

The Eyes Have It

Spuds are big business in the eastern part of our state — and they taste good, too.

by Bryan A. Oesterreich

“Big Pat” McCotter squints in the sun as he walks out the back door of the office/scale house to greet me. His face is weathered from a life in the fields, but his smile is August sunshine. He starts talking about potatoes right after we shake hands.

Eastern North Carolina potatoes are grown on family farms — like the “Big M” farm of the McCotter family in Vandemere, 20 miles northeast of New Bern along N.C. Highway 304. McCotter and his sons, David and Johnny, farm more than 5,000 acres, raising primarily potatoes along with corn, soy, and wheat.

For miles around McCotter’s, the Coastal Plain stretches out along canals and swampland. In Vandemere, a large, blue wooden sign signals the entrance to the farm. A quarter mile down the dirt road is the farm’s central office and yard. Scattered around the yard are imposing bright blue tractors, forklifts, tractor-trailers, and assorted machinery. Two large cool-storage buildings are set off to one side, used later in the season after harvesting takes place.

McCotter has been farming for more than 40 years. But, he didn’t start off in the fields; he got his feet wet first — literally. His father, of Scotch-Irish descent, was a commercial fisherman who took young Pat out on the Pamlico Sound and the Atlantic to harvest shrimp. When he graduated high school, McCotter enrolled at East Carolina University and, during his time there, signed on with a farm team of the Chicago Cubs. While he never got to the major leagues, he enjoyed his time playing in the minors during the summers.

In the late 1950s, McCotter married and started both a family and a farm. Today, his wife, Amy, manages the office; his son David manages the day-to-day operations; and his son Johnny handles equipment purchases.

To get a better idea of just how many potatoes McCotter grows, he says, “For about five weeks in June and July, we ship from 15 to 20 tractor-trailer loads a day.” Many of McCotter’s potatoes end up in bright yellow Frito-Lay bags in North Carolina stores, but some also find their way to other states. “We sometimes ship as far north as Connecticut and Michigan.” Planting usually takes place here in March (much earlier than northern states), with harvest coming along in June.

As in other areas of our lives, technology has influenced potato farming. McCotter says equipment available today has drastically reduced his need for manual labor. “With the machinery we have in place, we only need four people to do what used to take 100. Today, our potatoes are never touched by hand. A computer in the tractor, using GPS, tracks where we plant and how much fertilizer is used.”

Pass the potatoes

But potatoes go back much farther than recent technology and McCotter's own 40-plus years of farming. Spuds have been around a while. Try 7,000 years.

The ubiquitous potato has an enviable lineage. It was first discovered in South America in the farmer-unfriendly Andes Mountains. It wasn't until the mid 1500s, however, that the potato found a place on tables in the western world — courtesy of the Spanish Conquistadors.

Over the next two centuries, the potato spread throughout Europe. Early American settlers dabbled with the potato in the 1600s, but the first aggressive cultivation didn't begin until Scotch-Irish immigrants planted them in 1719, in New Hampshire. From there, the popularity of the crop spread to other colonies including, of course, North Carolina.

According to the North Carolina Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, potatoes are the most popular food crop in the United States. An average American eats the equivalent of one potato a day — about 142 pounds a year. Potatoes belong to the nightshade family of plants, which includes tobacco, tomatoes, red peppers, and eggplants. However, our friendly spuds differ from their relatives because they flower above the soil and grow their fruit below. Tubers, or seed potatoes, are grown in “seed producing” states such as Maine, New York, and Wisconsin, and then shipped to farmers for planting.

And eastern North Carolina growers plant and harvest a lot of potatoes — on 17,500 acres. Most of them are grown in the potato-friendly and fertile soils of coastal counties: Beaufort, Camden, Carteret, Currituck, Hyde, Pamlico, Pasquotank, Tyrrell, and Washington. The crop accounts for \$15 million to \$17 million in these local economies. Sixty percent of the potatoes grown are used for potato chips; the remaining 40 percent are sold in grocery stores as “table stock.” Several varieties grow here — Round Red, Yukon Gold, Atlantic, and Superior. The Tar Heel state also produces 30 to 40 percent of the entire sweet potato crop (North Carolina's official state vegetable) in the United States, primarily raised in the northern Piedmont.

Today, technology is making inroads in laboratory research as well as in the fields. North Carolina State University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences maintains a research facility in Plymouth. One of its programs focuses on developing more productive varieties of potatoes for North Carolina and the Southeast.

Mark Clough, a research specialist at the facility, works with eastern North Carolina farmers like McCotter. “We try to help farmers like Pat increase their yields,” he says. “It's fascinating work, but it requires patience.” Clough says it can take up to 10 years to develop a hardier or more productive species. “We go through a time-consuming process, but the rewards are many. We're helping our farmers feed our families.”

‘Tater special

Eastern North Carolina families know how important the potato is to their economies. Events such as the Albemarle Potato Festival, sponsored by the Pasquotank Arts Council and held for more than 60 years in Elizabeth City, pay homage to the popular spud. Thousands of people gather for the May event to eat potatoes any way you like 'em: fried, baked, casseroled, stuffed, simmered, chipped, stripped, whipped, mashed, and glazed. Festivalgoers also gather to dance, ride ponies, sing, watch a parade, and generally praise the all-purpose addition to any dinner worth its salt — the potato.

Nutritionally speaking, the potato is well worth dishing out, according to the North Carolina Potato Association's 'tater facts. Potatoes are high in potassium, a third higher than bananas. Counting calories? A medium-sized potato contains only 110. And please don't skin them — potato peels contain a variety of minerals, vitamins, and antioxidants. So, the next time you're moving through the produce section at your grocer, keep in mind that the bag of Robust Red or Yukon Gold potatoes you put in your cart probably came from right here in the Tar Heel state. Eastern North Carolina farmers hope you enjoy. I'll have mine baked, with sour cream on the side, please.

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