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A local taste for shallots

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, For The Star-Ledger

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Once upon a time, New Jersey farmers grew almost all the shallots sold in the United States. The landscape wasn't exactly carpeted with them, however.

In 1992, New Jersey was the nation's leading producer with all of 14 acres cultivated by fewer than a half dozen growers, according to Rick Van Vranken, an agricultural agent with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Atlantic County. "All the other states combined had less than one acre," he added.

In some cases, the European ancestors of today's leading farming families had transplanted their traditional shallot varieties into the local soil when they began working the land around Vineland in the early 20th century. Over time, others took to planting shallots to carve out a niche in the competitive vegetable marketplace.

In the 1980s, Bylone Brothers Farm raised five to seven acres of shallots "and there were two farms bigger than us," recalled Peter Bylone, manager of the Vineland Produce Auction. "It was a good crop for us to handle. They were ready in June, July; stored; and sold all winter. It was income."

There were several flush harvests in the latter part of that decade, when celebrity chefs began turning on a new generation to shallot-infused specialties. But the shallot boom went bust in the early 1990s, when inexpensive supplies grown by European farmers -- heavily subsidized by their governments -- flooded the U.S. market. "The local shallot production went to zero. Our guys couldn't compete and got out of it," said Van Vranken.

Still, when growers in South Jersey talk about shallots, they stress the last syllable -- la francais (and Webster's preference, which may surprise those who've always said SHALL-ot instead of shall-OT), and sound, oh, so continental.

Though some farmers might put in a row or two of shallots, a resurgence of any local large-scale production is unlikely. These days, the shallots most often found at market are not from Europe, however, but from Canada and

probably were harvested in September, said Erwan Landivinec, vice president of IPEX, a division of Baldor Specialty Foods in the Bronx, one of the largest produce importers and distributors in the northeast. A new crop from Chile should be available in May, he added.

A native of Brittany, which produces most of France's shallots, Landivinec knows that not all shallots sold at market are really shallots. Like its relative, the onion, shallots are alliums, members of the lily family. But whereas onions grow singly, shallots -- like garlic, another relation -- grow in clusters, attached at the basal plate at the root end. Or at least that's what real shallots do. Dutch breeders, said Landivinec, have developed onion varieties, such as the Matador, that mature individually but resemble shallots in color and appearance and are grown from seed. "The real shallot doesn't grow from seeds. You replant the bulb. It will re-grow and give multiple shallots," he said.

Popular reference books list varieties like the Jersey Long and the Jersey Half-Long. These have nothing to do with the Garden State, however. Most likely, explained Landivinec, they were named for the Isle of Jersey, which formerly was under the control of his home region, France's land of the shallot -- but not its birthplace.

"The shallot was described before 300 BC by the Greek writer Theophrastus, who called it asklolonion. In the first century AD, Pliny concluded that it was so named because it came from Askalon (now Ashkelon, in S. Israel), and the attribution has remained," wrote Alan Davidson in "The Oxford Companion to Food" (Oxford University Press, 1999). In fact, the shallot originated much further east, in ancient Mesopotamia, or perhaps China, and came to Europe via the silk trade and the Crusades.

According to vegetable authority Elizabeth Schneider, more shallots are grown in Southeast Asia than anywhere else. But they are not universally employed in the cuisines of the Far East, said Tony Jan, who hosted a TV cooking show in his native Taiwan and now operates Jan's China Gourmet in Whitehouse Station. There, sauteed minced shallots garnish some of his beef and scallop dishes.

To many, shallots are simply upscale onions -- with a price tag to match, since their per-pound price can be more than double that for ordinary yellow onions. But there is a discernible difference in their flavor profiles. "I refer to the onion as the country cousin and the shallot as the city cousin. The flavor of the shallot is more refined and elegant," said Andre de Waal, chef-owner of Andre's Restaurant and Wine Boutique in Newton. But that doesn't mean shallots can be added willy-nilly to any recipe calling for onions. "It really depends on the recipe," said de Waal. "There are definitely times when you want the onion."

Shallots are de rigueur in several classic French sauces, however. "To make a good bearnaise, you have to have shallots, otherwise you make some kind of ersatz," said Landivinec. "In a beurre blanc, shallot is really the only way to go. To use an onion or a scallion in that, the flavor would be out of balance," said de Waal.

He also smokes unpeeled, halved shallots over fruitwood and then finishes them in an oven before chopping them into chutney that's served with cheese. On occasion, he purees roasted shallots into a mousse with heavy cream and seasonings to serve as a garnish for seafood nœûte or a terrine.

At home, adding textural interest and a pleasing bite to any sauteed vegetable is as easy as sprinkling them with minced shallots near the end of the cooking time.

C'est si bon.

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