

Family Farmers Lead NC Pickle Push

Small family farmers are providing the principal push behind North Carolina's drive to become the nation's premier pickle producer, state officials say.

Pickle-buying stations are scattered across much of eastern North Carolina, with Duplin County a center of both pickle production and processing.

About 75 percent of North Carolina's pickling cucumbers are sent fresh to out-of-state processors. Some are packed in brine at Faison and sent out of state for processing into dill or sweet pickles or relish. The rest are processed in-state, most at either Charles F. Cates & Son in Faison or at Mount Olive Pickle Co. in nearby Mount Olive. Pickles from these two companies are sold in stores across the nation.

Last year Duplin farm families harvested 1,600 acres of pickle cucumbers that produced 320,000 bushels. The pickles brought the producers about \$1.5 million. Dry weather cut the yield this year and cut the gross return to less than \$1 million, according to county extension workers. Among other major pickle-producing counties are Sampson and Nash.

Most pickling cucumbers are grown on plots of one to a dozen acres. They are picked in late spring. Most pickers are members of the growers' families aided by neighbors, particularly young people. Some farmers use riding harvesters, somewhat similar to the better-known tobacco riding harvesters. Pickers ride on the machines but pick the cucumbers by hand.

Large farmers usually use mechanical harvesters or employ migrant workers who are eager to fill up their bushels with the large cucumbers less desirable for pickling, said Jeff Morton, program administrator for the N.C. Agriculture Department's horticulture section.

"With the smaller acreage," Morton said, "the cucumbers are more likely to be hand-picked. That gives you a higher percentage of the smaller sizes, which have a better price. People like the small gherkin types, and you can't get 'em hardly anywhere else but here."

North Carolina, with a \$25 million pickle industry, already has the nation's highest pickle acreage at 27,000. But Michigan has a higher yield per acre to produce about 6.5 million bushels of pickles a year, compared to North Carolina's second place 5 million bushels, said Moore. Third is Wisconsin and fourth is California.

The total pickle production in the U.S. is 30 million bushels. A bushel holds about 600 No. 3 pickles — the largest size, with a diameter between 1.5 and 2 inches.

Research at N.C. State University's food fermentation lab has been crucial in tripling the annual U.S. consumption of pickles to 9 pounds per person over the past 35 years, said Bill Moore, executive secretary of Pickle Packers International of St. Charles, Ill. Scientists there discovered the optimum temperatures for curing pickles that gives them an "audible crunch at 10 paces," he said.

NCSU researchers have also developed 800-bushel plastic tanks to replace some of the wooden vats where the pickles are soaked in salty water for up to two years, said Jeff Morton, program administrator for the state Agriculture Department's horticulture section.

Researchers are also working on new cucumber varieties to increase yield and on ways to reduce the amount of salt needed in brining, he said.

"North Carolina is a large consumer of pickles, but we produce a lot more than are sold in North Carolina," said Bill Hennessee, president of Cates and past president of the N.C. Pickle Producers Association.

The pickles are either fresh-packed, which means they are washed and put directly into a jar of vinegar, brine and spices; or they are brined in vats of salt water that

allows a certain bacterium to produce the lactic acid that makes a pickle sour, he said.

"America was named after a pickle peddler," said Moore. "Amerigo Vespucci — he outfitted his ships in Seville with pickles, which enabled his crew to go three or four months without getting scurvy."

—Letter To The Editor—

Fairfax, Va.
August 28, 1985
Editor, Duplin Times
P.O. Box 68
Kenansville, NC 28349

I would appreciate very much if you would print the following statement in the Duplin Times:

"On July 8, 1985 a fire destroyed a two-story building that was adjacent to the home of my father-in-law, R. D. Harner of Albertson. It was a

blessing from Heaven coupled with the professional help of three local volunteer fire departments that the house did not burn too.

On behalf of Mrs. Harper and his family, I extend sincere thanks to all volunteer firemen of the Albertson, Pink Hill and Deep Run Fire Departments for their unselfish service in extinguishing the fire."

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