

1. Title:

A Potato Variety Evaluation for Culinary Performance

2. Project Leader(s):

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4. Abstract:

The purpose of this project is to promote the NY potato industry. Think of Apples. Apple varieties and their various culinary uses are well known to everyone. Potato varieties vary in their sugar and starch content. Without knowing what each potato does when cooked gives potatoes a distinct disadvantage to the grower. We started out working with various cooking schools to evaluate the different potato varieties. Once we had a handle on the culinary characteristics, we started promoting and educating chefs, culinary schools and the public.

5. Background and justification:

Potato growers in NY have seen demand for their products steadily decrease over the years. Competition from Canada and the Northwest has resulted in a dramatic reduction in potato acreage and the number of producers. In the past twenty years, New York potato acreage has decreased from 38,000 acres to 22,000 acres. Over that same period, the dollar amount growers receive per hundred-weight has remained at right around five dollars. It is possible that within five to ten years, there will be no more wholesale potato producers left in NY. The generic round white potato just does not cut it anymore.

With more and more of our food coming from anywhere and everywhere, the public is eager to buy locally. Chefs have a catch when they can say their product is grown locally. New York has a huge population base very close by. Why do potatoes grown possibly 2-3000 miles away have an advantage in the market place? If price is the sole consideration, than potatoes grown in Idaho are going to win. If we can market our potatoes in different ways than previously, New York can begin to take back their market.

With the popularity of food magazines and all the cooking programs on television, the public has a heightened food awareness. New York growers need to take advantage of this interest. The way to do that is by variety name recognition and being able to market specific varieties by culinary performance.

8. Results and discussion:

Beginning in January 2008, we distributed six ten pound bags of different NY varieties to restaurants throughout eastern NY. We focused on the bigger cities and fine "white table cloth" restaurants. Potatoes were distributed in Lake Placid, Plattsburgh, Saratoga Springs, Albany, Schenectady, Troy, New Paltz and Kingston and restaurants in between.

Initially, we wanted to give potatoes to 60 restaurants in the whole of NY, but quickly realized the reception was very favorable and we could meet the 60 restaurant goal just in Eastern NY. It was decided to focus on eastern NY and wait till next season for western NY. An evaluation form was included with the potatoes for the restaurant chefs to fill out and return to us with their opinions of the potatoes. Our goal here is to educate chefs on NY varieties and locally grown issues. Hopefully they will ask their suppliers to obtain locally grown potatoes. These restaurants will be able to spread the potato promotional information. We need to educate people in many different ways.

In addition to “white table cloth” restaurants, we distributed potatoes to 6 vocational schools in the Capital District. An “Iron Chef” competition was staged between the Albany and Columbia County BOCES using the potatoes. Culinary students are the chefs of tomorrow and by educating them now, we are paving the way for increased locally grown usage.

Professor Walter DeJong and I met with Dan Barber, owner and head chef at Blue Barns Restaurant in Westchester County. There is a farm connected to the restaurant. We had a small potato variety trial on his farm in 2007. He has expressed interest in growing any unusual potato varieties Cornell might have. In exchange, he is willing to give the Cornell potato breeding program and NY potatoes national exposure. We are looking to show everyone how NY has one of the best potato breeding programs in the US. We also want to emphasize NY potatoes as being of high quality. Dan Barber is a nationally recognized food expert and has appeared on Dateline as well as in many national publications.

On February 10, I gave a talk on “IPM, agriculture and Locally grown” to the Eastern NY American Culinary Federation (ACF) awards meeting in Albany. I have taken every opportunity to educate Chefs and other educators on the issues involved in locally grown food and potatoes specifically. The talk was warmly received.

On February, 27, 2008 we held “The New York Potato, more than a side dish and locally grown” at SCCC. The meeting began at 10 am with two hours of speakers covering different aspects of NY potatoes. The focus was on educating the food industry on NY locally grown potatoes. The meeting was followed at noon by a luncheon featuring potato dishes prepared by students in the Culinary Arts program. Initial sign up for the meeting was 75 chefs, produce buyers and food industry people. Unfortunately, February 27 was a heavy snow day with local schools being closed. We still had 40 people attend the meeting. The Commissioner of Agriculture Hooker and Noah Sheetz, Chef for the Executive Mansion were featured speakers at the meeting.

As a result of the potato meeting and working with the restaurants, newspaper coverage of potatoes has been very good. Articles on NY potato varieties appeared in the Albany, Saratoga Schenectady, Poughkeepsie and New York Magazine.

On April 7, I gave another talk on “IPM, agriculture and Locally grown” at the New York State Restaurant Association annual meeting in Saratoga. Three varieties of NY potatoes

were served with the dinner and NY potatoes were given out as door prizes to the chefs attending. It is important to take every opportunity to educate chefs on locally grown and NY Potato issues. Many good contacts within the food industry were made at the dinner.

We met with Toby Strianese, the culinary program director at Schenectady County Community College and set a date for the Potato Educational Day. We plan to have two meetings, one in Eastern NY and another in Western NY. With the amount of work putting together one meeting, it was felt to focus on Eastern NY in 2008 and have another meeting in Western NY in early 2009.

During the summer, we conducted an organic potato variety field evaluations at two eastern NY vegetable farms. We evaluated 16 potato varieties for resistance to potato leaf hopper and organic yield. The results were distributed to growers throughout NY. This information will help growers select resistant potato varieties that yield well in NY conditions.

We put together "The New York Potato Culinary Usage Guide". Input from the various culinary schools and selected Chefs was used to rate the different potato varieties on their culinary properties. This will be a valuable tool for consumers as well as growers. Consumers, whether they are the public, produce buyers or chefs will be able to know how a specific potato variety will perform. Growers will find this especially useful, as they will have an extra marketing tool to be able to sell their potatoes by culinary use. While the initial use guide was handed out at the meeting, we are continuing to work and expand the Potato Use Guide. We are working on glossy, color versions before the end of the 2008 growing season. We have selected 5 or 6 "model spuds" of each variety and we are currently in the process of photographing the potatoes to go along with the Use Guide. Melanie Wickham, Executive Secretary of the Empire State Potato Growers Inc. has agreed to host the Use Guide on their web site. We will also be printing hard copies of the Use Guide.

We are currently working on a "Potato Variety Cultural Use Guide" This will be a companion to the "Culinary Use Guide". The Cultural Guide will include insect and disease resistance information, storage information, planting, growing and other useful information that will help growers in their production of potatoes.

The target date for putting both the Cultural and Culinary Use Guides on the Empire State Potato Growers Web site is February 15, 2009

We are currently planning for the winter of 2008-2009. Potatoes will be distributed to 60 restaurants in western NY and hopefully some select restaurants in NY City. We are also continuing work on "The NY Potato Use Guide".