

Marketing Asian Produce

Market Overview

The increasingly diverse appetites of Caucasian consumers, combined with a larger ethnic Asian population, fueled an explosion in the popularity of ethnic Asian cuisine during the 1990s.

American consumers already familiar with Chinese cuisine began exploring Thai, Japanese, Indian, and Korean fare, especially when dining out. Ethnic Asian restaurants, especially “quick casual,” fusion, and higher-end establishments, made inroads away from traditional market centers on both coasts and into the central U.S. This trend has continued into the 2000s. In 2002, the Food Institute named Asian cuisine as “the next hot concept for the restaurant industry.”¹ The following year, Outback Steakhouse™ introduced an Asian concept restaurant; similar Asian-themed “quick casual” introductions are expected from other corporations.

Increased use of ethnic Asian food is also fueled by a growing Asian population. Between 2000 and 2003, the U.S. Asian population grew by 12.5%, just behind the 13% Hispanic growth rate.² The population of persons of Asian ethnicity in Kentucky, though comparatively small, is rising. The Kentucky Asian population in 1990 was 17,812; increasing to 29,744 in 2000; and estimated at 36,986 in 2004.³

Burgeoning Asian populations, along with the increased interest of other consumers in Asian cuisine, has helped stimulate an increased interest in purchasing fresh



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vegetables to prepare in Asian dishes at home. While Caucasian consumers tend to prefer value-added and processed vegetables, there are some growing market niches for fresh Asian vegetables. Kentucky producers have received inquiries to source edamame (vegetable soybean) and daikon (Chinese radish) at wholesale quantities. The youngest shoppers (“Generation Y” or Millennials) are also said to be highly receptive to ethnic offerings.

Market Opportunities

Smaller growers and market gardeners have immediate opportunities to tap into local consumer demand for Asian vegetables. Growers should investigate adding traditionally Asian vegetables to their farmers’ market offering, Community Supported Agriculture (CSA), roadside stand, or restaurant mix. As with any new market, the best way to determine what to grow is to find out what the customer wants. This is especially critical in finding niche markets for Asian vegetables, where

various ethnic groups may prefer different sizes, colors, and other characteristics of the same eggplant, radish, cucumber, etc.



PICK-YOUR OWN (PYO)

PYO marketers always face the challenge of communicating their farm policies and picking rules to their customers. Marketing to non-native English speakers can present producers with additional challenges in communicating farm policies. PYO marketers selling larger amounts of produce to non-native English speakers should consider having their farm policies translated into languages common to their customers—Mandarin and Cantonese, Korean, Thai, Japanese, etc.

Customers can then be presented with a copy of the farm's policies, enabling easier enforcement of those rules. It is important that all customers have an understanding of the farm's rules governing the Pick Your Own operation.

Open communication lines with your customers can also result in additional markets for other products. While welcoming guests to the farm and explaining PYO rules, producers can ask their customers what other products they might be interested in purchasing. This can help the producer discover new crops to offer at the farm market.

ASIAN PEARS AND MELONS

Kentucky orchardists near Lexington, Louisville, and Cincinnati have found a ripe local market for Asian pears (also called "pear apples"). Orchardists report that Asian customers enjoy obtaining fresh Asian pears at the farm and have been especially open to Pick-Your-Own operations. On a smaller scale, some producers have successfully marketed specialty Asian melons near these metro areas.

ASIAN VEGETABLES

Kentucky growers could potentially discover local market niches for dozens of Asian vegetables. The challenge to the grower is to identify those vegetables that may be grown efficiently and readily marketed. Using funds from a University of Kentucky New Crop Opportunities Center marketing project, several producers were provided seed for kabocha squash in 2004. Kabocha squash, also called Japanese

pumpkin, is a hard (winter) squash well-received by both ethnic Asian and Caucasian consumers. It was selected because of the availability of past University of Kentucky variety trial research.

Kabocha squash customers were surveyed about their Asian vegetable buying practices and preferences. Their responses reinforced basic guidelines for direct marketing specialty vegetables. Key considerations for producers wishing to develop market niches for Asian vegetables are:

- Providing preparation instructions and recipes at purchase
- Bundling specialty vegetables with other products, providing instructions for use
- Providing educational information about the vegetable's name, where and how it is grown, and other background information

It is a proven marketing practice to include recipes with specialty crop purchases. Even customers already familiar with kabocha squash were interested in receiving recipes at purchase. Producers can obtain recipes from a variety of sources, and should always verify that the recipe may be reproduced and distributed.

RECOMMENDED ASIAN VEGETABLE MIX

A recommended Asian vegetable mix for growers interested in experimenting with Asian crops is listed below. These are the more common ethnic Asian produce items demanded by farm market and farmers' market customers in Kentucky.

- Specialty greens and herbs
- Bok choy
- Daikon
- Specialty cucumbers
- Specialty eggplants
- Specialty melons
- Specialty squash/gourd

According to the 2005 Kentucky Produce Marketing and Planting Intentions Survey, the most common Asian vegetables grown in Kentucky are bok choy, daikon, eggplant, and Asian greens. These were also the vegetables

most likely to be purchased by the kabocha squash customers surveyed.

Other vegetables that the kabocha squash customers said they were willing to purchase were celtnce/asparagus lettuce, chayote, garlic chives, wax gourd, and Japanese eggplant. The sample size of this survey is too limited for producers to make assumptions that these vegetables will be popular in their areas. Producers should use the sample customer survey instrument that follows (APPENDIX I) or other basic market research to develop their own tools for measuring interest and market niches for new crops.

ASIAN VEGETABLE NAME CHART

The following table (APPENDIX II) is a partial reproduction of a listing of Asian vegetables and their ethnic names that appears in The University of California's *Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook*. It has been reproduced by permission. This handbook is recommended for those interested in Asian and other specialty produce.

More Information

- Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook, 2nd edition (University of California, 1998) *Handbook description, along with purchasing information at:*

<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/Docs/publications.asp?view=5>

¹ The Food Institute Report, May 27, 2002 edition

² Malinda Miller, "Ethnic Foods Market Profile," July 2005. Retrieved August 2005 at <http://www.agmrc.org/agmrc/markets/Food/ethnicfoodsmarketprofile.htm>

³ U.S. Census Bureau www.census.gov

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APPENDIX I. Kabocha Squash Customer Survey

1. **Have you ever eaten kabocha squash before?** Yes No
2. **Do you know how you will prepare this squash?** Yes No
3. **Have you ever heard this squash called “Japanese pumpkin”?**
 Yes No
4. **Would you find recipes using kabocha squash useful at purchase?**
 Yes No
5. **How often do you cook with Asian vegetables?**
 More than once a week Once a week
 2-4 times per month Once a month
 Less than once a month
6. **Would you be interested in purchasing any of the following crops if they were available locally?** (Check all that apply)
 Arugula
 Bitter Melon/Balsam Pear (fu kwa, kerala, nigai uri, ampalaya)
 Bok Choy
 Bottle Gourd/Calabash/Cucuzzi (yugao, po gua, upo, bau)
 Celtuce/Asparagus Lettuce
 Chayote/Mirliton/Vegetable Pear (Tao tah; hayato uri; fut shau kua, ngow-lai choi, tsai hsio li, sayote, xu-xu, trai su, choc ho)
 Chinese Broccoli/Kailan/Gai-lohn/Chinese Kale (pak kah nah)
 Daikon/Chinese Radish (Lo pue, lor bark, labanos, cu-cai trang)
 Garlic Chive/Chinese Chive/Gow Choy (Nдох dah, nira, jiu tsai kau tsai, kui, tsai, gil choy)
 Sponge Gourd/Chinese Okra/Luffa (Skoo ah, hechima, sinqua, ta tsu kua, patola, cabatiti, muop khia)
 Tomatillo
 Wax Gourd/Ash Gourd/Winter Melon (Tougan, doongua, cham kwa, tankoy)
7. **Other ethnic vegetables you would be interested in purchasing locally** (Please list)

8. **What is your zip code?** _____

APPENDIX II. Selected Asian Vegetables: English and Ethnic Names

English	Botanical Name	Family Name	Chinese	Japanese	Filipino	Vietnamese	Hmong
Bitter melon	<i>Momordica charantia</i>	Cucurbitaceae	ku kwa (M)	rei shi	ampalaya	muop dang	jee dee ee-ah
Bitter gourd			fu kwa (C)	niga uri		dee ee-ah	
Bottle gourd (calabash, white-flowered gourd)	<i>Lagenaria siceraria</i>	Cucurbitaceae	po gua (C)	yugao	upo	bau	
Chayote	<i>Sedum edule</i>	Cucurbitaceae	fut shau kua (C) tsai hsio li ngow-lai choi	hayato uri	sayote	xu-xu traï su	tao tah
Chinese broccoli (white flowering)	<i>Brassica oleracea</i> <i>Alboglabra</i> group	Brassicaceae	gai lohn (C)				pak kah nah
Radish (Chinese, Japanese white, Oriental winter)	<i>Raphanus sativus</i> (<i>Longipinnatus</i> group)	Brassicaceae	lor bark (C)	daikon	labanos	cu-cai trang	lo pue
Chives, Chinese	<i>Allium tuberasum</i>	Amaryllidaceae	jiu tsai (M)	nira			ndoh dah
Garlic Chives			gow choy (C) gil choy				
Luffa	<i>Luffa acutangula</i>	Cucurbitaceae	sinqu (C)	hechima	patola	muop khia	skoo ah
-angled (Chinese okra, vegetable sponge)			ta tsu kua (M)		cabatiti		
-smooth	<i>Luffa aegyptiaca</i>	Cucurbitaceae	bark gua (C)		bilidan	muop huong	
Wax gourd / Chinese preserving melon	<i>Benincasa hispida</i>	Cucurbitaceae	doongua (C)(M)	tougan	tankoy		
-harvested at white stage			cham kwa				

Note: (C) refers to Cantonese; (M) refers to Mandarin

Other Asian vegetables

Bok Choy Botanical name: *Brassica rapa*; Family: Brassicaceae (Chinensis group)
Includes varieties: Canton Pak, Pai Tsai White Stalk, Shanghai, Lei Choy and Pak Choy

Celtuce Botanical name: *Lactuca sativa* var. *augustan*; Family: Asteraceae (Sunflower family)

Table from The University of California *Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook*, 2nd edition, 1998.
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