



Marketing Asian Produce

Matt Ernst¹ and Tim Woods²

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

Asian cuisines became well-established as part of the American diet as Caucasian consumers developed increasingly diverse appetites and the U.S. ethnic Asian population increased. Today’s younger consumers, especially Millennials, are likely to consider ethnic foods part of their regular diet. Globally inspired children’s menu items ranked as a major restaurant trend for 2020, and foodservice trends continue to popularize ethnic Asian cuisines.¹ Since the 1990s, ethnic Asian restaurants, particularly “quick casual,”² “fusion”³ and higher-end establishments, have become more popular with consumers.

The popularity of ethnic Asian cuisine continued through the 2010s as value-conscious consumers embraced Asian dining lunch menus and noodle-based dishes, as well as bowl entrees. Asian cuisines also figure prominently in “street food,”⁴ as well as fusion dining and cooking. Ethnic/street food-inspired cuisine appeared in the National Restaurant Association’s lists of top trends, from appetizers to main dishes, from 2014 to 2020.⁵

Increased use of ethnic Asian food is also fueled by a growing Asian population. The U.S. Asian population made up 5.4% of the total population in 2017.⁶ The



YARDLONG BEANS

population of persons of Asian ethnicity in Kentucky, though comparatively small to Kentucky’s more than 118,000 persons of Hispanic origin, continued to increase in the 2000s. Kentucky’s Asian population was estimated at 36,986 in 2004, nearly doubling to about 71,000 by 2018.⁶

Burgeoning Asian populations and consumer interest in Asian cuisine helped stimulate increased interest in purchasing fresh Asian vegetables to prepare at home, a trend expected to continue. More interest in ethnic cuisine from Caucasian consumers also supports ethnic vegetable cultivation. The youngest shoppers (Generation Y, also



¹Matt Ernst is an independent contractor with the Center for Crop Diversification.

²Tim Woods is an Extension Professor with the UK Department of Agricultural Economics.

known as the Millennial Generation, or Millennials) are also highly receptive to ethnic cuisine. During the past 20 years, Asian vegetables like edamame (vegetable soybean) and daikon (Chinese radish) have been among vegetable crops that could be produced at wholesale quantities in Kentucky.

Market Opportunities

The U.S. ethnic foods market, including fresh produce, saw robust annual growth during the period from 2010 to 2018. 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. Wholesale marketing opportunities are also available for Asian vegetables.

Marketing Asian vegetables to restaurants may be possible for farmers located near metro areas. Selling Asian vegetables to upscale restaurants 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 distinctions in produce sourced by Thai, Chinese, Indian, Japanese and other ethnic chefs.

PICK-YOUR-OWN (U-PICK)

Pick-your-own (PYO) marketers always face the challenge of communicating their farm policies and picking rules to their customers. 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 pick-your-own operation.



ASIAN PEARS

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. Past University of Kentucky marketing research projects evaluated consumer acceptance of kabocha squash, also called Japanese pumpkin, a hard (winter) squash well-received by both ethnic Asian and Caucasian consumers.

Kabocha squash customers were surveyed about their Asian vegetable buying practices and preferences.



BOK CHOY is among the Asian vegetable crops in demand at farmers markets in Kentucky.

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. Past surveys of kabocha squash customers indicated they were willing to purchase celtuce/ asparagus lettuce, chayote, garlic chives, wax gourd and Japanese eggplant. The sample size of this survey was specific to a single farm market and is too small for other producers to assume 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).

¹National Restaurant Association What’s Hot 2020 Culinary Forecast. https://restaurant.org/Downloads/PDFs/Research/Whats_Hot_2020.pdf

²Quick 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.

³Fusion is a culinary trend that merges two or more distinct ethnic styles into a unique type of cuisine

⁴Street food, as the name implies, refers to food available through street vendors, generally via a portable cart or stall.

⁵ National Restaurant Association. What's Hot 2020 Culinary Forecast. https://restaurant.org/Downloads/PDFs/Research/Whats_Hot_2020.pdf

⁶ <http://www.census.gov>

Selected Resources

- Asian Vegetables (University of Kentucky) <https://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu.ccd/files/asian.pdf>
- Asian Vegetables (Midwest Vegetable Production Guide, Page 95) <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/ID/ID-56-W%202020.pdf>
- Ethnic Vegetables (Cornell University) <https://cyp.cce.cornell.edu/crop.php?id=13>
- Growing Specialty Ethnic Crops for a South Asian Market in the Northeast (Northeast SARE, 2016) <https://cdn.sare.org/wp-content/uploads/20171204120541/Crop-Guide-for-South-Asian-Vegetables-in-NE1.pdf>

- Growing and Marketing Chinese Vegetables in Central Kentucky (University of Kentucky, 1996) <http://www.hort.purdue.edu/newcrop/proceedings1996/v3-496.html>
- Specialty and Minor Crops Handbook, 2nd edition (Small Farm Center, University of California-Davis, 1998) This publication is available for purchase only. Information on the handbook contents: <http://sfp.ucdavis.edu/pubs/publications/5/>
Available for purchase at: <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/Details.aspx?itemNo=3346>
- Specialty Vegetables (ATTRA, 2002) <https://attra.ncat.org/attra-pub/summaries/summary.php?pub=36>

Suggested Citation:

Ernst, M. and T. Woods (2021). *Marketing Asian Produce*. CCD-MP-8. Lexington, KY: Center for Crop Diversification, University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, Food and Environment. Available: <http://www.uky.edu/ccd/sites/www.uky.edu.ccd/files/asianmarket.pdf>

Reviewed by Brad Bergefurd, Ohio State University Horticulture Specialist, and Savannah Columbia, Extension Associate, UK Agricultural Economics

Photos courtesy of Pixabay.com

August 2021

For additional information, contact your local **County Extension** agent

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of economic or social status and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, ethnic origin, national origin, creed, religion, political belief, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, pregnancy, marital status, genetic information, age, veteran status, or physical or mental disability.

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 choy, 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 (Ndoh 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*, 2nd edition, 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>Glycine 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