1947

Marketing Louisiana sweet potatoes in Pittsburgh

James M. Baker

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MARKETING LOUISIANA SWEET POTATOES IN PITTSBURGH

By

J. M. Baker

Louisiana State Market Commission Cooperating

Interviewing Housewife Purchasing Louisiana Sweet Potatoes in a Retail Food Store in Pittsburgh

LOUISIANA STATE UNIVERSITY

AND

AGRICULTURAL AND MECHANICAL COLLEGE

AGRICULTURAL EXPERIMENT STATION

BATON ROUGE, LOUISIANA

W. G. Taggart, Director
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Marketing Louisiana Sweet Potatoes
in Pittsburgh

By J. M. Baker*

Introduction

The sweet potato study conducted in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, during March, 1947, may be considered as somewhat of a supplement to previous studies in Louisiana and in Chicago. Pittsburgh was selected for the survey because of its importance as an eastern market for Louisiana sweet potatoes. A total of 359 carlots, or about 5 per cent of the Louisiana shipments during 1946, were delivered to Pittsburgh and constituted 58 per cent of the total receipts at that market.

This study was undertaken for three main purposes: (1) to obtain information on dealer reaction to present quality and grades of Louisiana fresh and canned sweet potatoes; (2) to compare the findings in this study with the results of previous studies; and (3) to compile the data gathered into a comprehensive report for use by sweet potato producers and dealers.

The agencies cooperating in the study were the Louisiana State Market Commission and The Great Atlantic and Pacific Tea Company. The Commission provided the major portion of the personnel for the survey in Pittsburgh and supervised the grading of the sweet potatoes for the experiments, and the Company supplied the sweet potato exhibits and the retail store facilities.

The data collected on dealer reactions to Louisiana sweet potatoes were obtained through interviews with wholesalers and retailers at the terminal markets, managers of grocery companies, restaurant operators, and those in charge of different types of retail food stores. The consumer preference studies were conducted by using exhibits of sweet potatoes in

* Associates in making the survey in Pittsburgh were J. O. Anders and Leonard Lagneaux of Louisiana State Market Commission. Among the studies especially helpful in the interpretation and appraisal of the data for this study were the ones by Professor Martin A. Abrahamsen, Consumer Preferences for Sweet Potatoes, N. C. Experiment Station Tech. Bul. 82, February, 1947; and by Professor W. T. Ferrier, Marketing South Carolina Sweet Potatoes, S. C. Experiment Station Bul. 352, November, 1944. The Tri-State Produce Company cooperated by providing an especially well-graded car of sweet potatoes for the study.

1 J. M. Baker, Consumer Preferences in Sweet Potatoes, Louisiana Agricultural Experiment Station Bul. 409, January, 1947, which will be referred to in the present report as “previous studies.”
four A. & P. food stores located to give a good cross section of the classification and purchasing power of Pittsburgh consumers. Some of the exhibits consisted of different grades and others of different sizes of sweet potatoes. Information on consumer preferences was obtained by observation, measurement of purchases, and interviews with consumers.

Dealer Acceptance of Louisiana Sweet Potatoes

To gather information on the reaction of dealers to Louisiana fresh sweet potatoes, or "yams" as they are called in Pittsburgh, visits were made to 12 large distributors located at the terminal market and 14 wholesalers operating adjacent to the terminal market. For the data on canned sweet potatoes, six wholesale grocers and representatives of several chain store systems, independent retail units, and restaurants were contacted. The items of inquiry concerned the grading of sweet potatoes for market, type of package, condition on arrival, consistency and reliability of the quality of sweet potatoes received from Louisiana shippers, and other relevant information.

Grading

The first dealers to be contacted were the distributors at the terminal market where most of the sweet potatoes are unloaded. Almost without exception, the first reaction of these dealers was a plea for better quality and grading of this product. Many of the shipments were reported as meeting only the minimum of U. S. grade specifications. Laxities permitted during the war were still in evidence. The grades contained too large a portion of waste and off-sizes.

The wholesalers emphasized the urgent demand of retailers for better standardized products. Changes in merchandising practices in the stores call for continued improvement. The dealers were unanimous in the opinion that the extreme over- and undersized sweet potatoes should be excluded from shipment and the remainder packed in separate crates according to size. When properly divided, the more desirable size ranges should net a premium for use in stores handling the better grade products. The large size could be assigned to the retailers using lower priced merchandise. Since sweet potatoes are graded at the place of origin, all basic improvements in grading should begin at the farm or the shipping point.

Type of Package

Most of the dealers expressed preference for the James-type wire-bound sweet potato crate used by practically all Louisiana shippers, provided it was clean, well-labeled and of good appearance. Attention was called to the fact that most wholesale distributing companies offer sweet potatoes to other wholesale dealers who in turn sell them to retailers. Under these circumstances, a good package greatly enhances the
sales value of the product. The appearance of the crate is less important, however, when the receiving firm moves the sweet potatoes directly to retail stores. Crating sweet potatoes according to size ranges would help to adjust prices to quality and make distribution to the different types of retail trade more equitable.

**Condition of Product on Arrival**

All of the wholesale dealers contacted reported Louisiana Porto Rico sweet potatoes, with few exceptions, arriving at Pittsburgh in good condition. Some attributed the occasional losses to sharp changes of temperature encountered in transit; others believed weather conditions at the shipping point the cause. The extent and causes of the injuries were not determined.

**Consistency in Quality Shipments**

The lack of consistency in repeating good quality shipments of Louisiana sweet potatoes to the city of Pittsburgh was next in importance to the plea for improvement in the quality of the grades. The unfavorable criticisms were directed at sweet potato shippers. Striking examples of inconsistency occurred in Pittsburgh while the study was in progress. One was that of a prominent Louisiana shipper who delivered to a chain store company a car of U.S. No. 1 sweet potatoes that were deficient in quality. The shipment contained too many misshapen and oversized sweet potatoes. This meant one of two things to the retailer: a disastrously low price for the product or a reduction in the amount of consumer purchases. And for this shipper, who, in a way, represented the producers of his community, there would be no repeat orders in the near future.

Another instance of inconsistency was that of a smaller Louisiana shipper who also delivered to the Pittsburgh terminal market a car of sweet potatoes below the standard of quality. Neither can this shipper expect additional orders from disappointed receivers. Who bears the brunt of such a deal? For the moment the receiving dealer, but in the long run, the shipper and the producer are the losers, especially the latter.

In contrast to the inconsistent dealers shipping Louisiana sweet potatoes to the Pittsburgh markets, there are those who are known for repeated delivery of quality products. One such shipper will be called Mr. "X" and his brand of sweet potatoes "Y." Mr. "X" not only adheres strictly to good quality but gives full measure of it. As a result "Y" sweet potatoes are well known and are in good demand by all types of Pittsburgh dealers handling sweet potatoes. One dealer at the terminal market has the exclusive agency for the "Y's" in that city. It is also known that this brand nets a premium of 25 to 50 cents a bushel over other brands of Louisiana sweet potatoes. The supply of "Y's" was exhausted before the close of the 1946-47 season. Mr. "X" makes a valuable contri-
bution to both better demand and higher prices for the producer by making it possible for the consumer to constantly find good sweet potatoes in the retail stores. Shippers and producers have great responsibility to each other in marketing the sweet potato crop. As goes the quality of sweet potatoes offered the consuming public so goes the welfare of the industry.

Other Varieties

Although the study in Pittsburgh was designed to deal with Louisiana Porto Rico sweet potatoes, certain comparisons with other varieties, or the same variety from other states, could not be overlooked. Some of the dealers at the terminal market contended that the Louisiana Porto Rico sweet potato was superior to others in edible qualities. Be that as it may, it was quite evident that Louisiana “yams” possess relatively good store keeping qualities.

Restaurant Demand

Many restaurants were visited and the managers interviewed regarding their demand for sweet potatoes. The information obtained supported reports by the dealers that, by and large, restaurants use the low grades of sweet potatoes at low prices. Restaurant operators explained that customers at the table are not interested in the shape and size of the sweet potato, especially when sliced and candied, as it usually is. Sweet potatoes are not listed regularly on the restaurant menus. They are difficult to prepare when bought in the fresh form. Apparently the canned product has not yet appeared in a quality and price satisfactory for extensive restaurant use.

Canned Sweet Potatoes

Six wholesale grocers and many retail food stores of the different chains and independents were checked for information on canned sweet potatoes, with emphasis on the brands packed in Louisiana. The reports from all the stores were practically the same. The trade seemed partial to the No. 3 squat can packed with small, whole potatoes. There was difference in opinion on preference for the type of pack. Some favored the sirup and others the vacuum pack. All dealers referred to lack of consistency in quality. Some store managers reported customers as saying the canned sweet potatoes were hard and not well flavored; and others that they were too soft. Some said the canned product was too expensive as compared with the fresh sweet potatoes. It was the opinion of the enumerators that probably the sweet potatoes too small for the fresh market could be canned whole as a fancy pack for individual and restaurant use, and that a good quality of sliced sweet potatoes might be obtained from the larger sizes and offered at a reduced price. Much additional study is needed before specific conclusions can be drawn and definite recommendations made concerning these markets for canned Louisiana sweet potatoes.
Merchandising Methods

The change in merchandising practices and the rapidity with which these changes are being made in retail food stores are little less than revolutionary. Quality products prepackaged for the consumer in transparent bags of popular size evidently is the ultimate objective. In Pittsburgh a limited amount of prepackaging of sweet potatoes already is being done. Only well-graded and carefully standardized commodities can be merchandised successfully in this manner.

Consumer Preferences and Related Data

The study of consumer preferences in sweet potatoes included two types of exhibits, one of different grades and the other of different sizes. The related data pertained to such items as the principal buyers of sweet potatoes in the retail stores, size of family, size of individual and weekly purchases, frequency of serving, and methods of cooking sweet potatoes.

![Figure 1](image-url)

**Figure 1**—Here U.S. No. 1 and U.S. No. 2 Louisiana sweet potatoes are shown during the last part of a three-period demand test in a Pittsburgh food store. The price of No. 1's remained constant and the price of No. 2's was lowered during the second and third periods to eight and seven cents a pound, respectively. Despite the reduced price of No. 2's, purchases favored No. 1's in the ratio of about four to one.

Grade Preference

For the grade tests in the stores, U.S. No. 1 and U.S. No. 2 sweet potatoes were exhibited side by side for a three-period duration. During the first period both grades were priced on the basis of 9 cents a pound. During the second and third periods the price of No. 1's remained constant while that of the No. 2's was lowered to 8 and 7 cents, respectively. No labels other than the price quotations appeared over the exhibits.
The grade tests revealed a somewhat constant demand for the U. S. No. 1 sweet potatoes over the No. 2's in the ratio of about four to one, irrespective of the declining price of the latter. In the way of explanation, the influence of the declining price of No. 2's on demand was fully counteracted by the relatively faster deterioration in appearance of this grade as compared with that of the No. 1.

Some may say that if only U. S. No. 2 sweet potatoes were put on display, they would be taken at the same price as U. S. No. 1's. So they would, but the quantity taken probably would be reduced to an unsatisfactorily low level. In the stores where the exhibits of the best quality were used, the demand for sweet potatoes was reported greatly stimulated. In some cases the sales were actually doubled.

The shipment of U. S. No. 2 sweet potatoes to distant markets, in the long run, is difficult to defend, except during periods of unusually strong demand and scarcity of the better grades. The fact that No. 2’s possess the same food value as U. S. No. 1’s is not enough. Eye appeal and size are the main factors affecting consumer choices and volume of purchases. Thus we find two forces competing for the consumer patronage: the better quality merchandise of the U. S. No. 1’s and the lower price of the No. 2’s. Since the average size of individual purchase is relatively small, as will be shown later, it is easy to understand why the demand is so strongly on the side of the better grade. But here attention should be called to the fact that some of the undesirable qualities of U. S. No. 2 sweet potatoes are also present to some extent in the U. S. No. 1’s, that is, the extreme variation in sizes. Consumers like uniformity in products, and good merchandising practices require a high degree of it.

Size Preference

Aside from good appearance, size is the quality in sweet potatoes with which the housewife is most concerned. Size is closely associated with specific uses and ease of preparation. The wide variation in sizes causes the shopper inconvenience and confusion when she has to follow her neighbor to the sweet potato bin and pick from a deteriorated and motley lot. Probably no other farm product offered the retailer and the consuming public is more heterogeneous in so many ways. The problem of dividing the good quality sweet potatoes into size ranges best suited to merchandising uses and, at the same time, determining the most profitable method of disposing of the over- and undersized sweet potatoes is worthy of much careful study.

In the size preference study in Pittsburgh, U. S. No. 1 sweet potatoes were divided into size ranges designated as small, medium, and large. The small size included sweet potatoes measuring a minimum of one and three-fourths inches in diameter and weighing a maximum of 7 ounces; mediums weighed 8 to 12 ounces, and the large size 13 to 24 ounces. From these size groups two separate exhibits were constructed
and placed in different stores. In one store the three sizes were placed side by side and quoted at the same price, as shown in Figure 2. In the other store the small and medium sizes were combined and exhibited beside the large size, as presented in Figure 3. The duration of the second experiment was divided into three periods, with the price of the small and medium sizes remaining at the base of 9 cents a pound, while

the large size was quoted, for the three periods, at 9, 7, and 5 cents a pound, respectively.

At the store where the three sizes were exhibited separately, the purchases of 273 customers comprised 31 per cent small size, 50 per cent medium size and 19 per cent large size. These figures correspond closely to the results of the study in Louisiana and in Chicago.

At the store where the small and medium size sweet potatoes were combined against the large size, the test was designed to determine the effect of price changes on the demand for the large size. When both lots were quoted on the basis of nine cents a pound, 94 per cent of the purchases consisted of small and medium sizes and 6 per cent of the large size. As the price relation changed to 9 and 7 cents, respectively, the consumer preference was reversed to 61 per cent in favor of the large size.
and 39 per cent in favor of the small and medium sizes. When the price of the large size was lowered to 5 cents, the preference shifted back to the smalls and mediums in the ratio of 52 per cent to 48 per cent. This last reversal was due to the fact that the more desirable potatoes in the large group had been picked out and only the excessively large sizes remained in the large-size lot.

Both shippers and retailers who struggle with the disposition of the large sweet potatoes may find this observation of much importance. The large sweet potatoes may contain as much food value as the small and medium sizes, but the fact that they are much less in demand places them, from the standpoint of merchandising, in a lower price bracket. Therefore, to maintain equal quantity of sales among the different size groups, differentials in price must be adjusted to the differentials in demand.

Although the division of sweet potatoes into size groups leads to better methods of fitting the supply to market demand, the experiment leaves some problems yet unsolved. For example, there is a minimum price at which any grade of Louisiana sweet potatoes may be handled at distant markets and, at the same time, a profit secured for the producers. No doubt there is an appreciable portion of the present U. S. No. 1 grade which comprises excessively large sweet potatoes that could not command
the minimum price and move in satisfactory quantity. Also, a high percentage of the small sizes weighing under six ounces are not in demand at a profitable price. Further study is necessary, therefore, to determine the proper divisions to make in the size ranges for the fresh market, and to determine definitely the sizes that should be assigned to other uses.

**Principal Buyer at Retail Store**

Of the 382 customers purchasing sweet potatoes at retail food stores in Pittsburgh, 75 per cent were housewives, 21 per cent husbands and 4 per cent children or friends of the family. The housewife, therefore, is the principal consumer whose demands must be considered by sweet potato producers and dealers.

**Size of Family**

The results of this study coincide closely with the findings in the previous studies. Of the 320 families represented by customers purchasing sweet potatoes, 30 per cent averaged fewer than three persons in size, including parents, and 73 per cent fewer than five. Only 15 per cent consisted of six or more. The average size of family was 3.7 persons. These data indicate that adults and not children are the principal consumers of Louisiana sweet potatoes.

**Size of Purchase**

The percentages of the different sizes of individual and weekly purchases of sweet potatoes are shown in Table 1. For the U. S. No. 1 and U. S. No. 2 grades the average size of single, or individual, purchases was 3.1 pounds, and the average for the week was 4.5 pounds. In the tests with the small, medium and large sizes, the individual purchases averaged, respectively, 2.6, 3.3, and 4.2 pounds. Most of the larger individual and weekly purchases appeared to be associated with food habits rather than ability to pay. The prices were believed too high to induce larger weekly purchases in the lower purchasing power group of consumers. However, a more extensive study conducted by Professor Abrahamson of North Carolina Agricultural Experiment Station in North Carolina on the relation of income and sweet potato purchases reveals that the weekly purchases in the lowest income class, that is, the class with family income below $100 a month, were 45 per cent higher than

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purchases*</th>
<th>One</th>
<th>Two</th>
<th>Three</th>
<th>Four</th>
<th>Five</th>
<th>Six</th>
<th>Seven</th>
<th>Eight</th>
<th>Nine</th>
<th>Ten-up</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>26.4</td>
<td>37.2</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>2.4</td>
<td>.2</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>.0</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>10.7</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>8.5</td>
<td>9.0</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Average size of individual purchases: for U. S. Nos. 1 and 2, was 3.1 pounds; and for small, medium and large sizes, 2.6, 3.3, and 4.2 pounds, respectively. Average amount of weekly purchases was 4.5 pounds.
in the highest income class considered where the family income was over $200 a month.²

**Frequency of Serving Sweet Potatoes**

The frequency with which the families are served sweet potatoes may depend principally on how well the family likes them. Seventy-two per cent of the customers interviewed reported serving their families sweet potatoes one to two days a week. Eighty-eight per cent served not more than three days a week. The average per week was 2.1 days.

**Methods of Cooking Sweet Potatoes**

The different qualities in sweet potatoes, especially size, are closely associated with the methods of preparation. Of the 531 times that different methods of cooking sweet potatoes were mentioned by the sweet potato customers, oven-baking was given 53.3 per cent of the times, candying 23.7 per cent, cooking with meat 10.0 per cent, frying 8.5 per cent, and making the sweet potatoes into such dishes as pies and puddings, 4.5 per cent. On the whole, the small and medium sizes were baked or cooked with meat and the larger ones used for the other purposes. These and other data indicate very little difference in the manner of serving sweet potatoes in different parts of the country.

**Summary and Recommendations**

To obtain the reaction of Pittsburgh dealers to Louisiana sweet potatoes, 26 distributors and wholesalers were interviewed. This survey revealed (1) that sweet potatoes intended for the fresh markets should be more carefully graded. Present receipts, on the average, contain too high a percentage of waste and off-sizes; (2) that with improvements in merchandising practices by retailers, better standardized products are required with emphasis principally on good appearance and a high degree of uniformity in shape and size; (3) that probably sweet potatoes intended for the retail trade should be graded and packed for shipment according to size, thereby making distribution to the different types of stores more equitable; and (4) that better standardization of the product will greatly stimulate the demand.

As to the type of sweet potato package, wholesale dealers offered no adverse criticism of the James crate used by Louisiana shippers provided it was clean, well-labeled and of good, general appearance.

On the whole, sweet potatoes from Louisiana were reported arriving at Pittsburgh in good condition.

Pittsburgh dealers complained of the lack of consistency in the quality of Louisiana sweet potatoes. Few shippers could be relied upon

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to deliver good quality repeatedly. Brands that are constant in quality net repeat orders and a premium in price.

Compared with other varieties of sweet potatoes at the Pittsburgh markets, the Louisiana product appeared to be in a favorable position, especially in relation to edible and keeping qualities.

A study of the restaurant demand for sweet potatoes revealed that, because the product is usually sliced and candied for table use, the supply was selected from the lower grades.

Canned sweet potatoes, which included Louisiana brands, were reported as lacking quality in some cases and uniformity of quality in others. The small can of whole sweet potatoes, both vacuum and sirup pack, was reported most popular among housewives. It is believed there is a need for lower priced canned sweet potatoes that might be obtained from off-sized and poorly shaped sweet potatoes.

The changes in merchandising methods in the retail food stores call for greatly needed changes and improvement in grading and standardizing sweet potatoes for the fresh produce markets. Along with many other products, sweet potatoes are being prepackaged for the store customers. Prepackaging requires a definite standard and quality of merchandise.

The tests for consumer preferences in the grade and size of sweet potatoes in the Pittsburgh stores indicated (1) that with U. S. No. 1's quoted at nine cents a pound and U. S. No. 2's at seven cents, purchases favored the former four to one; (2) that where the different sizes of U. S. No. 1's were quoted at the same price consumers chose 31 per cent small sizes, 50 per cent mediums, and 19 per cent large sizes; and (3) that when the small and medium sizes were combined and tested against the large sizes, it was necessary to reduce the price of the large sizes about two cents a pound in order to get equal volume of purchases. This indicated that the large size sweet potatoes are less in demand and come within a lower price bracket.

Other information obtained from consumers at the retail food stores indicated that (1) 75 per cent of the buyers of sweet potatoes were housewives; (2) the average size of families using sweet potatoes, including parents, was 3.7 persons; (3) the average size of single purchases was 3.1 pounds and of weekly purchases 4.5 pounds; (4) sweet potatoes were served to the families an average of 2.1 days a week; and (5) that sweet potatoes were oven-baked over 53 per cent of the times, candied 24 per cent, and cooked with meat, fried or made into casserole dishes the balance of the times.

The studies of consumer preferences for the different grades and sizes of sweet potatoes have led to the conclusion that certain revisions should be made in the pattern of grading sweet potatoes for the fresh produce
market; that sweet potatoes possessing the other favorable marketing qualities should be graded according to size and placed into definite size groups.

There appears to be prominent inconsistency in the present grade specifications for sweet potatoes. For example, the U. S. No. 1 grade includes sweet potatoes which would fall into different price brackets in the retail food stores. It has been indicated by tests and extensive observation that the small and medium sizes command a higher price than the large size, and that there are those of the extremely small and large sizes which the trade will not take at a price profitable to the producer.

**Acknowledgements**

The author is indebted to many individuals, in addition to his professional associates, for assistance and cooperation in this study: to Merton L. Corey and Claybourne Ross of Carl Byoir and Associates, Inc., an affiliate of The A. & P. Tea Company, for help in planning and making arrangements for the work in Pittsburgh; to W. W. Roberts, Executive Secretary, Louisiana State Market Commission, and his associates, J. O. Anders, Leonard Lagneaux and H. B. Swindler, for preparing the sweet potatoes for the study and actually helping with the enumeration; to Harry W. Johnson, President of Tri-State Produce Company, and E. S. Richardson of Louisiana State Department of Commerce and Industry, for arranging for the sweet potato supply; to J. J. Gardner, Head of U. S. Inspection Service in Pittsburgh, for assistance and many professional courtesies; to P. T. Ecton of Warriner Products Company, for cooperation and valuable counsel; and last but certainly not least, to L. C. Baum, Jr., Vice-President, Atlantic Commission Company, and his associates, W. H. Bayliss in Pittsburgh and W. Simmons of Opelousas, Louisiana; and the personnel of The A. & P. Tea Company in Pittsburgh, including H. F. Peterson, Sales Manager, H. W. Klingensmith, Produce Personnel Trainer, A. P. Catterall, Advertising Manager, and Joseph Ludwig, Lewis Sowa, M. M. Moschiswky and J. T. Schwartz, Store Managers, and many others of the staff who extended wholehearted cooperation and helped to make the study in Pittsburgh possible. Pittsburgh dealers also were thoroughly cooperative and cheerfully provided needed information.