

SAVVYSHOPPER

How to shop for ingredients ethically without compromising taste. This week: **potatoes**



ROSE PRINCE

Do we love potatoes, or the fat they are cooked with? Fat carries flavour and dosing a jacket potato with butter intensifies all that is nice about the taste. Every year, each of us eats 500 potatoes, but lovely as they are, those 500 spuds could taste even better.

Loath as I am to say without scientific foundation that organic potatoes taste better than conventional, there is a trend with organic farmers to grow many more varieties and among them are potatoes with incredible flavour.

Buy them and you will encourage farmers, who are currently struggling to profit from growing unsubsidised crops of endless, dull old Maris Piper, to diversify.

WHEN ARE POTATOES IN SEASON?

There are three British growing seasons:

■ New potatoes are planted between January and March and arrive in shops between May and July. Even earlier potatoes, from the sunnier climes of Jersey and Cornwall, arrive in shops in January and are unmissably delicious.

■ Second "earlies" are planted between March and April and are in the shops from July to October.

■ Maincrop are planted in April and harvested through September and October.

HOW DO THE VARIETIES DIFFER?

There are two groups: "waxy" and "floury". New potatoes have a waxy nature and, indeed, most potatoes will have that texture if eaten when relatively small, soon after picking. Waxy potatoes include early Jersey Royals and Cornish varieties, and all waxy potatoes are good in salads or gratin dishes, where they need to hold their shape. Floury potatoes have a more granular texture and are the ones that "chip", mash or roast the best.

WHY DO SHOPS SELL SO FEW VARIETIES?

This is an area of horticulture where the lack of diversity is virtually criminal. Out of the 80 to 100 varieties, we grow five per cent commercially, namely Maris Piper, King Edward, Estima and Cara.

Variety is chosen by the retailers and processors (of chips and so on) when it was once the domain of growers. Potatoes with long keeping qualities are particular favourites with supermarkets.

As a result, we have dull uniformity instead of exciting diversity. Organic growers have found that growing a greater variety prevents the spread of disease.

HOW MANY OF THE POTATOES IN SHOPS ARE BRITISH?

About 80 per cent, but it may be less when there is a particularly wet autumn and farmers are unable to "lift" the crop. The country of origin will be shown on the pack or sack, or near the box if they are sold loose.

DOES ORGANIC TASTE BETTER?

Some of the most delicious potatoes I have eaten are organic, but this may be because organic farmers grow some interesting breeds. Natural fertilisers do affect taste, however. The Jersey growers use seaweed from the Channel Islands' beaches and attribute the lemony flavour of their potatoes to this.

SHOULD I WORRY ABOUT PESTICIDES?

Yes. In 2003, the Government tested 144 samples, finding detectable levels of aldicarb, a nerve poison, on two per cent. Seventy-three "maincrop" potatoes

were tested between July and December 2004 for 23 residues. Eighteen out of the 73 contained residues of aldicarb, chlopropham and maleic hydrazide, a plant growth regulator that prevents sprouting. No residues exceeded the government-decreed "safe levels".

HOW SHOULD I STORE THEM?

Potatoes store best in the dark at 16C/61F. They will blacken if kept too long below 11C/52F, so the fridge is not the right place. Best to store them in a metal bin outside, preferably in a paper sack.

SHOULD I BUY THEM ONLY IF THEY LOOK PERFECT?

Do not buy green potatoes or those that are soft, have wrinkly skins or nasty black spots. You can knock off the odd sprout, but lots of sprouts means poor storage. Knobbly is fine.

HOW ABOUT SUPERMARKETS?

Sainsbury's and Waitrose are involved in admirable programmes that encourage the farmers that supply them to grow unusual varieties. These are on sale during the second early and maincrop seasons and are well worth seeking out.

WHICH ONES SHOULD I BUY?

Look out for potato sales at farm gates or smallholders' honesty-box sales. I have bought excellent potatoes this way



PICTURE: JONATHAN BUCKLEY

at bargain prices in easy-to-store paper sacks. Farmers' markets are also a good source of potatoes.

Find the one nearest you at www.farmersmarkets.net or www.lfm.org.uk, and for your nearest farm-gate sale see www.bigbarn.co.uk

OLD POTATO VARIETIES

■ Carrol's Heritage Potatoes, Northumberland (and at Borough Market, London SE1, Harrods and Harvey Nichols; 01890 883060; www.heritage-potatoes.co.uk). The company stocks 12 varieties of pre-1950 potatoes, including Highland

Burgundy, British Queen, Salad Blue, Pink Fir Apple and Arran Victory.

■ Ryton Organic Gardens, Coventry (02476 308201; www.gardenorganic.org.uk). The Henry Doubleday Research Association, now called Garden Organic, is a trust that protects old food plant varieties and sells them at its a shop at its gardens.

■ The Jersey Royal Potato Post, St Helier, Jersey (01534 861345; www.jerseyroyalpotatopost.com). Very fresh, lemony-flavoured Jerseys delivered to your door in protective packaging.