Chefs, Breeders Pair Up to Produce Tastier Vegetables

M.L. JOHNSON, Associated Press

A visitor to the University of Wisconsin research farm samples tomatoes Wednesday, Aug. 27, 2014, in Verona, Wisconsin. University plant breeders are working with chefs and farmers to develop better-tasting vegetables. **(AP Photo/M.L. Johnson)**

VERONA, Wis. (AP) — There's a good chance that many of the suddenly trendy vegetables that foodies latch on to in the next decade will benefit from research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

While plant breeders at many public universities focus on improving field corn, soybeans and other crops used in food manufacturing or livestock feed, those in Madison want to produce better-tasting vegetables.

The university has long had ties to the vegetable processing industry, as Wisconsin is among the top two or three states in producing canned or frozen sweet corn, green beans and peas. But vegetable breeders say the local food movement has created additional opportunities with a boom in organic farms, farmers markets and farm-to-table restaurants. The challenge is coming up with varieties consumers like, even if they can't always articulate what makes one ear of corn better than another.

"Apples are almost the only fruit or vegetable that when you go to the grocery store, you see 30 different apples all by name," said Bill Tracy, a sweet corn breeder who chairs the university's Department of Agronomy. "We could do the same thing for corn, and I'm not saying we need 30, but we could have a corn that's perfect for roasting, or soup use."

Horticulture professor Julie Dawson is leading a project in which vegetable breeders work with local farmers and chefs to figure out what makes vegetables taste great

and then produce easy-to-grow varieties with outstanding flavor. Participating chefs receive weekly deliveries of produce that they evaluate on a 5-point scale for qualities like sweetness and texture.

Dan Bonanno, the chef at A Pig in a Fur Coat, estimated he's tasted 80 varieties of tomatoes — "I never knew there were so many different tomatoes" — since mid-July. For him, the big find has been a sweet corn bred to have a less sugary taste and firmer texture than most popular varieties.

"I ripped open the husk, took a bite, and it was like eating a pear," Bonanno said. "It was so juicy ... I'm like, wow, you can make a very nice sauce or gelato with it because it's already naturally sweet and buttery and it had so much water."

Very sweet corn, which most Americans have become accustomed to, becomes mushy when stirred into a dish like risotto, Tracy said, and the sugary taste may conflict with other ingredients.

"If we understand what chefs want, we can produce it," he said. And, Tracy is confident chefs will be able to sell those new varieties to the public, given how they have popularized ramps, broccolini and other once-obscure fruits and vegetables.

On Wednesday, chefs, farmers and members of the public sampled and rated Tracy's corn, along with multiple varieties of tomatoes, peppers and melon at a university farm in Verona. Dawson will use the information to see how closely the chefs' opinions match that of regular eaters and develop an evaluation system that can be used early in the breeding process to select the best-tasting prospects from hundreds of cultivars.

"The flavor is much harder to fix at the end," she said. "If you have the flavor, the other things are easier to fix."

That's where farmers come in.

Mark Voss has been testing five varieties of tomatoes at his urban farm, which supplies Madison restaurants. He looks for resistance to disease and good production, but taste and aesthetics are important, too.

The varieties include a few big tomatoes with bold flavor as well as some smaller, cocktail tomatoes that he's "not so passionate about" because they "take a long time to pick." He prefers bigger fruit with thin skins and a lot of flesh — characteristics that make tomatoes more likely to bruise during shipping but aren't a problem when he's selling locally.

"I think there's an inverse relationship between bruise-ability and flavor," Voss said.

That's the kind of feedback Dawson is seeking. "Because really," she said, "it has to work for farmers as well as chefs."

If You Go ...

Two more public tastings [1] are scheduled from 3 to 5 p.m. on Sept. 22 and Oct. 24 at the UW West Madison Agricultural Research Station, 8502 Mineral Point Road, Verona, Wisconsin; 608-262-2257.

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