

Everything you always wanted to know about onions

Written by By CINDY WELCH, Food Columnist
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Could "onion breath" ever be a good thing? Apparently it was a good thing to the ancient Egyptians under the rule of Ramesses IV. The Egyptians believed that, if buried with the dead, the strong scent of onions would bring breath back to their mummified bodies. Ramesses mummy was found to have traces of onion in the eye sockets. Onions are one of the oldest vegetables known to mankind. They have been traced to Bronze Age settlements in Palestine, dating to 5000 BC, pyramid paintings in Egyptian tombs of both the Old and New Kingdoms, and are mentioned in the *Bible* in the book of *Numbers* along with leeks and garlic.

In Greece and Rome, athletes and gladiators rubbed down their bodies with onions to balance the blood and firm the muscles. And in the Middle Ages, onions were so valued that they were used as gifts and money. Onions have continued to become a major part of most of the world's cuisines.

Onions are a member of the Allium family. The word onion came from the Latin word *unio* which means "single" or "one" because the plant produces a single bulb. The name also describes the union of the many separate layers. The concentric circles of the onion are what inspired its use in spiritual and ritualistic ceremonies.

There are two major types of onions. Fall/winter or storage onions are available August through April. There are red, white and yellow varieties. They have multiple layers of thick, dark, papery skin. Because of their intense flavor and lower water content, they store for long periods of time in a cool, well-ventilated space. They are at their best when they are used in foods cooked for a long time.

Spring/summer or fresh onions are available March through August. We should be seeing them arriving in stores now. They have a more delicate taste, thin, light-colored skin, and a higher water content. The higher water content contributes to their sweeter taste. Because of it, they also bruise more easily and don't last as long in storage as the fall/winter onions.

They also come in red, white and yellow varieties. Yellow onions are about 87 percent of the crop grown and eaten in America. They turn a rich brown when cooked and have a sweet, tangy

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flavor. Red onions are about 8 percent of the crop. They are used most often raw, but are also great for grilling and char-broiling.

The white onion is only about 5 percent of the crop, but because it is more popular in classic Mexican cuisine, it is a favorite in Texas. They turn a golden color when sautéed and have a very sweet flavor. They are the best type to use for caramelizing.

A special category of spring/summer onions are the "sweets." They include the Hawaiian Hula, Vidalia Onions, and the Texas 1015 among others. Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and California have; also developed sweet onions. Some are so mild and sweet that they can be eaten like apples.

As a vegetable, onions are most often used in conjunction with other foods. They can be chopped, minced, sliced, powdered, dehydrated and frozen. Sometimes they even make a great dish on their own. In the United Kingdom they are served pickled in vinegar as a snack or condiment with fish and chips. In the US, primarily the South and Southwest, they are a necessary addition to barbecue, and in most places in the United States you have to request "no onions" if you don't like them on your burger.

Onions are so common to our daily lives that myths have been created about them. According to one myth, rubbing your windshield with an onion will keep your car windshield frost-free. Another myth says that if you rub your head with onion, your hair will grow "thick as thistles." Young women looking for a husband can write the name of each suitor on an onion, store it in a dark place and the first onion that sprouts will name the man she should marry.

Because of its strong odor and unusual properties, laws were written in the past about onions. Some are still even on the books today. In Ridgeland, South Carolina, a woman who weighs over 200 pounds cannot wear shorts and eat onions in a public place. In Northfield, Connecticut, citizens cannot eat raw onions while walking down a street. In Tennessee, customers of movie theaters must be onion-free for at least four hours.

You can't eat onions while attending church in Vermont and Kentucky. Pastors have the right to make offenders stand in a corner or leave the church until the service is finished. And don't try to spend your Sunday afternoon eating onions and ice cream in North Carolina and West

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Virginia, where it is illegal to sell ice cream and onions on Sunday.

In Budds Creek, Maryland, people over 21 cannot eat onions without permission from their dentist. In Lexington, Kentucky it is against the law to carry raw onions in your pocket. Don't be caught peeling onions in a Cotton Valley, Louisiana, hotel room or you may end up peeling onions in the jail kitchen. Don't share your onions with a friend in Rhode Island and don't expect to eat them with pretzels and beer in Sturgis, South Dakota.

Love lives and the impact onions had on them was governed throughout the nation. In Alabama, "No man can place his arm around or kiss an un-chaperoned woman without a good and lawful reason" if he has eaten onions in the last four hours, and no woman is allowed to eat onions on the Sabbath unless she "is properly looked after" by her husband. Even in Nacogdoches, Texas, you can't take your date for hamburger and onions. Young women have an onion curfew and aren't allowed to eat onions after 6 p.m.

Yes, most of these laws are archaic, and not enforced, but they are still on the books.

The benefits of eating onions have been recognized more and more in the past few years. They are high in antioxidants, help to lower cholesterol, raise good HDL cholesterol levels and increase glucose tolerance. They have also been shown to reduce blood pressure, risk of heart attack and stroke. They have been singled out with a small number of fruits and vegetables as contributing to a significant reduction in heart disease. These other "super foods" include tea, apples, broccoli, blueberries, red wine and pomegranates.

Onions are particularly beneficial to women. They have been shown to reduce colon cancer and ovarian cancer risk by as much as 50 percent when consumed two to three times per week. They also help maintain hormone levels during menopause.

Maybe onion breath isn't such a bad thing, if you have a good mint.

Next week we will look at the preparation, storage and contributions of onions to our foods. We'll look at the role of the onion in *mirepoix* and the "holy trinity" of cooking and how it is the

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base for all good sauces, stocks and soups. I'll also include some of my favorite onion recipes that highlight their delicious flavor.

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For the past 20 years, Cindy Welch has been involved with all aspects of cooking, including formal culinary training, experience as food service director for First Baptist Church of Euless, a personal chef and owner of Cindy's Casa Cuisine. Cindy's favorite hobby is "providing delicious food for the people of Sulphur Springs." Her columns cover all aspects of the cooking experience.