

Will super food yacón remain on the organic circuit?

Although yacón has been cultivated in the Netherlands for a number of years already, it is still a new type of food. It has not yet found its way to the masses through the supermarkets, according to Wiel van de Bool, who has cultivated the crop from the very beginning. He takes care of distribution to organic food shops in the Netherlands and Belgium through various wholesalers with a few other organic cultivators. He almost managed to make a deal with restaurant chain La Place, which was going to use yacón as a sugar replacer in smoothies. Department store V&D's bankruptcy just then threw a spanner in the works. Now, cultivator Wiel van de Bool is looking for new buyers, and he is also looking towards the processing industry. As a prime cultivator, he has much experience with the introduction of new crops. Wiel: "It usually works, Butternuts and lacinato kale are in supermarkets."



Potential

That it has not yet worked with yacón is a shame. The crop has the potential, but multiple parties are needed to make it into a success, otherwise it will remain on the organic circuit, according to Wiel. "The distribution takes place through organic wholesalers Udea (EkoPlaza), Vroegop/Kroon and Estafette Odin, and also through culinary trade companies such as Lindenhoff and Ecoville. Fresh yacón is available via wholesaler Biofresh in Belgium."

Wiel thinks it might be the price. Yacón is not cheap. It has to be very carefully harvested by hand. "That is because the roots contain so much moisture that tension is created, which means cracks and breaks can easily occur during mechanical harvesting, which could negatively influence shelf life." The margins of the wholesaler's and the shop then have to be added to that as well. Prices in organic shops are between 5 and 6 euro per kilogram.



Incas

The plant receives a lot of attention as a processed product. It is available as syrup, marmalade, powder, tea, dried slices. Diabetics know it as a substitute for sugar. The use of fresh yacón is still unfamiliar. On the other side of the world, where yacón is originally from, it is a completely different matter. It was a popular crop with the ancient Incas. The current Andes population is also fond of the crop. Yacón is both loved for its special and subtly sweet flavour, and for its health-promoting characteristics.

Yacón has a crisp bite, and it is fairly sweet for a tuber. After cooking, it will retain its bite, and it is therefore a surprising ingredient in soup, for example. The natural flavouring inulin gives the crop a soft and mildly sweet flavour that varies from apple to melon and to pear. Yacón can be stored for long periods, and could replace certain types of fruit in winter. The flavour becomes even sweeter after storing.



Healthy

Yacón was already known by the Incas for its good influence on health. A few years ago, the Foundation Climaxplant and the Science Shop from University of Wageningen combined forces to further study the possibilities of yacón as a healthy supplement to daily diets. The glycemic index has a low value, which means that the natural sugars in the tuber are absorbed into the digestive system slowly and evenly, and make you feel full for longer periods of time. "Yacón is a prebiotic. It contains the largest amounts FOS from all known foods. These are nutrients for bacteria that stimulate the healthy bacterial growth in the intestines, and hinder the harmful and toxic development of bacteria. They sort of boost the immune system. Various studies have shown that it has a positive effect on our complete digestive system, and that it is especially rich in potassium and antioxidants," Wiel explains. "However, consuming too much yacón, like its relative Jerusalem artichoke, can cause flatulence. When heating the tuber, the sugars are transferred into a longer type, which is at the expense of the positive characteristics."

Low-calorie

Because of the inulin it is a low-calorie crop, making it suitable for diabetics. It could also be marketed as a healthy alternative for refined and artificial sweeteners in the struggle against obesity. Wiel: "For example, in Japan they make yacón tea from the plant's leaves. These contain substances that lower the amount of glucose in the blood. Diabetics can benefit from this. Yacón syrup is delicious on waffles and pancakes, and tastes good as sweetener in smoothies and shakes. It can also be used in kitchens as a substitute for sugar in all kinds of desserts, pies, cakes and dairy-based breakfasts."

Uses

The tuber is usually eaten fresh, as a raw snack or processed into a salad. Besides, it can be applied in many different ways, from pastries to crisps and to traditionally Dutch dishes. "Customers in our farm's shop use it as a substitute for apples in apple pie, or instead of pineapple in sauerkraut dishes. I recently had a waffle with bits of yacón in it, and the structure and flavour was comparable to those of sultanas," Wiel says. He does not know how well the favourable characteristics are kept after preparation. "However, the bite is retained, and yacón becomes even sweeter after heating."

Without further additions of sugar, yacón can therefore be used in low-calorie turnovers, fritters and pies. Crisps can be made by frying the slices of yacón in butter without further additions. Because of the crisp bite, yacón is suitable for raw snacks or in summery salads. The tuber can change colour considerably during preparation, just like celeriac. That could also happen when you use lemon juice or a sour dressing. Blanching is another a method, but it has a negative effect on the flavour.





Names

Although yacón is not very well known yet, it has already been given many names. As relative to the Jerusalem artichoke it is also called 'ground pear,' but other names are 'sun carrot,' 'apple of the earth' and 'diabetes potato.' Its official name is *Smallanthus sonchifolius*.

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