Onions – What’s The Appeal?

1. **What is an Onion**
2. Onions (*Allium cepa)* belong to the lily family, the same family as garlic, leeks, chives, scallions and shallots.
3. The word ONION comes from the Latin word *unio* which means *single* or *one*.
4. It refers to the fact that the onion plant produces a single bulb, unlike its cousin, the garlic, which produces many small bulbs.
5. The name also describes the onion bulb when cut down the middle; it is a *union* of many separate, concentrically arranged layers.
6. There are generally two types of large, globe shaped onions. (spring/summer and fall/winter or storage onions)

1. Spring/Summer

* 1. Spring/Summer onions are grown in milder climates and have a sweet and mild flavor.
  2. Maui, Vidalia and WallaWalla onions are in this category.

1. Fall/Winter or Storage onion
2. Storage onions are grown in colder weather climates, and after harvesting are dried out to create a dry, crisp skin for long term storage.
3. They are more pungent in flavor and usually named by their color: yellow, white and red.
4. There are also smaller varieties of onions which include the green onion (scallion) and pearl to name a few.
5. **History of Onions**
6. Due to their thin-skinned nature, onions have been hard to establish a birth date or place…they don’t leave much trace.
7. It’s thought that prehistoric man probably had a version of wild onions in their diets long before farming/cultivation or even writing.
8. Most researchers agree that the onion has been cultivated for more than 5000 years.
   1. Onions may have been the earliest cultivated crop because of their ability to grow in many climates and could easily be stored for times when food was scarce.
   2. Cultivation may have originated in central Asia although other researchers think they were first cultivated in Iran and West Pakistan.
9. While their birth place and time is still a mystery, many documents from very early times describe its importance as a food and its use in art, medicine and mummification.
10. One Sumarian text dated to about 2500BC tells of someone plowing over the city governor’s onion patch.
11. The onion symbolized eternity to ancient Egyptians who buried onions along with their Pharoahs.
12. Egyptologists theorize that the onion’s strong scent was symbolic of their magical powers which would prompt the dead to breathe again. Other Egyptologists believe the onion’s strong antiseptic qualities, made them magical and therefore handy in the afterlife.
13. Onions were eaten by the Israelites in the Bible (Numbers 11:5) *“We remember the fish, which we did eat in Egypt freely, the cucumbers and the melons and the leeks and the onions and the garlic.”*
14. The Greeks used onions to fortify athletes for the Olympic Games having them consume pounds of onions, drink onion juice and rub onions on their bodies before competition!
15. Excavators of the doomed city of Pompeii discovered gardens with cavities in the ground, indicating that onions may have been grown there.
16. By the Middle Ages, the three main vegetables of Europe where beans, cabbage and onions.
17. Pilgrims brought onions with them only to discover that wild onions grew throughout North America and were being used extensively by Native Americans.
18. **Nutrition & Health Benefits of Onions**
19. Vitamins and minerals.
20. High in vitamin C, fiber, folic acid and B6, although a serving is 1 cup which is probably more than most people eat at one time.
21. Onions are sodium, fat and cholesterol free.
22. Onions are a very rich source of Fructo-Oligosaccharides (FSO) which is just a long word that means onions promote the growth of healthy bacteria in the colon!
23. Onions are an excellent source of Antioxidants.
24. One, very powerful antioxidant that is found in onions is called *quercetin* (kwer-sit-in). This is the same one found in apples and in tea! Studies have shown that this antioxidant works to protect the body from the damaging effects of LDL (bad cholesterol.)

**What is an antioxidant?**

Antioxidants are compounds that help our bodies get rid of harmful substances. These substances are normally produced by the body and are often called “free radicals.”

1. Other antioxidant properties may be beneficial in reducing the risk of stomach ulcers.
2. Several studies are looking at quercetin and its beneficial effects against cataracts, heart disease and many types of cancer.
3. Quercetin also has anti-inflammatory properties and may be helpful for those with asthma.
4. A study at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is showing positive results with onions and blood thinning. In test tube models, pungent onions are preventing blood platelets from sticking together, thus potentially reducing the risk of cardiovascular disease, heart attack and stroke.
5. Another study in Switzerland is looking at onions and bone mineral density.
6. Onions also have several sulfur-containing compounds which are known to have antibacterial and anticancer properties.
7. Onions may improve mood by blocking the overproduction of homocysteine, a chemical that interferes with serotonin (the “feel good” chemical) from reaching the brain.
8. **Selection, Storage, Handling & Cooking Onions**
9. Selecting Onions
10. Choose onions that are clean, well shaped, have no opening at the neck, and feature crisp, dry outer skins. Avoid those that are sprouting or have signs of mold.
11. In addition, onions of inferior quality often have soft spots, moisture at their neck, and dark patches, which may all be indications of decay.
12. Yellow onions are the “all-purpose” onion. They are the best type to use for caramelizing. Cooking brings out this variety’s nutty, mellow, often sweet quality when caramelized.
13. Red onions have really gained commercial popularity in the past decade and are commonly used for pizza, sandwiches and salads.
14. White onions are most commonly used in white sauces, prepared salads and Mexican cuisine. They have a golden color and sweet flavor when sautéed.
15. Vidalia onions are perfect in salads where the yellow, red or white can be overpowering. They can also be caramelized and served raw on sandwiches.
16. Scallions, a.k.a. green onions, are most commonly enjoyed raw in salads or even on a vegetable tray. They are milder than other onions but stronger than chives.
17. Shallots are part of the onion family but are more similar to garlic. They do not have concentric layers like onions but rather are sectioned into cloves like garlic. Their taste is actually reminiscent of both onion and garlic.
18. Leeks are also related to onions but are considered very mild and look like very large green onions. People who hate onions are often very fond of leeks.
19. Storing Onions
20. Storage of Spring/summer onions (Vidalia) is limited to about 30-60 days with only a 30-day retail shelf-life.
21. Storage of Fall/winter or storage onions is 30-180 days. They are specifically designed to withstand long periods of storage. Yellow onions can be stored the longest, followed by red, then white.
22. At home store all onions in cool, dry, well-ventilated space, as close to 45-55°F as possible. Do not store with potatoes or other produce that release moisture.
23. Apples, pears and celery can absorb onion odors BUT onions can also absorb odors from apples and pears.
24. Do not wrap onions in plastic or store in plastic bags. A lack of circulation will shorten the shelf-life.
25. Handling Onions
26. Onions are grown in the ground and are often used in a raw form; great care should be taken in handling. Onions with mold, bruising and decay should be avoided.
27. Those tears are caused by sulfur-compounds. To reduce the amount of crying…
    1. Refrigerate for at least 30 minutes before cutting
    2. Begin cutting furthest from the root end since that has the highest concentration of those compounds.
    3. Always use a sharp knife
28. To get rid of the smell of onions on cutting boards and hands, try rubbing with lemon juice or salt.
29. Cut onions will keep for several days if sealed in containers and refrigerated. Depending on the onion, the odor can be very strong and even penetrate the container so be sure to store away from odor-absorbing foods.
30. When peeling or removing layers, try to remove as few layers as possible. Several antioxidants come from the pigments and more of the pigment is found on the outer layers. Red onions are highest, white are lowest, with yellow somewhere in between.
    1. Red onions contain a pigment called anthocyanins (think blueberries, concord grapes and apples) which are responsible for their vibrant purple/red color and much of their antioxidant power!
    2. Over peeling red onions can result in a 20% loss of quercetin and as much as 75% of the anthocyanins.
31. Cooking and Serving
32. High heat makes onions bitter. When sautéing onions, always use low or medium heat.
33. Cut onions as close to cooking time as possible. An onion’s flavor deteriorates and its aroma intensifies over time.
34. When cooking onions, consider the recipe and the type recommended, but also remember that your taste-buds and flavor preferences should be your guide.
35. In most recipes, onions are meant to add a flavor dimension and not overpower the dish so keep this in mind.
    1. If you notice that your onion is “very strong” don’t be afraid to adjust the recipe accordingly.
    2. If you don’t have the type of onion that the recipe requires, adjust the quantity so the intensity of the flavor matches. For example, if your salad recipe calls for green onions and you want to use the yellow onion you have on hand, then you will need to use considerably less of the yellow or your salad will be overpowered.
36. Fun Facts
37. The average American consumes about 20# of onions annually. This is up from 12# just two decades ago! What country has the highest per person consumption? Libya with almost 67# annually.
38. The largest onion ever grown weighed 10# 14 oz. It was grown in England.
39. New York City was called the Big Onion long before it was called the Big Apple. It was called this because it was a place from which you could peel off layer after layer without ever reaching the core!
40. What can you eat to get rid of onion breath? Parsley
41. US farmers plant about 125,000 acres of onions per year. This produces about 6.2 billion pounds! They are grown commercially in 20 states, with Washington producing the most.