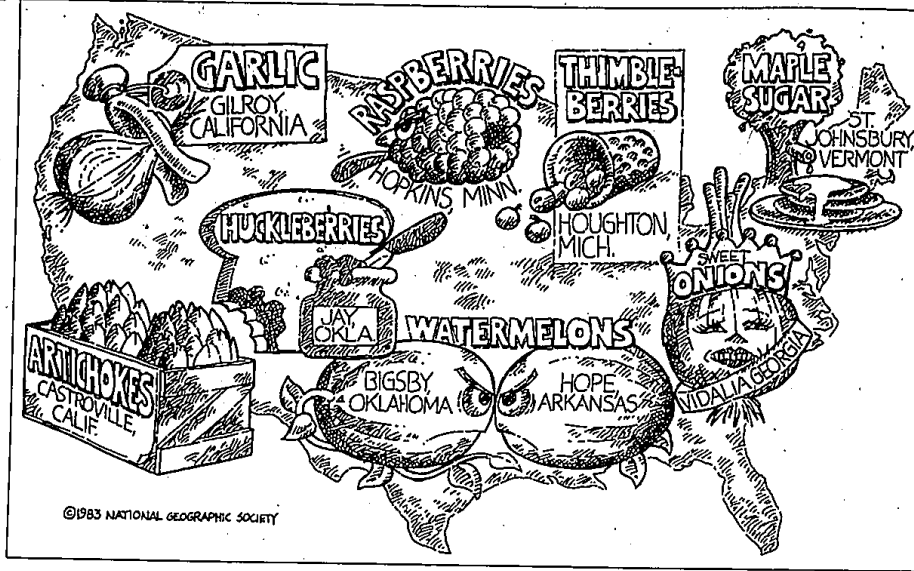


Foods put these towns on the map



©1983 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC SOCIETY

'There's lots of towns say they're for progress, but I bet we're the only one named after an onion.'

— Dick Walden of Vidalia, Ga., the Sweet Onion City.

IN CASTROVILLE, Calif., they have a saying: Anything you can do with potatoes, you can do with artichokes and you can do it better.

Castroville is the artichoke capital of the world. In Vidalia, Ga., Dick Walden says that when his wife bakes Vidalia sweet onions, he sometimes thinks that she has secretly sprinkled sugar on them because they are so sweet and mild.

In Jay, Okla., youngsters protect the locations of their wild huckleberry patches so they'll have a steady supply to sell to Kelley's IGA, which makes huckleberry preserves.

Jay is the huckleberry capital of the world. And in Gilroy, Calif., the worst recipe using garlic they've collected was for an aphrodisiac: slice a banana lengthwise, slather it with peanut butter and cover it all with whole garlic cloves.

THERE ARE TOWNS like this all over the United States, all with the title of "something or other capital of the world." There is nothing official about such designations; they are self-awarded, and other towns would probably quibble about some of them.

But they often play a major part in establishing a town's identity, in recognizing a unique crop and in promoting tourism. The way capital status is conferred varies widely. Jay began calling itself the huckleberry capital 16 years ago when it launched an annual huckleberry festival. Until then, the berry had been popular in the town of 3,000 but was rarely eaten elsewhere.

Now, according to Ann Kelly, who runs the IGA and makes the preserves, people drive 90 miles from Tulsa just to pick up a jar.

"And some of the best restaurants in Tulsa come to the festival to bid on huckleberries at our auction, then ad-

vertise them for the rest of the year," she said. The sweet, tiny berries are used in jams, cobblers and cakes, but are no longer fried, Cherokee style.

A **SIMILAR TALE** is told in Houghton, Mich., the thimbleberry capital of the world, which celebrates a deep berry unique to the Keweenaw Peninsula, the Copper Country of Upper Michigan.

"This is the only place the thimbleberry grows wild," said Linda Johnson, office manager of the Copper Country Chamber of Commerce. "It tastes like a raspberry, but it's not as seedy. The whole thing comes off the plant shaped like a thimble with no stems."

Houghton's bushes, like Jay's, produce only a small amount of berries. But in some capitals, the local product is the pillar of the economy. Vidalia was on the verge of becoming a depressed area, its traditional products like tobacco and peanuts dropping in value, when its sweet onion, produced since the 1930s, began receiving national attention and distribution three years ago.

Now the price of the Vidalia sweet onions is rising, said Dick Walden, executive vice president of the Vidalia Chamber of Commerce. Full consumer potential is still

untapped, and the town of 12,500 has changed its motto from "City of Progress" to "Sweet Onion City."

"There's lots of towns say they're for progress, Walden said, "but I bet we're the only one named after an onion."

IN CASTROVILLE, where the first artichokes were planted in 1924, some 9,000 acres within 15 miles of the town are planted with artichokes. The town has a population of only 4,200, but it and the surrounding area produced 37,630 tons of fresh artichokes last year, with a cash value of \$28.4 million.

A town can get to be a capital in a serendipitous way. Take the case of St. Johnsbury, Vt., the maple capital of the world. It earned its status because a local grocer was broke.

Tradition has it that George Cary, representing a wholesale grocer, called upon a St. Johnsbury retailer to settle an account back in 1898. The local man had no cash, so he paid with 1,500 pounds of maple sugar he had.

"Cary's boss didn't think that was so great, so he had to unload it," says Terry Hoffer, executive director of the St. Johnsbury Maple Festival. Fortunately, he ran into a tobacco company salesman and learned that tobacco was packed for shipment with imported cane sugar. Cary persuaded tobacco growers first to use his maple sugar instead, and a capital was born. Cary gave the town its maple sugar capital status.

STILL, IT'S EASY to win such a title, harder to keep it. Hope, Ark., population 10,300, is the watermelon capital of the world because it grows them so big. The Guinness Book of World Records says the champion watermelon, all 200 pounds of it, was grown in Hope by Ivan Bright.

But last year, that distinction passed to a grower in Bigby, Okla., who produced a 219-pounder. Lloyd Bright, Ivan's son and a high school administrator who "liddies

Hope, Ark., population 10,300, was called the watermelon capital of the world because it produced a champion 200-pound watermelon. But last year, a grower in Bigby, Okla., produced a 219-pounder.

around" with watermelons during the summer, is confident Hope can win the crown back, justifying its other motto: "A slice of the good life."

Things aren't so hopeful in Hopkins, Minn., formerly the raspberry capital of the world. That was in the days when, as Clint Blomquist, 79, curator of the Hopkins Historical Society, recalls, "We'd ship raspberries out by five freight carloads, and we had to import people 40 or 50 miles away in season to pick berries."

Now suburbia has overtaken Hopkins, nine miles west of Minneapolis, and there are no berry patches. Well, there's one, Blomquist says, "but the lady who runs it is in her 80s, and her daughter says that when she dies, the berry patch dies with her."

So now when Hopkins holds its annual raspberry festival in spite of changing conditions, it has an ignominious task to perform:

It has to import raspberries from California. — National Geographic News Service

This is one of the better traditions that go with a cup of coffee. When you need what we have to offer, we make the best reading possible. If you need a job or a new employee, a car, bike or stereo, or someone to build a porch, brew up a cup of coffee and pick up the best classified section around--Observer & Eccentric classified ads.

To place your ad, call before 4 p.m. Friday for Monday's paper and 4 p.m. Tuesday for Thursday's paper.

THERE'S A LOT GOING ON IN

Observer & Eccentric classified ads

REACH HIGHLAND'S FINEST MARKET ONE CALL DOES IT ALL! 844-878 Oakland County 981-988 Wayne County 982-3222 Rochester Avon Twp. www.oeandec.com