

Top-export product nearly gone from Dutch market

Where are the silver skin onions?

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AMSTERDAM -

Guess, where have the silver skins gone? No less than 70% of all silver skin onions worldwide are of Dutch origin. Silver skin onions are well-known internationally but for the Dutch they are becoming increasingly obscure. Only three large growers remain and they have decided to cooperate. Lest the typical Dutch silver skin onion be forgot. But is the silver skin onion really typically Dutch?



Photo: Frank de Ruiter



The regional novel „Merijntje Gijzen”, one of the best books written by A. M. de Jong, describes the efforts of the young protagonist whilst harvesting ‘white gold’, onions, aka silver skin onions. Children are struggling on their knees in the blazing sun, with a hoe and a basket, trying to pull onions from the concrete soil. They’d better make sure no clay clings to the onions, or they would be paid less money for their basket. Silver skin onions literally used to cover about half of the Dutch province of Brabant.

„That’s not the same anymore”, according to Jolanda Wesenbeek. And she should know as she sells silver skin onions. She has been doing so for twenty years and promotes silver skins on behalf of the remaining three large Dutch growers. „Onion crops are susceptible to soil diseases. Therefore, we must move on from one growing location to another. At present, they are grown in the Dutch Flevo and North East polders. And some fields are located in the north of France. Israel used to grow silver skin crops, but the current lack of water makes it impossible. The Jewish kitchen has a long tradition of pickling vegetables. The same goes for Spain and Italy. Over 95% of the Dutch tonnage is exported. Nowadays, we almost seem to be surprised if people mention silver skin onions, whereas they used to be omnipresent in the past. They were mainly used in potato salads, but nowadays they are replaced by brightly coloured carrots and peppers. They used to be in vegetable mixes and don’t forget baked beans with bacon and silver skins. And Indonesian dishes like fried noodles or fried rice. But now the side dish is relish. We think it’s a pity.”

Seeds

Annually, the Dutch harvest some 20 million kilos of silver skins but yield obviously varies. For those who want to know all the ins and outs: silver skins are grown from seed. Special onion seed that is grown in Italy.

Jolanda Wesenbeek, „Our climate is less suitable for onions in the flowering stage. And the flowers are lovely, the future seed heads. The seeds are continuously improved in Italy. For instance, to enable us to harvest sooner. Although recently our summers have become warmer, the autumn rains arrive sooner too. Unfortunately, onions are very difficult to pull up from wet soil.”

Real devotees like to buy silver skin onions fresh during the harvest. They can be found at greengrocers for a few weeks at the end of August. Wesenbeek laughs: „You know, I just don’t get it. We are the only large growers and we don’t sell to greengrocers. All of a sudden they arrive in the shops and we really wonder where they come from. Wouldn’t it be weird if they came all the way from France as a delicacy? We do get a lot of people from all over the country arriving at our companies during harvest time, carrying buckets to buy a few kilos for home preservation. Preferably, they take them unclean, so they can de-skin them at home. Quite odd, because de-skinning is a tedious job. Anyhow, these people value tradition. Besides, it gives them the opportunity to add their preferred flavour to the onions. The same goes for every customer, we deliver silver skins in light vinegar and buyers decide on the final taste.”

Obviously, there are exceptions to the rule: onions for Belgium and Scotland are fermented. „Yes, that’s quite a different process, just add a little salt, similar to sauerkraut preparation. Scots still sell them in the pub, just like you could buy Amsterdam onions in each Amsterdam bar and the Belgians... well, of course, they sell them in the chips stand, on a bag of chips.”

Funny enough, we often do not realise we are eating silver skin onions. Jolanda Wesenbeek: „A large proportion is supplied to the freezing industry. Silver skins are processed in vegetable mixes or delivered to institutional kitchens. I often wonder where they all end up.”

One jar attracts my attention. Ready made skewers of pickled cauliflower, carrots and silver skin onions, from Spain. „These jars are available throughout Spain. Especially in La Rioja, pickled vegetables are very popular. Often enough, you will find small workshops behind living quarters and entire families will be preparing these skewers for tapas. Using our silver skins...”

Recipe

A new website has been launched, www.zilveruitjes.com , offering many recipes. That's why we'll just describe this basic dish which is so wonderful and yet unknown. It takes no more than two ingredients, real farmer's butter and drained silver skin onions. Heat the butter in a saucepan and add the silver skins. Next, keep them simmering, just forget about them for 30 minutes. Shake them occasionally, that's it. These onions will lose their sour taste and turn sweet, with a deep and warm flavour. Eat them with the butter on cold meat, such as a roast. Even better, add a spoonful of sugar after fifteen minutes and half a lemon's juice. A pinch of salt is also fine. I can't think of a meal I wouldn't enjoy with this side dish.