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So Sweet, You Have to Say It Twice

The Walla Walla Is One Big, Tasty Onion

By Tracy Dahl
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The six-pack of sweet onions arrived on my doorstep unannounced. Individually wrapped, each one was at least four inches in diameter and almost comically large. The onions were a gift from Whitman College, the small liberal arts school in Walla Walla, Wash., that I had just decided to attend -- and I had no idea what to do with them.

They hung out in my family's "fruit room," a cool area in our basement, until a friend suggested we slice them, brush them with oil and throw them on the grill to go with our burgers. We did, and they were so alluringly sweet and delicate that it was difficult to think of them as onions.

That was 12 summers ago in Portland, Ore. I spent the next four years living in Walla Walla, a place so steeped in onion culture that there's a storefront on Main Street called Onion World.

The season for "sweets" is in full swing: The 25th annual Walla Walla Sweet Onion Festival is set for this weekend, complete with caramel onions on a stick and Walla Walla sweet onion sausage. Street stands around town are selling the sweets, and grocery stores around the Northwest are getting their shipments.

But I live in Alexandria now, and grocery stores in this area aren't as lucky. The sweets, a herald of summer in the Northwest, aren't readily available here. Sure, Vidalia onions have become ubiquitous, but nostalgia leaves me longing for those jumbo globes pulled out of Walla Walla dirt.

The sweets are a longtime tradition in the town of 30,000, nestled in the rolling wheat fields of southeastern Washington state. Their story began in the late 1800s, when a French soldier found a sweet onion seed on the island of Corsica and brought it to Walla Walla. The Italian immigrant farmers there were impressed with the onion's winter hardiness, and they began to cultivate it. Years of selecting each crop's sweetest and largest specimens for seed harvesting made "Walla Walla" synonymous with huge, sweet onions in much of the Pacific Northwest. The sweet was named Washington state's official vegetable in 2007; some of those Italian families that first nurtured it still live in the Walla Walla Valley of southeastern Washington and northeastern Oregon.

Today, about 40 growers keep the sweet tradition alive on 1,200 acres in the valley. Most plant their seeds in the fall, allowing the onions to hibernate during the winter and then harvesting them the next summer. Because the sweets contain more water than most onions, their shelf life is but three to six weeks. They're available from mid-June to September.

A few weeks ago, another box of onions landed on my doorstep. This time, I'd placed the order (see "[How to Buy](#)"), and I was ready.

I invited a friend and fellow vegetable enthusiast, Danielle, to come over for a cooking marathon, and we dug into my 40-pound box. She'd never tried a sweet before, and she was surprised how true to name even the raw slices were. They're so mild that some people chomp into them like apples.

There's some science behind this mild flavor. An onion's pungency is dictated by its pyruvic acid content, which is a byproduct of cutting into an onion and releasing its volatile sulfur compounds. Onions with a pyruvic acid content of more than 10 percent sting your eyes and burn your throat, but the Walla Walla sweets' acid content is closer to 2 to 3

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percent, says Kathryn Fry, director of the onion festival. That, combined with the sweets' higher sugar and water content and the low level of sulfur in Walla Walla Valley soil, makes for one sweet, mild onion.

Chef Jamie Guerin has found hundreds of ways to use summer sweets in the nine years he has worked at Whitehouse-Crawford in Walla Walla, a restaurant at the vanguard of what has become a fine-dining destination for wine tourists in the region. The soft-spoken 43-year-old grew up in Bethesda, went to the University of Virginia and worked at 701 Restaurant in Penn Quarter and at the Nicholas Restaurant in the Mayflower Hotel in downtown Washington.

At Whitehouse-Crawford, he keeps his onion dishes simple: Paper-thin slices are dusted with flour, fried and served as crisp threads in a basket; petals of onions are roasted in rosemary and wine, then baked with Gruyere and Parmesan cheeses in bubbly golden gratins; chopped onions are the main component of a salad mixed with mint, Sriracha sauce and lime that is served with Thai-style fish cakes.

Of course, Guerin has cooked with all kinds of sweet onions, including Maui, Vidalia and Texas sweets. He can't quite say that Walla Wallas are markedly different from or better than the rest. "I do like that they are mild enough to be treated like a vegetable on their own," he says. "And I like smelling them in the air. When the onions are curing in the field here, it sort of smells like sour-cream-and-onion potato chips around town."

That kind of talk sent me straight to the kitchen. Danielle and I kicked things off with an onion and watermelon salsa; we found the recipe on the SweetOnions Web site (<http://www.sweetonions.org>). It seemed like an appropriate starter, because my family often drove through the Columbia River gorge in the summer, and we would always stop to buy local watermelon at Fred's Melons, a little roadside stand 60 miles from Walla Walla in Irrigon, Ore. As it turns out, the melon and the onions are a standout pair; their sweet flavors work beautifully together, while a kick of jalepeño pepper brings out the onion's muted bite. This is a light, refreshing condiment, though it's sweet enough that I'd consider serving it for dessert.

Next, we grilled, then roasted some Walla Walla halves, which got a slather of pine nut butter before serving. The butter transformed the sweets into something substantial enough for a meal yet allowed the onions' flavor to shine through. That led to some necessary experimentation: Chef Guerin's palate aside, would we be able to detect a difference between another sweet onion, such as Vidalia, and my beloved Walla Wallas?

Yes, we could -- albeit a slight one. Though the Vidalia was sweet and an acceptable substitute for its West Coast cousin, the Walla Wallas were even sweeter and noticeably more delicate.

True onion fiends should love the final recipe we tried that night: Walla Wallas in parchment paper. The sweets are baked whole with the skin on, sprinkled with anchovies and butter and then drizzled with balsamic vinegar before being sealed in a pouch of parchment and aluminum foil. The paper beautifully echoes the onions' thin skins, and the vinegar accentuates the Walla Wallas' charms. They smelled divine in the oven and retained their rich aroma even on the plate.

Danielle and I served the three preparations to my parents, who were visiting from Portland. We reminisced about driving through farm country to visit Whitman and about the gift box the college sent me long ago. Whitman has kept up that tradition: Four hundred and twenty-five incoming students will receive their own boxes of onions in the next few weeks.

How very sweet.

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