

# Marketing Asian Produce

## Introduction

Asian produce includes any number of fruits and vegetables originating in and/or used in the cuisine of East Asia (China, Japan, and Korea) and Southeast Asia (Vietnam, Laos, Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia, etc). The term “Asian” can also include cuisine of South Asia (India and Pakistan).

## 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 and into this century.

In the 2000s, American consumers already familiar with Chinese cuisine began exploring Thai, Japanese, Indian, and Korean fare, especially when dining out. Ethnic Asian restaurants, particularly “quick casual,”<sup>1</sup> “fusion,”<sup>2</sup> and higher-end establishments, made inroads away from traditional market centers on both coasts and into the central U.S. In 2002, the Food Institute named Asian cuisine as “the next hot concept for the restaurant industry.”<sup>3</sup> Chains such as Outback Steakhouse® introduced Asian concept restaurants while P.F. Chang’s China Bistro® grew in popularity and opened its quick casual Pei Wei Asian Diner concept at lower price points. Similar Asian-themed quick casual introductions continued.

**Crop Diversification  
& Biofuel Research  
& Education Center**



This trend is still evident heading into the 2010s, with value-conscious consumers embracing Asian dining lunch menus and noodle-based dishes. Asian cuisine also plays a prominent role in recent trends toward “street food,”<sup>4</sup> as well as fusion dining and cooking. *Restaurants & Institutions* magazine ranked “Asian + Latin” fusion cuisine as one of its top 20 food trends for 2010.<sup>5</sup>

Increased use of ethnic Asian food is also fueled by a growing Asian population. Between 2007 and 2008, the U.S. Asian population grew by 2.5%.<sup>6</sup> The population of persons of Asian ethnicity in Kentucky, though comparatively small to Kentucky’s more than 90,000 persons of Hispanic origin, continued to increase in the 2000s. The Kentucky Asian population was estimated at 29,744 in 2000; 36,986 in 2004, and grew to 40,684 by 2008.<sup>3</sup>

Burgeoning Asian populations, along with the increased interest of other consumers in

Asian cuisine, has helped stimulate an increased interest in purchasing fresh vegetables to prepare in Asian dishes at home. Consumers are expected to continue to explore cooking with Asian food. 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, also known as the Millennial Generation, or Millennials) are also highly receptive to ethnic cuisine.

### Market Opportunities

The U.S. ethnic foods market accounts for the equivalent of \$1 of every \$7 being spent on groceries.<sup>7</sup> 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) shares, or roadside stand mix.

Marketing Asian vegetables to restaurants may also be a promising strategy for growers, especially those located nearer metro areas. Selling Asian vegetables to upscale American restaurants that are expanding their menus to include Asian-themed entrees may also be an option. 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. Growers should recognize that these differences extend to restaurants, with



ASIAN EGGPLANT

distinctions in produce sourced by Thai, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, and other ethnic chefs.

### PICK-YOUR-OWN (U-PICK)

Pick-Your-Own (PYO) or U-Pick 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, and so on.

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 U-Pick 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:

- Provide preparation instructions and recipes at purchase
- Bundle specialty vegetables with other products and provide instructions for use
- Provide 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 FOR NEW GROWERS

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 Kentucky Produce Marketing and Planting Intentions Survey, Asian vegetables most likely to be grown by commercial vegetable growers 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 at an on-farm market in 2004.



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 survey instrument (see 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 chart (APPENDIX II, TABLE 1) is a partial reproduction of a listing of Asian vegetables and their ethnic names in the University of California's *Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook*. It has been reproduced by permission. The handbook is recommended for those interested in Asian crops, as well as other specialty produce. Other Asian vegetables that could potentially be grown in Kentucky are listed in a second table (APPENDIX II, TABLE 2).

## Selected Resources

- Asian Vegetables (University of Kentucky)  
<http://www.uky.edu/Ag/cdbrec/introsheets/asian.pdf>
- Growing and Marketing Chinese Vegetables in Central Kentucky (University of Kentucky, 1996)  
<http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/proceedings1996/v3-496.html>
- Kentucky MarketMaker  
<http://www.marketmakerky.com>
- Around the World at Farmers' Market: Opportunities in Growing and Marketing of Ethnic and Old-fashioned Fruits, Vegetables and Herbs (Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, 2002)  
[http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/2002\\_proceedings/ethnic\\_fruits\\_veggies\\_herbs.pdf](http://www.kerrcenter.com/publications/2002_proceedings/ethnic_fruits_veggies_herbs.pdf)
- Asian Vegetables in Ohio Vegetable Production Guide (Ohio State University, 2009)  
<http://ohioline.osu.edu/b672/pdf/Asian.pdf>
- Production Practices and Sample Costs (University of California-Davis. 2006) *sample budgets for commercial production of Asian vegetables in California's San Joaquin Valley*  
<http://www.sfc.ucdavis.edu/research/coststudies.html>

- Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (University of California, 1998)  
*Information on the handbook at*  
<http://sfp.ucdavis.edu/Docs/publications.asp?view=5>  
*Available for purchase at*  
<http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu/SmallFarms/3346.aspx>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Quick casual*, also referred to as fast casual, are restaurants that offer counter service rather than full table service. The quality of food and atmosphere, however, is of a higher quality than what would be offered at a fast food restaurant.

<sup>2</sup> *Fusion* is a culinary trend that merges two or more distinct ethnic styles into a unique type of cuisine.

<sup>3</sup> The Food Institute Report, May 27, 2002 edition.

<sup>4</sup> *Street food*, as the name implies, refers to food available through streetside vendors, generally via a portable cart or stall.

<sup>5</sup> Perlik, Allison. 2010. *R&I's Top 20 Menu Trends for 2010 - US Food Trends*. Restaurants and Institutions.  
<http://www.caterersearch.com/Articles/2010/02/18/332318/RampI39s-20-Menu-Trends-for-2010-US-Food-Trends.htm>

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Census Bureau  
<http://www.census.gov/>

<sup>7</sup> Geisler, Malinda. March 2011. *Ethnic Foods Market Profile*.  
[http://www.agmrc.org/markets\\_\\_industries/food/ethnic\\_foods\\_market\\_profile.cfm](http://www.agmrc.org/markets__industries/food/ethnic_foods_market_profile.cfm)

---

Prepared by Matt Ernst & Tim Woods ([tawoods@uky.edu](mailto:tawoods@uky.edu)) Issued 2005, Revised 2010  
UK Department of Agricultural Economics, 400 Charles E. Barnhart Building,  
Lexington, KY, 40546-0276 Phone 859-257-5762 <http://www.ca.uky.edu/agecon/index.php>

---

Photos: Seth Anderson, Flickr (bitter melon); Ken Hammond, USDA (eggplants);  
Matthew Ernst, University of Kentucky (farmers market); and  
John Strang, University of Kentucky (kabocha)

May 2010

---

## 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 to 4 times per month  Once a month

Less than once a month



KABOCHA SQUASH

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

TABLE 1. Asian vegetables in *The University of California Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 1998

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 Garlic Chives	<i>Allium tuberosum</i>	Amaryllidaceae	jiu tsai (M) gow choy (C) gil choy	nira			ndoh dah
Luffa -angled (Chinese okra, vegetable sponge)	<i>Luffa acutangula</i>	Cucurbitaceae	sinqua (C) ta tsu kua (M)	hechima	patola cabatiti	muop khia	skoo ah
-smooth	<i>Luffa aegyptiaca</i>	Cucurbitaceae	bark gua (C)		bilidan	muop huong	
Wax gourd / Chinese preserving melon  -harvested at white stage	<i>Benincasa hispida</i>	Cucurbitaceae	doongua (C) (M)  cham kwa	tougan	tankoy		

\*(C) denotes Cantonese; (M) denotes Mandarin

TABLE 2. Other Asian vegetables

English	Botanical Name	Family Name	Chinese (Mandarin)	Notes
Adzuki bean	<i>Phaseolus angularis</i>	Fabaceae	hong xiao dou	also: azuki bean
Bok Choy	<i>Brassica rapa</i>	Brassicaceae	xiao bai cai	includes varieties: Canton Pak, Pai Tsai White Stalk, Shanghai, Lei Choy, and Pak Choy
Celtuce	<i>Lactuca sativa</i> var. <i>augustan</i>	Asteraceae	wo sun	also: stem lettuce
Edamame	<i>Glycines max</i>	Fabaceae	mao dou	edible green vegetable soybeans
Kabocha	<i>Cucurbita maxima</i>	Cucurbitaceae		also: Japanese squash
Napa	<i>Brassica rapa</i> var. <i>pekinensis</i>	Brassicaceae	da bai cai	headed Chinese cabbage
Pea shoots	<i>Pisium sativum</i>	Fabaceae	dou miao	sprouts
Yardlong bean	<i>Vigna sesquipedalis</i>	Fabaceae	chang jiang dou	also: asparagus bean