

Farming for flavor: The New Potato Imperative

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Today we will explore why great culinary qualities in potatoes are important. You could call it "Food for thought." Today's consumers want to know more and more about their food and how and where it's grown, along with a great eating experience.

Potato Sensory Evaluation at Le Cordon Bleu

So, the question is "**What is new with potatoes?**"

Well, for the past 7 years the Oregon Potato Commission and I have conducted sensory evaluations on potatoes at Le Cordon Bleu Culinary School in Portland. We then assembled a panel of professional chefs who have been trained on how to evaluate culinary qualities in potatoes. Since chefs value flavor and culinary qualities, I created a flavor lexicon to help chefs evaluate potato flavors, and I hope it can influence consumer decisions when purchasing potatoes. We gathered a group of up to twenty chefs, growers, and researchers to participate in this program using the flavor lexicon to evaluate taste, texture, aroma and appearance. It is a rare opportunity to taste 50 potato entries side by side all in one sitting. Yet, every potato sensory event that we have done, the panel of chefs and growers has been amazed to find that each potato tastes different, and also has its own culinary qualities.

Goodness Unearthed Award

After these sensory evaluations, the Oregon Potato Commission presented a "Goodness Unearthed Award" for the best tasting potatoes. These potatoes were broken down into four categories: Russet, Red, Yellow, and Specialty. We also evaluated some experimental varieties. These awards can have promotional potential in the market place.

Peruvian/What is Flavor?

A little background

There are about 4,000 Peruvian native varieties that grow on the planet and about 600 varieties grown in the United States. For centuries potatoes have been selected for their taste, texture, shape, and color. Yet all potatoes are not created equally in taste and texture.

So what is flavor exactly? Flavor is made up from **taste and smell.**

Taste is broken down into four parts: **sweet, sour, bitter, and salty.** You could also include a **5th element called umami, which means savory.**

Smell is actually the main determinate of food flavor and the smells of food are potentially limitless. And, there is recent research of a 6th taste category called "**Kokumi**" from a study at Oregon State University at Corvallis, which suggest that we also have taste receptors on our tongue, roof of the

mouth, and back of the throat, that allow us to taste starch or carbs. This may explain why potatoes are so cravable, and why we love bread, pasta, and of course potatoes.

Other factors are **temperature and texture** in the perception of flavor. “Terroir,” meaning “soil or land” which refers to the environment that the potatoes are grown in, including **soil type, water, and temperature**, can also influence flavor. Potatoes have a very special flavor profile, and every grower has had an opinion about their favorite potatoes to eat.

Types of Flavors/Textures

Some potatoes have many flavor textures; I have listed 50 flavors including: **earthy, soil, herbaceous, celery, toast, astringent, buttery, nutty, smooth creamy, and/or gummy**. Some flavors are desirable and some are not. But we cannot underestimate the satisfaction and the power of potato flavor. The better eating experience consumers have, the more they will buy potatoes.

Remembering Great Taste

Remember when supermarket tomatoes used to taste juicy and strawberries were full of flavor? Potatoes should never go the way of the often tasteless strawberries or tomatoes. Potatoes are one of the most craved foods of all, and are the third most important consumed food on the planet. Supermarkets in Europe have been very active in the attempt to de-comodify and glorify the humble potato. They do this with more attractive packaging as well as guidance on which variety is best for which use. This is vital knowledge for anyone who has accidentally selected a waxy potato when they should have had a non-waxy variety for their purpose.

Potato Flavor/ Culinary Branding

Variety branding is becoming more important, and successful branding can command a premium price. We need to encourage groceries to enhance informational signs instead of specifying them just as red, white, new, russet, or Yukon to avoid making potatoes seem too ordinary. They could potentially sell more potatoes to the public by using different variety names as well as culinary preparation suggestions to go with them. Russet potatoes are wonderfully familiar and comforting. Moving forward I encourage the variety selection process and growers to place high value on flavor and culinary qualities of potatoes that are being considered for the market place.

We are investing in the future of driving consumer interests into choosing to eat potatoes more frequently. I contend that great tasting potatoes do not need many additions to make them taste better. If I have a great tasting potato then all it needs is just a little bit of extra-virgin olive oil, garlic, and a little bit of salt and pepper. Depth of potato flavor is always important. From subtle chestnut to buttery sweet. It doesn't have to be complicated to be delicious. In fact, newly dug potatoes generate a “fresh from the ground flavor” that just can't be beat, and it's a mystery why that is.

Robuchon Potatoes

Chef Joel Robuchon of France, has a number of 3-star Michelin restaurants in France and Las Vegas. He has been called the chef of the century by a French travel guide and is most famous for his mashed potato dish called by his namesake, Robuchon potatoes (using French LaRatte potatoes).

Likewise, with Chef Thomas Keller of the French Laundry and many other top chefs in the United States, almost every chef will have their favorite potatoes for their various dishes.

You can guess that they want great-tasting potatoes. Yet, sometimes potatoes get a bad rap for not being healthy, but we know that potatoes are an excellent source of high-value nutrients. **It's not the potato that's bad, it what we do to them that makes them unhealthy.**

In the spirit of innovation I think there is money to be made in high value gourmet-flavored potatoes. They have outstanding culinary qualities that satisfy chefs and the consumer segment. As farmers markets have become more popular and accessible to the public there is a frenetic burst of interest from growers and the public for more interesting fresh food that is full of flavor! Perhaps we can create the first potato to go viral for its flavor and culinary qualities. That being said, we could use more social media such as Twitter and Facebook to encourage the new generation to consume more potatoes. Consumer education is an ongoing concern, Younger consumers often overlook potatoes due to prep time and negative health concerns brought on by the media. However, progressive growers have come a long way from the days of "one variety fits all." Regarding today's potatoes, will they stand the test of time in terms of taste and versatility?

"Small Potatoes Go Big"

Growers have also made great varieties like small potatoes which have landed among the top 10 food trends for 2017. This could be for many reasons: they're shareable, sociable, and are an innovative platform. There are also many different types within this category like **minis, marbles, and fingerlings**, all of which respond well to roasting, blistering, smoking, and smashing. Small potatoes are perfect for their **skin to flesh ratio**. They generally have a more concentrated flavor. It's not surprising they are included in the **2017 food trends**; they make great bar snacks! Plant based cuisine is a major food trend, few things are better than perfectly salty crisp on the outside and creamy on the inside, the taste of potato goodness.

Heirloom Ozette Potatoes

Many great tasting heritage variety potatoes have disappeared from the market shelves because of, poor yields, disease resistance and long term storage issues, but have been kept alive by specialty growers and home gardeners. Rare old varieties such as Makah Ozette, also known as Anna Cheeka's Ozette, have been resurrected by these specialty growers. The Makah Indians have grown these potatoes for over 200 years, right in Washington State. It is the only potato to be recognized by the **slow food movement** in the United States, and has earned a place in the **Ark of Taste** as an heirloom potato favorite. These heirloom potatoes are revered by chefs for their unique nutty earthy flavor reminiscent of cooked dry beans; they taste like a good earthy smell. Chefs treat them as if they were fine wines.

AI's Place and Smoke's Poutinerie

Undoubtedly chefs have played their part in the potato revival or we would not have seen the addition of rarified items like bulk duck fat in specialty stores that we love for making potato confit or duck fat fries and poutines.

Al's Place in San Francisco is making red skin potato brined French fries that have become a hit, while "**Smokes Pouterie**" is using yellow flesh potatoes for poutine fries with great flavors and has opened 150 locations in Canada and in the U.S. These are great examples of some of the endless possibilities where potatoes are making their mark. As long as you have a great potato flavor to start, the rest is golden.

The Power of Potato Flavor

As a chef, I believe flavor is one of the most important elements in food. When we consume potatoes, we want to enjoy them for what they are, not for what we put on them. I contend that as we educate consumers on this concept they will respond to taste and potato goodness. After all, we cannot underestimate the satisfaction and the power of potato flavor.

Bottom Line

**We want great tasting food, and potatoes play a major role in our food choice satisfaction.
We love potatoes.**

I would like to close with expressing my gratitude to all farmers and the potato industry for providing high quality produce to chefs and consumers, and carrying on this great tradition of family farming in the Pacific Northwest.