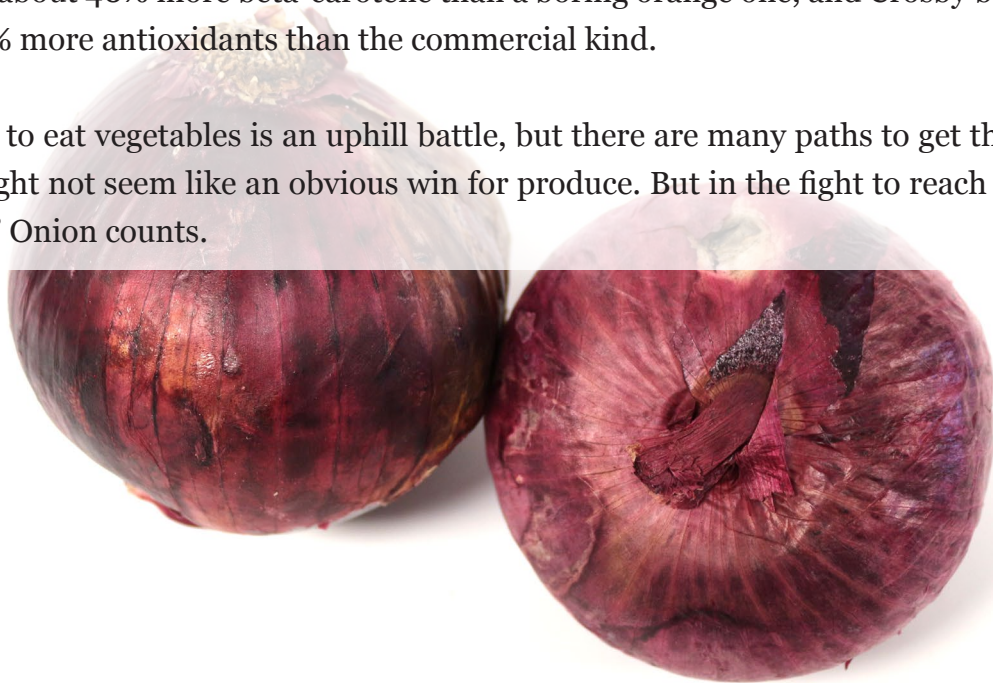
In this room full of veggie freaks eager to spread the gospel of produce, Katz knows he's preaching to the choir. "You gotta like fruits and vegetables or you gotta get out of here," he joked to the audience. But outside of veggie HQ, not everyone is wild about picking a fruit and veggie sculpture clean.

"I guess sometimes we're in a little academic bubble here," said Kevin Crosby, a vegetable breeder and associate professor of horticultural sciences at the VFIC. "We think people should eat vegetables, and we don't know why they don't—but we also need to think how to educate the public, how to spread that interest or that excitement about vegetables to everyday people who don't even think about vegetables."

That's one reason why the university's most successful creation to date is the Texas 1015, a tearless, mild onion so sweet you can bite into it. Named for its mid-October planting date, the onion is basically the mascot of the state. (It is indeed the official state onion of Texas.) More than one man at the conference wore an onion tie.

The center has every reason to be proud of its onion heritage. The 1015 is Outback Steakhouse's onion of choice for its Bloomin' Onion—and the breed brings in about \$1 billion to Texas alone, Crosby estimates. And toying with flavor doesn't always mean sacrificing antioxidants. A maroon carrot the center developed has about 40% more beta-carotene than a boring orange one, and Crosby bred a line of peppers with 400% more antioxidants than the commercial kind.

Getting people to eat vegetables is an uphill battle, but there are many paths to get there. Deep-frying a vegetable might not seem like an obvious win for produce. But in the fight to reach 5 servings a day, every Bloomin' Onion counts.



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