



PHOTOS COURTESY OF POTANDON PRODUCE

Potandon Produce has released a new CarbSmart potato, developed with lower carbohydrate levels. Officials say the product is an example of new choices in the fresh category helping to strengthen fresh-potato sales.

Low-carb spud latest innovation in fresh potato category

By JOHN O'CONNELL
EO Media Group

Potandon Produce has released a new potato variety making a counterintuitive marketing claim for a starchy vegetable.

The Idaho Falls-based company unveiled its first low-carbohydrate potato Oct. 19 during the Produce Marketing Association's Fresh Summit convention in New Orleans. Potandon boasts its CarbSmart potato has 55 percent fewer carbohydrates than rice or pasta.

Ralph Schwartz, the company's vice president of sales, marketing and innovation, believes the product will continue a recent trend of convenient, colorful and innovative specialty products strengthening sales in the long-stagnant fresh potato category.

"We've been working on it for several years," Schwartz said, explaining this is the pilot for what could become a broader line of potatoes bred for specific health attributes.

It's no accident that Potandon bred a yellow-skinned, yellow-fleshed variety for its first CarbSmart release.

Schwartz explained yellow potatoes have enjoyed steady sales growth for the past eight years — perhaps because U.S. demographics are changing, and yellow potatoes may be more similar to spuds found in many other countries.

Schwartz also noted that mini fresh potatoes have become trendy, growing from about 11 percent of category dollars two years ago to roughly 15 percent today.

"Because they're growing, everybody is focusing almost 100 percent of their marketing and advertising dollars on (minis)," Schwartz said.

Potato industry leaders say they're cautiously optimistic about new Nielsen sales numbers for August, purchased by Potatoes USA, which show gains in all potato categories, including a second consecutive month of growth in fresh sales. The fresh sales volume increased by 1.3 percent from August of 2016, and the sales value rose 2.8 percent.

By volume, sales of fingerlings were up nearly 23 percent, with yellow sales up more than 13 percent, russets up 0.7 percent, reds up 0.6 percent and other specialty types up by nearly 15 percent.

"The fact that we saw two months in a row where sales of all products — fresh potatoes and also fresh-cut, frozen, dehydrated and deli — were all up is positive," said John Toasperm, chief marketing officer with Potatoes USA. "It's a sense that the market is doing well, that as we diversify into various different parts of the store people are still buying potatoes, and fresh potatoes, as well."

Toasperm cautioned that the industry shouldn't put too much stock in eight weeks of data, and he'll draw firmer conclusions once numbers are released for the end of the year.

"I do think one of the things helping the (fresh) category is the fact that there are so many different and new products being offered," Toasperm said. "We've got more fingerlings, we've got more easy-preparation products, and a lot of different products are out there that appeal to different consumers."



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WEISER, Idaho — Chris and Sharolyn Schofield have carved a unique niche in the art world — making colossal sculptures of Idaho Russet Burbank potatoes.

Though the Weiser couple has thus far avoided the spotlight, their creations are recognized nationwide.

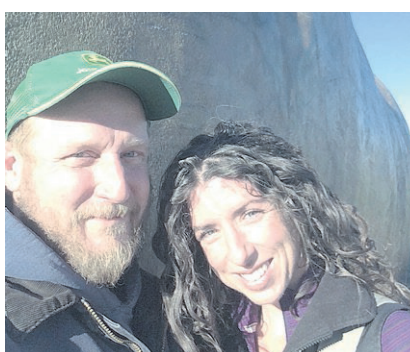
Tens of thousands of onlookers witness the dropping of their giant, glowing potato in downtown Boise each New Year's Eve. And the 6-ton spud they created for the Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck has traveled about 150,000 miles, visiting 7,200 cities while promoting the Idaho brand.

The Schofields — founders of Schofield Design — are building their fourth giant potato. It is a replacement for the IPC's original oversized traveling tuber. The IPC introduced the truck in 2011 to celebrate its 75th anniversary, planning on a single tour but keeping it on the road ever since, based on its popularity.

IPC President and CEO Frank Muir initially worried the truck would be "hokey" if the potato wasn't convincing.

Instead, Muir believes it's become part of "American pop culture." He said people often drive hours for the chance to see the truck.

"One of the testaments to their ability to create authentic art is that the No. 1 question wherever the truck drives is, 'Is it real?'" Muir said. "The fact that people would even think a 12,000-pound potato



PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHAROLYN SCHOFIELD
Chris and Sharolyn Schofield in front of the giant potato they built for the Idaho Potato Commission's Great Big Idaho Potato Truck. The couple is building a replacement potato for the truck.

is real is amazing."

Sharolyn is a certified structural welder. Chris grew up in the construction trade and has taken sculpting classes. He's experienced in building indoor climbing walls and used a similar construction approach to make IPC's first potato. The Schofields took the best features from several large Idaho spuds Muir sent them to make a composite design. Based on their sketch, they fabricated metal ribs, which they welded together and covered with plywood, and then foam, which Chris cut into a potato shape. They then covered the exterior with a thin layer of polymerized concrete. They developed a specialized trough to make the russet "skin," used concrete dye for color and protected the sculpture with a sealant.

"We're pretty critical of our projects," Sharolyn said. "We want things to look just right."

A hidden door at the front of the potato allows the truck crew to access the interior for storage.

Over the years, the potato has sustained damage from overhanging branches, frequent cracks caused by road vibrations and even boot prints made by NASA astronauts who stood on it during a parade. The Schofields made a repair kit and trained the truck's crew to make on-the-road fixes. They give the potato a major touch-up following each national trek.

"In the beginning, it was just another job, but it's been six years and it's got a special place in our family," Chris said. "We have our heart and soul in this one, and when we see it go, we're sad."

For the New Year's Eve Potato drop, the Schofields created a low-budget foam model, which they later replaced with a fiberglass version for greater longevity.

IPC's next potato will also be made of fiberglass, cutting out about half the weight.

They're taking measurements from the original potato so the new spud will fit perfectly into a square frame, mounted on springs, that Sharolyn designed and welded to affix the spud to the truck's flatbed. Special LED lighting on the truck will illuminate the new spud during night parades. The potato should be finished by March, in time for the truck's next tour.

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