

# Klamath Basin farmers get rights to grow, market new purple potato

Oregon State University  
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CORVALLIS, Ore. – Klamath Basin Fresh Direct, an association of potato farmers along the Oregon-California border, has been awarded exclusive rights to grow and market a new purple fingerling developed by the USDA and three Northwest universities.

The potato is called Purple Pelisse, named for an intense hue inside and out that looks like a color you'd find in a crayon box. The tuber is the first specialty spud that Oregon State University, the University of Idaho, Washington State University and the U.S. Department of Agriculture have jointly made available for public consumption. It's called a specialty because it's not like a traditional potato with white flesh and brown skin, such as Russets, commonly used for fries.

Dan Chin, chairman of the association, said his company was interested in the Purple Pelisse because it is looking to expand its color spectrum with a potato that it can grow on a small scale for a niche market. KBFD produces two potatoes: a red-skinned one and a small, white-skinned variety.

"Right now there's not a good purple fingering on the market," Chin added. "But this one has good flavor and looks good. It fits the bill for what we think a consumer might want."

He said KBFD, which beat four other bids, plans to market it as a potato that can be boiled, fried and roasted. The group plans to change the name of the potato, which it will grow organically and market to high-end supermarkets and restaurants in the United States. He hopes to eventually promote it overseas. In November, he'll take it to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau and the Philippines as part of a trade mission with the Oregon Department of Agriculture.

The eye-catching potato, which takes its name from a cloak, is unusual because few purple fingerlings are available to the public, said OSU potato breeder Isabel Vales. But it's more than just a rare breed. It also has three times greater potential to protect cells from damage caused by free radicals compared with the Russet Burbank, according to a study by Shelley Jansky, a research geneticist with the USDA. Jansky stressed, however, that this ability depended on where and in what year the potatoes were grown. The new tater's possible health benefits come from antioxidants, which are mainly in the form of anthocyanin pigments and vitamin C. Anthocyanins cause the purple color and aren't found in brown-skinned, white-fleshed potatoes.

Consumers will be able to see and taste the Purple Pelisse and other Oregon-grown potatoes at Timberline Lodge on Oregon's Mount Hood from Aug. 19-25. Each week this summer, the ski resort features a different food produced in the state as part of a

daily brunch buffet. During the meal, executive chef Leif Eric Benson and his team will also show diners how to prepare the potatoes.

The lodge's guests will be getting a rare sneak peek at the Purple Pelisse because it won't be available in supermarkets or restaurants until at least the fall of 2011, Chin said. That's how long it will take to produce enough seed potatoes for commercial planting, he said.

The new novelty potato resulted from a cross made by USDA research geneticist Chuck Brown in 2000 and was initially christened POR01PG16-1. It's part of the Pacific Northwest Tri-State Breeding Program, which develops potatoes for growers and processors in Oregon, Washington and Idaho. The program has released about three dozen varieties since it began in 1984. OSU conducted most of the field trials on the Purple Pelisse, so it owns the original rights to it.

Creating a new potato is a rigorous process that can take up to 15 years. In the tri-state program, the aim is to produce potatoes that resist pests and diseases, are attractive, have higher yields, are more nutritional, and handle processing better. In the case of the Purple Pelisse, experts evaluated it for six years throughout the western United States. After beating thousands of other specialty potatoes in field trials, it was tested in the kitchen where it was boiled, baked, zapped in a microwave, made into potato salad and scalded in hot oil. Testers found that the Purple Pelisse, which weighs an average of 3.2 ounces, is ideal for boiling and baking and that its chips retain their bright purple color and resist fading.

Specialty potatoes make up about 10 percent of the potatoes in development in OSU's breeding program while Russets make up most of the remainder, Vales said. She expects U.S. demand for specialty potatoes to increase.

"All of us like to try new things," she said. "These specialty potatoes cater to that desire because they have different shapes, sizes, colors and flavors. Plus, there's quite an array of phytochemicals in them that might be beneficial to our health. I think consumers will find that to be an attractive feature."

In an effort to give people more choices, Vales said the tri-state program plans to make public a red-skinned, red-fleshed fingerling and a yellow-skinned, yellow-fleshed round variety by the beginning of next year.

Potatoes are the No. 1 vegetable grown in the United States in terms of value of production, according to the USDA. They're the third-most-consumed food crop in the world after rice and wheat, according to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization. In Oregon, farmers sold \$165 million of potatoes last year, making them the state's seventh-largest crop and Oregon's leading vegetable crop in terms of gross farm gate sales, according to a report by the OSU Extension Service.

*About Oregon State University: OSU is one of only two U.S. universities designated a land-, sea-, space- and sun-grant institution. OSU is also Oregon's only university designated in the Carnegie Foundation's top tier for research institutions, garnering more than 60 percent of the total federal and private research funding in the Oregon University System. Its more than 20,300 students come from all 50 states and more than 80 countries. OSU programs touch every county within Oregon, and its faculty teach and conduct research on issues of national and global importance.*

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