

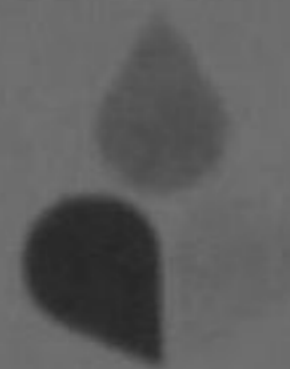
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McWhinnie's World



## Fresh Corn On The Cob: A-maize-ing!

By Jill McWhinnie

I'm a corn connoisseur. I await the arrival of the first local corn with the same eager anticipation that wine enthusiasts await the yearly release of Beaujolais Nouveau. I drive by the fields in early summer, keeping an eye on the plants, and watch for the appearance of Fresh Corn signs in early August.

Corn on the cob has been a summer culinary delight in my family for as long as I can remember. I can still see my dad, just arrived home from work, rushing into the kitchen carrying a large paper bag stuffed with freshly-picked corn cobs from the fields of a local farmer.

We would shuck the leaves off the cobs on the back porch as water was brought to a boil in the large corn pan on the stove. No matter what else was cooked in that pot, it was always the "corn pan". The cobs were placed in the water, covered, and cooked for three to five minutes.

When the steaming platter was brought to the table, to be drenched in salt and butter, there was an almost ceremonial quality to the meal. It's easy to understand why ancient agrarian peoples such as the Celts, so dependent on the bounty of nature, celebrated Lughnasa, a festival which marked the beginning of the harvest around August 1, halfway between the summer solstice and autumn equinox.

I remember eating pure yellow corn as a little kid; however more recently bicolor corn - referred to as "peaches and cream" - is the most widely available type.

"Most people prefer bi-colour corn, so the breeding efforts target those varieties," said Stouffville area farmer Jay Reesor.

"People also want really sweet corn, so the selective breeding focus is on super sweetness." Jay is quick to point out that the corn varieties grown in Ontario from these processes are not genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

There are hundreds of varieties grown today.

"One of most popular bi-colour varieties is Gourmet Sweet," said Jay. "But there are still people who would prefer older, yellow varieties such as Seneca Chief, which many of our grandparents would have grown." The seeds of this old variety, along with many others such as Golden

Bantam, introduced in 1902, are listed on many heritage seed websites.

Sweet corn is essentially a mutant variety of field corn. The mutation causes the kernels to accumulate more sugar and less starch than field corn. Field corn is considered a grain and is harvested when the kernels are mature and dry, whereas sweet corn is harvested in the immature (milk) stage and eaten as a vegetable. The preferred scientific term for corn is "maize", as wheat and other grains are often referred to as corn in Britain and other European countries.

The cultivation of maize is believed to have begun about 8,000 years ago in southern Mexico and Central America, where an annual grass, teosinte, which bears no physical resemblance to today's corn, evolved through ancient forms of selective breeding into the ancestor of the modern corn plant.

Over time it became a dietary staple of the indigenous people of the Americas. Corn, squash and beans, were the "three sisters" - the main agricultural crops of many Native American tribes. They were planted close together; the maize provided the structure for the beans to climb, and the squash growing along the ground provided mulch for the other two plants.

Corn is nutritious as well as delicious. Perhaps that's why we eat so much of it. I can usually manage three average size cobs at a sitting, but that pales in comparison with the amount consumed at the 2013 Florida Sweet Corn Fiesta, where the winner of the corn-eating contest put away 35 cobs in 12 minutes and was awarded a \$2,000 cash prize.

I don't aspire to consumption on that level, but I am looking forward to this year's crop. According to Jay, "It takes about 80 days from seeding to harvest. We're right on schedule for locally-grown corn to be available by about August 1. We've had enough rain to keep the corn growing, but it's still been dry enough to plant three acres every five to seven days to keep the corn coming into fall."

I can't wait to taste that first cob of the season - undoubtedly my tasting notes will record "A young but full-bodied, robust cob, buttery, smooth, elegant, earthy, crisp, with a rich finish. Cheers!



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