

# Radicchio: There's a lot for farmers to like about radicchio

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The growing popularity of the little-known crop prompted the couple to help lead a regional effort to raise the crop's profile by establishing the Pacific Northwest Radicchio Association.

Geography is on their side. Radicchio is widely grown in northeastern Italy, whose latitude and climate are comparable to those of the Pacific Northwest.

There's a lot for farmers to like about radicchio, Erickson-Brown said. It's a winter-hardy crop, and improves soil health by breaking up pest and disease cycles as an alternative to Brassica crops, such as cabbage, kale and Brussels sprouts.

Radicchio also overwinters in the field and holds up well in storage, making it a locally grown winter salad alternative to lettuce shipped from warmer climates.

The new organization will bring together growers, processors, wholesalers, distributors, retailers and restaurants in Oregon and Washington.

It will build on existing efforts by Washington State University's Food Systems Program, led by Lewis, and the Culinary Breeding Network, led by Oregon State University professor Lane Selman.

Lewis and Selman received a \$250,000 USDA specialty crop block grant in 2020 through the Washington State Department of Agriculture.

Their goals are:

- Promote radicchio, improve farmers' access to production methods and seed and increase consumer interest.
- Offer educational and culinary events, including a radicchio grower's symposium and field days and expand an annual Seattle radicchio festival with events in Spokane, Bellingham and Walla Walla.
- Develop an international exchange between association members and Italian farmers, breeders, seed dealers and experts to boost production in the Northwest.

## Northwest grown

A California-grown, round, red Chioggia type is the radicchio most commonly found in U.S. grocery stores.

Northwest growers are producing more varieties.



Shawn Linehan/Culinary Breeding Network

Pacific Northwest farmers toured Italian radicchio farms in January 2020.



Shawn Linehan/Culinary Breeding Network

Radicchio breeder Andrea Ghedina, center, talks about the crop with Northwest growers.

Some are already working with seed companies to develop region-specific varieties, Lewis said.

Erickson-Brown envisions the association as a marketing board, promoting Pacific Northwest-grown radicchio and building interest.

The organization could potentially sell into East Coast urban markets that now import radicchio from Italy and elsewhere.

"We know there are people willing to pay a pretty high price to get this special Italian radicchio," she said. "As long as we've already got trucks bringing Washington apples to the East Coast, wouldn't it be great if we could also throw a few pallets of radicchio on there?"

Erickson-Brown hopes to hear from other growers about the organization.

"What we don't want to do is miss anybody," she said. "We know a lot of small farmers are growing radicchio that may or may not be on our radar right now."

She welcomes growers

who want to sell radicchio locally and those who aspire to ship their crop overseas.

Italian marketing associations have identified China, Japan and the U.S. as the biggest potential markets, she said.

"We're going to start to take roll and figure out who wants to figure this out with us," she said.

## Fast-growing crop

It's not clear how many Northwest growers are actually raising radicchio, Selman said. The USDA doesn't collect that information. The association will likely measure production and market demand, she said.

Lewis predicts 35 to 50 growers will be involved in the organization.

From experience, Erickson-Brown sees great potential for radicchio. Her farm reported a 900% increase in production and sales over the last decade, with sales doubling in 2019 alone compared to the previous year.

Winter vegetables are the fastest growing greens segment of the seed market, John Navazio, leafy green

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Shawn Linehan/Culinary Breeding Network

Duval, Wash., radicchio farmer Jason Salvo in a greenhouse during a tour of the industry in Italy.

"They are so excited about the fact we're excited about radicchio," she said. Many varieties are grown in several regions of Italy, but used only for one dish or a particular way, Lewis said.

"We're not set in stone how we're going to use this crop," she said. "They were like, 'We need your innovation to expand our Italian markets as well.'"

Andrea Ghedina is co-founder and breeder for Smarties.bio in Chioggia, Italy, near Venice. His company sells conventional and organic radicchio seeds. He's been breeding radicchio for 10 years.

Radicchio is not considered a specialty crop in his region, he said.

"It's something we know very well, it's not so romantic for us," Ghedina said.

Scientifically, however, the crop offers genetic variation and is still relatively new, he said. It was bred from wild chicory into its current red, round shape about 70 years ago.

Radicchio contains antioxidants and vitamin C in quantities significantly higher than other fruits and vegetables, even oranges, Ghedina said.

Ghedina will offer his expertise to Northwest growers. He wants to collect as much data as he can to breed new varieties.

He believes less bitter varieties would find larger markets, even in Italy.

## 'Rad TV'

The annual fall festival, Sagra del Radicchio — Italian for the Festival of Radicchio — drew roughly 325 people to Seattle in its first two outings, in 2018 and 2019.

Last year, because of the coronavirus shutdowns, the virtual alternative, "Rad TV," drew 1,345 same-day viewers in November and a

total of 2,500 views.

About 44% were consumers and home cooks, 36% were farmers and ag industry members, and nearly 8% were involved in restaurants and the hospitality industry. The rest didn't specify their affiliation.

People in 13 countries registered. About 74% of the viewers were in the U.S.

Roughly 40% of the audience was between 25 and 34 years old, and nearly 32% between 35 and 44 years old.

Organizers want to return to in-person events, Selman said, but "I think we would actually consider doing it also virtually."

## Next steps

The association will meet for the first time in March. The goal is to have the organization running in the next few months, Lewis said.

Any international exchanges may be modified or delayed due to the pandemic, she said.

In the meantime, Erickson-Brown wonders how COVID-19 will impact demand as she decides what to plant for the coming growing season. Each year, they've increased their radicchio crop by 25%, and have always sold it all, she said. About 90% of it goes to restaurants.

Early on, at farmers markets and restaurants, she would often hear how hard it was to find, she recalled.

That showed her the enthusiasm is there for radicchio.

"You don't need to grow something that appeals to everybody," Erickson-Brown said. "You just need to do a really good job of growing something that's meaningful to enough people that makes it worth doing."

# Lawsuit: Lawsuit asks for either an injunction or receiver to take control of Easterday Ranches

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roughly 2% of the company's beef during the last four fiscal years.

Gary Mickelson, senior director of public relations for Tyson, said the company became aware of fraud during a recent company-led inspection.

"As we disclosed in December, this misappropriation of funds has cost Tyson more than \$200 million, which the company is working to recoup," Mickelson said in an emailed statement. "We are also working with our outside auditor to implement additional financial controls to help prevent or detect this type of activity in the future."

While Easterday Ranches initially cooperated with Tyson on the investigation, the lawsuit alleges that, on Jan. 22, the farm announced intentions to sell its "North Lot" feedlot within the next few days and dissipate the proceedings — possibly to insiders and affiliates of Cody Easterday.

Mickelson said Tyson is asking for a court-appointed receiver to take control of Easterday Ranches until the situation is resolved.

Notwithstanding the falsified records, Tyson claims it has approximately 54,000 real cattle still located on Easterday's feedlots and grow yards.

"Those cattle are of various ages and various weights, most not yet ready for market," the lawsuit states. "Those cattle require continued feeding, maintenance and other care on a daily basis, or their value will quickly and dramatically deteriorate."

The lawsuit asks for either an injunction or receiver to take control of Easterday Ranches to prevent any potential sale of the North Lot, which Tyson states would "have a material negative impact on (Easterday's) creditors."

## EASTERDAY RANCHES FILES FOR CHAPTER 11 PROTECTION

By GEORGE PLAVEN  
Capital Press

PASCO, Wash. — Easterday Ranches has filed for Chapter 11 protection amid allegations the Eastern Washington cattle supplier bilked Tyson Foods out of \$225 million by submitting fake invoices for more than 200,000 cattle that did not exist.

Court documents filed Monday list the 20 largest claims against Easterday Ranches, totaling more than \$236 million — including \$8.6 million to Segale Properties, a Seattle-based commercial real estate company; \$1.08 million to Animal Health International in Sunnyside, Wash.; and tens of thousands of dollars to other local farmers, vets and contractors.

No other claim, however, comes close to the \$225 million sought in a lawsuit Tyson Foods filed last week in Franklin County Superior Court.

Meanwhile, a draft permit for Easterday Farms to redevelop the former Lost Valley Farms dairy near Boardman, Ore., with 28,300 cattle, remains under state review.

In a 2019 interview with the *Capital Press*, Cody Easterday said the farm plans to invest \$15 million in the dairy, including completion of a wastewater treatment system that was never finished under the previous owner.

Lost Valley Farm was shut down in

The meat processing giant accused Easterday Ranches, based in Pasco, of collecting money to buy, raise and feed more than 200,000 cattle that would be supplied to a nearby Tyson beef plant. Except for one thing — the cattle, it was later discovered, weren't real, the company alleges.

Easterday has not responded to messages for comment.

Easterday Ranches is part of the larger Easterday farming operation. The family also grows 25,000 acres of potatoes, onions, grain and forage in the Columbia Basin.

A report in the *Spokane Review* newspaper states the Washington Department of Agriculture will launch a review of the allegations, and how 200,000 nonexistent cattle may have slipped through its inspection process.

The case also casts doubt on plans by Easterday Farms to redevelop the former Lost Valley Farms dairy near Boardman, Ore., with 28,300 cattle.

2018 after racking up more than 200 environmental violations. Opponents are now pushing for a moratorium on so-called "mega-dairies."

Andrea Cantu-Schomas, a spokeswoman for the Oregon Department of Agriculture, said the agency is aware of the lawsuit involving Easterday Ranches.

"At this time the Easterday (dairy) draft permit is still under review," Cantu-Schomas said. "The state continues to conduct due diligence."



Cody Easterday

# Senate: Vilsack says he shares Biden's vision of a 'zero emissions' ag sector

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foretaste of what to expect in his policy agenda.

In response to questions about trade, Vilsack said USDA will work closely with the U.S. Trade Representative, negotiate new trade agreements and promote U.S. agriculture globally.

On climate change, Vilsack said he shares Biden's vision of a "zero emissions" agriculture sector. He plans to create new markets — for example, by paying farmers to sequester carbon. These markets, he said, will be "voluntary, market-based, incentive-based" and will need to be based on research and data.

Vilsack said he plans to use some portion of the Commodity Credit Corporation fund to create a carbon bank, but the CCC's historical uses will take priority.

Vilsack said he knows most farmers are more interested in functioning markets than in aid, but he thinks both are important. He plans to invest in regional food systems, but also to channel pandemic aid to farmers and maintain strong crop insurance programs.

The nominee also answered questions about rising farm input costs. Vilsack said he will talk to the U.S. Department of Commerce and other agencies about how

to ensure adequate fertilizer imports and other inputs. He said alternatives, such as converting ag waste into pelletized fertilizer, may be part of the solution.

On the timber and lumber markets, Vilsack said USDA will strengthen and grow markets for wood products — for example, by promoting cross-laminated lumber and biomass energy.

Some senators expressed concern about Biden's push for more electric vehicles, which they fear could hurt the ethanol and corn industries. Vilsack said he will continue to advocate on behalf of ethanol producers and will push for its expanded use in airliners and ships.

On livestock, Vilsack said USDA will strengthen laws for more transparency, incentivize the creation of more meat processing plants, push price discovery, strengthen meat labeling standards and work with the Department of Justice to investigate antitrust issues.

Vilsack said he will help disadvantaged farmers, including people of color. He plans to serve minorities by partnering with organizations that serve those communities.

He said he also will try to close loopholes so large corporations don't take advantage of USDA programs meant to serve small farms.