



## The Many Layers of the Onion

Onions are a staple of foodservice operators. From soups and salads to appetizers and sandwiches, onions add color, texture and flavor to menus.

### Onion Production

Onions are the third largest fresh vegetable industry in the United States; and grown in 20 states from coast to coast. Idaho, Eastern Oregon, Washington and California are the leading production areas. The National Onion Association estimates that fewer than 1,000 U.S. farmers plant more than 142,000 acres of onions each year. Per capita consumption of onions in the United States has more than doubled in the past 25 years. Americans consume nearly 20 pounds of onions annually.

### Onion Types

A domestic supply of onions is available year-round. Their flavor is determined by many factors including genetics, planting location, soil and temperature.

**Fresh onions**, available from March to August, have thin, light-colored skins. Because they have higher water content, they typically taste sweeter and milder than storage onions. This higher water content also makes them more susceptible to bruising. With their delicate taste, fresh onions are an ideal choice for salads and other fresh and lightly cooked dishes. The term “**sweet onion**” is used to describe the mildest, fresh onions. Many seed varieties of specialty onions are being developed and grown for their mild, sweet flavor.

**Storage onions**, available August to April, have multiple layers of thick, dark-colored, papery skin. Being low in water content, storage onions have higher amounts of solids. Storage onions are the best choice for savory dishes that require longer cooking times or more flavor.

### Fresh vs. Storage Onion Preparation

In general, onions with higher water content (fresh onions) take slightly more time to cook. Onions with a higher percentage of solids (storage onions) will cook in less time. In one study, fresh onions took about 40 minutes to caramelize while storage onions took just 20 minutes. In addition, the higher water content of fresh onions will require a longer resting time after breading rings or blooms. This will allow the breading to adhere better.

### Tips to Avoid Tearing

When an onion is pierced, a series of rapid chemical reactions take place. The reactions release sulfur compounds, which irritate our eyes. To reduce tearing:

1. Chill onions for about 30 minutes before cutting.
2. Always use a sharp knife and use quick, precise movements.
3. Begin cutting at top; Leave the root end intact as long as possible as it contains the highest concentration of sulfur.

### **Onion Colors and Sizes**

Both fresh and storage onions are available in yellow, red and white. **Yellow onions** are all-purpose and popular. In fact, 87 percent of the U.S. onion crop is comprised of yellow varieties. **Red onions** are a favorite for salads and sandwiches. Mostly used for raw applications or for grilling, red onions tend to be a bit courser in texture. About 8 percent of the U.S. onion crop is red. Demand for red onions in foodservice has grown in recent years. **White onions** are most commonly associated with Mexican or Southwest cuisine.

Onions range in size from less than 1 inch in diameter (creamers and boilers) to more than 4.5 inches in diameter (super colossal). The most common sizes of onions sold in the United States are the medium (2 to 3-1/4 inches in diameter) and the jumbo (3 to 3-3/4 in diameter).

### **Pre-Cut and Processed Onions**

Processed fresh and individual quick frozen onions (IQF) are available in a variety of cuts. Pre-grilled or pre-caramelized frozen onions are also available.

### **Onion Handling/Storage Tips**

Onions should feel firm and dry, but may have loose outer skins.

Onions should be free of gray or black mold and should not have any visible sprouting.

Always make sure the number of bags or cartons delivered matches the delivery invoice and the onions are the correct color and size ordered.

Always handle onions with care. Do not drop onions as this can cause bruising.

Store onions in a cool, dry, well-ventilated area.

Bagged or boxed onions should be stored at least one foot away from walls and other pallets to allow proper air movement. Do not wrap onions in plastic or store in plastic bags. A lack of circulation will reduce shelf life.

Do not store onions with potatoes or other produce items that release moisture.

Keep onions out of direct sunlight

Cut onions will keep for several days if sealed in plastic bags or containers and refrigerated.

### **Onion Nutrition and Health Benefits**

Onions not only provide flavor, they also provide health promoting phytochemicals as well as nutrients. Onions contain generous amounts of a flavonoid called quercetin which research has shown protects the body against many chronic diseases. Organosulfur compounds, naturally occurring chemicals in onions, are linked to lowering blood pressure and cholesterol. Onions are an important source of vitamin C, potassium, dietary fiber and folic acid. They also contain calcium, iron and have a high protein quality (ratio of mg amino acid/gram protein). Onions are sodium, cholesterol and fat free. A serving of onions (1/2 cup chopped raw onion) is 45 calories.

Onions are a delicious and nutritious addition to any savory dish!

**For more information about onions, visit [www.onions-usa.org](http://www.onions-usa.org)**