

Grown in Washington - Onions

The Walla Walla Sweet Onion story began nearly a century ago on the Island of Corsica, off the west coast of Italy. It was there that a French soldier, Peter Pieri, found a sweet onion seed and brought it to Walla Walla in the late 1800's. At the time, Italian immigrant gardeners comprised the core of WallaWalla's gardening industry, and several were Pieri's neighbors. Impressed by the new onion's winter hardiness, they and Pieri harvested the seed.

This "French" onion developed over several generations through the process of carefully hand selecting onions from each year's crop, ensuring exceptional sweetness, jumbo size, and round shape. Today's growers realize they're not just raising sweet onions, but cultivating a tradition.

The following information is about Onions in general.

Onion History

Many archaeologists, botanists, and food historians believe onions originated in central Asia. Other research suggests onions were first grown in Iran and West Pakistan.

It is presumed our predecessors discovered and started eating wild onions very early – long before farming or even writing was invented. Very likely, this humble vegetable was a staple in the prehistoric diet.

Most researchers agree the onion has been cultivated for 5000 years or more. Since onions grew wild in various regions, they were probably consumed for thousands of years and domesticated simultaneously all over the world. Onions may be one of the earliest cultivated crops because they were less perishable than other foods of the time, were transportable, were easy to grow, and could be grown in a variety of soils and climates. In addition, the onion was useful for sustaining human life. Onions prevented thirst and could be dried and preserved for later consumption when food might be scarce. While the place and time of the onion's origin is still a mystery, many documents from very early times describe its importance as a food and its use in art, medicine, and mummification.

Nature's Ninja

No longer the humble onion, Nature's Ninja is a **phenom of Mother Nature** that deserves higher praise for its stealth, its endurance and its adaptability and sustainability. While its nutrients help you ward off diseases, it's also a major action hero, slaying disease and bacteria just to get to the table. It provides amazing flavor to any meal, and it's useful in other ways such as dying fabrics, curing bee stings, cleaning grills or feeding sheep.

Consider these Ninja qualities:

- **Survivors** — From its hard, papery skin keeping bacteria at bay to its pungent juices preserving itself, the onion was built to survive the elements.
- **Master of disguise** — From the outside, the onion seems unassuming and simple. But there's a warrior inside ready to fight disease.
- **Resourceful** — Onions also have many properties to keep those who eat it healthy — while it helps sustain a healthy gut, it can also help your mental health – have you have a good cry lately?
- **Adaptable** — It can tempt the taste buds in a variety of forms to create just the right mixture of tastes to add the perfect touch to your meals.

- **Stealthy** — Who hasn't minced an onion to slip into recipes without being noticed? We know chefs who sweat onions and turn the onions into a puree to add the right amount of flavor to their dishes.

Sustainability

- **Natural dyes**— Onion skins can be used as natural fabric and textile dyes to add yellows, pinks and greens without the harsh chemicals.
- **Alternative fuel** — The onions that don't make it to market can be used as **sheep feed**, instead of thrown away. Research has shown that feeding sheep onions helps ranchers reduce feed and water costs. That means zero waste
- **Alternative Fuel** — Leftover onion parts are being used in California to power the entire plant from which they're processed, saving thousands in electrical costs. The **Gills Onions Advanced Energy Recovery System** has in its 10 years created enough power to fuel 460 homes.
- **Curative Power** — Onion's pungent juices will help soothe a bee sting. Take one on your next picnic.
- **Natural Do-It-Yourselfer** — As a grill-cleaner: Ditch the harsh chemicals and clean your grill off with an onion. Then put the onion in the coals to provide a mellow onion flavor to your meats. The onion also makes a nice alternative to **an ice scraper** during the cold winter months.

How to Select, Cut, Prepare & Store Onions

Onions are the third most consumed fresh vegetable in the United States and available in grocery stores all year long. Ranging in size from less than one-inch in diameter to over 4.5 inches in diameter, bulb onions can be yellow, red, or white in color. There are specific ways to find, prepare and store your onions for maximum flavor.

How to Select

Dry bulb onions should be firm for their size and have little to no scent. Avoid bulbs with any cuts, bruises, or blemishes. When purchasing whole peeled onions, select ones with an outside layer that does not show signs of being dehydrated. Fresh-cut onions should be purchased before the expiration date.

How to Prepare

A staple in the kitchen, onions can be prepared in a number of ways and can be found in almost every cuisine. Aside from the many ways onions are used raw, these are the four most common methods found in recipes:

- **Sautéed**
- **Caramelized**
- **Grilled**
- **Roasted**

How to Caramelize Like a Ninja

Nothing beats the sweet flavor of caramelized onions, but the reward is not without a little effort. Truly caramelized onions that are dark brown and soft with a flavor as sweet as candy take around 45 minutes to make — sometimes longer. They also need to be watched closely. Since not everyone has that kind of time, we found a short-cut. The trick to getting onions to caramelize more quickly is to add baking soda.

Why baking soda?

First, it's important to understand what is happening during the caramelization process and how baking soda is influencing it. As onions cook, they release their moisture and cells begin to break down, causing them to

soften. Sugars are released and as they heat up, both caramelization and a common chemical reaction in food occurs, called a Maillard reaction or Maillard browning. Both of these create the dark golden brown color we associate with caramelized onions. When you add baking soda during cooking it changes the pH which increases the Maillard reaction causing the onions to brown more quickly. The higher pH also causes the onions to soften more quickly.

It's important not to use too much baking soda as it can change the flavor of the onions and give them an unappealing chemical-like taste. Most recipes call for a pinch, but a pinch is up for interpretation so we wanted to define it. We also read to limit the amount to $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon per pound of onions. In the end, we decided to err on the side of caution and added $\frac{1}{8}$ of a teaspoon to 1 pound of onions with the recipe below.

1 pound onions, sliced

2 tablespoons unsalted butter

$\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon baking soda

We added both the onions and the butter to the pan at the same time and turned the burner to medium heat. We started our timer at this point and continued to stir until the butter melted, then stirred the onions often as they caramelized.

Our onions were soft and caramelized in about 13 minutes. Not too far off from suggestions we found around the Internet that it would take 10 minutes, and a lot less than the typical 45 minutes when not using baking soda.

Flavor

No chemical taste with these onions. They were delicious. Maybe even a little sweeter than using the longer method.

Texture

The onions dissolved a bit more and became creamy, almost like an onion jam. This was expected with the higher pH and it can be good or bad, depending on how you plan to use the onions.

For blending the onions into dips or spreading onto a sandwich, the caramelizing with baking soda provides the perfect end result. The soft texture allows them to blend right in with other ingredients and they are nearly spreadable.

If you are hoping for visual appeal and a bit of bite to the onions, the quick caramelized method probably isn't the way to go. For example, if you want to put them on a pizza or pile them on a bite-size appetizer.

How to Store

Whole dry bulb onions should be kept in a cool, dry, dark place with plenty of air movement. Lack of ventilation will reduce their storage life.

Refrigeration is only necessary when trying to extend the shelf life of sweet or mild onion varieties with high water content, but be sure to use a low humidity setting; they must be kept dry.

- Refrigerate whole peeled onions after purchasing.
- Store cut onions in a sealed container for up to 7 days.
- Always keep pre-cut onions refrigerated and use before the expiration date.

Jamaican Pork Tenderloin with Caramelized Onion and Fruit

Ingredients

2 medium onions
1/3 cup apricot jam
1 tablespoon soy sauce
1 tablespoon lime juice
1 large or 2 small pork tenderloins, (1 1/4 to 1 1/2 pounds)
1 cup mango, papaya, or peach cut into large pieces
1/4 cup chopped fresh cilantro
Lime wedges

Directions

Peel and trim onions. Cut crosswise into 1/2-inch thick rings. Combine apricot jam, soy sauce and lime juice to make a glaze. Grill onion slices and pork tenderloin over medium ash-covered coals. When the pork and onion have been on the grill for 10 minutes, brush them with glaze and turn as needed for even cooking. Pork is done when the internal temperature of the meat is 160°F when tested with instant-read thermometer. Transfer grilled onions to a bowl, separating into rings. Add fruit and cilantro. Slice pork with knife blade at a diagonal slant. Overlap meat slices onto a serving platter. Accompany with onions and fruit mixture. Pass lime wedges to squirt juice over.

Alternate Oven Method: Place onion slices and pork on oiled rack in roasting pan. Roast at 400°F. for about 25 to 45 minutes, brushing with glaze after first 10 minutes of roasting, or until pork has internal temperature of 160°F.

Makes 6 servings.

Per serving: 221 calories, 31 g protein, 4.6 g fat, 13.5 g carbohydrates, 1.7 g fiber, 108 mg sodium.

Recipe provided by the National Onion Association.