

SPECIFICATION

COUNCIL REGULATION (EC) No 510/2006 on protected geographical indications and protected designations of origin
“New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies”

EC No:

PDO () PGI (✓)

This summary sets out the main elements of the product specification for information purposes.

1 RESPONSIBLE DEPARTMENT IN THE MEMBER STATE

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2 GROUP

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Composition: Producers:

3 TYPE OF PRODUCT

Class 1.6 Fruit, vegetables and cereals fresh or processed.

4 SPECIFICATION

(Summary of requirements under Article 4(2) of Regulation (EC) No 510/2006)

4.1 Name:

New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies

4.2 Description: New Season Comber Potato/Comber Earlies is the name given to immature potatoes of the *Solanum tuberosum* species in the Solanaceae family. New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies are grown from the basic seed varieties catalogued in the national registers of varieties of the Member States of the EU. They must be planted, grown and harvested in the defined area and within the required timescale. The potato has the following characteristics:

- Small in size (30-70mm diameter)
- Round or oval
- White/cream colour inside
- Skin is soft, smooth, thin and loose, with colour depending on the variety
- Earthy, sweet and nutty flavour – a distinctive ‘early’ potato flavour
- Dark green foliage
- Sold either loose by weight, or packaged in a range of weights.

The tubers must be harvested between the start of May and the end of July.

4.3 Geographical area:

The designated region is the area originally described as the Hamilton Montgomery lands, comprising Ards Borough Council as far south as Ardkeen on the Ards peninsula and Crossgar and Killyleagh on the western side of Strangford Lough, North Down Borough Council and parts of Castlereagh,

Belfast and Down District Council to the east of the road (A7) running from Carryduff to Killyleagh via Saintfield and Crossgar.

4.4 Proof of Origin:

Each batch of potatoes is graded by size and packed into boxes for onward transmission. Each box or bag is marked with a UKNI number which is specific to each individual farm. These numbers are issued by Quality Assurance Branch in the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development. This individual farm number means that each batch of potatoes can be traced back to the farm from which it came.

4.5 Method of production:

Seed and seed preparation

New seed obtained each year is grown once to advance its maturity, i.e. where seed crops grown elsewhere are harvested in e.g. early September, seed of First Earlies grown on farm are harvested in early July and then set up for 'chitting'. During this physiological ageing, the seed, in single layers in boxes, is well-ventilated. Seed at planting should have sprouts of less than 1cm (0.5 inches)

Soil cultivation

Soils are light and therefore warm up quickly. Ploughing is done shortly before intended planting to facilitate rapid drying of the soil. Two rotovations are done before the drills are prepared.

Planting

The seed tubers are planted in drills from early January, as soon as conditions allow. This is much earlier than elsewhere in Northern Ireland where planting of second early and maincrop varieties does not usually take place until the end of March or later. The long growing season referred to above makes early planting of early varieties possible.

Nutrient management

N, P and K are applied according to fertiliser Recommendations in keeping with NI being a NVZ. The fertiliser is broadcast at the time of soil preparation.

Weed control

Active ingredients permitted for use on potatoes and which do not have a residual effect for following crops are used.

Blight control

Blight control is essential because of favourable prevailing weather conditions for the fungus (*Phytophthora infestans*). Systemically active compounds are used at the beginning of the spraying period in mid-May but later chemicals permitted for rapid harvesting, as required by the supermarket retailers, are used.

Pest control

Not required as there are no pest problems of consequence.

Defoliation

The haulms are pulverised and the crop is lifted green.

Harvest

The tubers are harvested between the start of May and the end of July using a single row harvester moving as slowly as possible to minimise damage and maintain skin integrity. Growers use test digs and taste tests to ensure that the crop is ready for harvest (i.e. ideally 30-60mm). The potatoes are harvested and sold within one day, the retailers collecting produce fresh every morning from the farm.

4.6 Link:

- **The geography, topography and climatic condition that result in an abundant growth of feedstuffs.**

The designated area is dominated by Strangford Lough, the largest inlet in the British Isles (150km²) situated on the east coast of County Down, Northern Ireland. About a third of the Lough is intertidal, with large expanses of sandflats exposed at the northern end at low tide. The parent material of the soil surrounding the northern end of the Lough is Triassic red sandstone and gravel. This means that the soil is lighter and free draining. This allows the soil to dry more quickly and warm up quicker than soil in other parts of Northern Ireland.

Protection offered by the Ards peninsula to the east and the Mourne mountains to the south means that the climate is warmer than other parts of Northern Ireland. Most of the region is low-lying and Strangford Lough has a powerful moderating effect on winter weather making it much milder than elsewhere in Northern Ireland. The soil is therefore warmer, and so the growing season for the New Season New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies starts before potatoes in the rest of Northern Ireland. It has the longest mean growing season of any part of Northern Ireland of more than 270 days. This climate and topography also means that there is a lower risk of frost in the designated area and so the potatoes are planted and harvested before potatoes elsewhere in Northern Ireland.

- **The long tradition and reputation**

Ireland generally is associated with potatoes. In *The History and Social Influence of the Potato* (Redcliffe N. Salaman, 1949), it is stated that “The potato has, in the minds of more than half the world, an inalienable and time-honoured association with Ireland.....For good or ill, Ireland has become the classical, though adopted, home of potato culture, and in no other country can its influence on the domestic and economic life of the people be studied to a greater advantage”

Although potatoes came to Ireland from elsewhere, the geography of the island is particularly suited to growing potatoes. In 1657, the English Botanist, William Coles, in his *Adam in Eden, or the Paradise of Plants* noted that:

“potatoes....have been planted in many of our gardens [in England], where they decay rather than increase; but the soyle of Ireland doth so well agree with them, that they grow there so plentifully that there be whole fieldes overrun with them”

The history of the designated area is intertwined with the history of two Ulster-Scots families, the Hamilton's and the Montgomery's. In 1605 James Hamilton and Sir Hugh Montgomery (later to become Viscount Montgomery of the Ards) led a private plantation venture from Scotland. It is the area of this plantation venture that, to this day, remains the most famous area in Northern Ireland for growing potatoes. The early years of this settlement were recorded in 'The Montgomery Manuscripts' written by William Montgomery, grandson of Sir Hugh

Montgomery. It includes what is believed to be the earliest literary reference to potatoes in Ireland referring to 1606:

“Her Ladyship [Jane Shaw, Sir Hugh's wife] had also farms at Greyabbey and Coiner [Comber], as well as at Newtown, both to supply new-comers and her house; and she easily got men for plough and barn, for which she gave them grass and so much grain per annum, and an house and garden-plat to live on, and some land for flax and potatoes”

It is the area of the Hamilton Lands and the Montgomery Lands, including Comber, Greyabbey and Newtownards where New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies are still grown. The historical link with the original plantation venture is evident in that there are still a number of Hamilton's growing New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies.

Comber and the surrounding area has been synonymous with growing potatoes ever since. In 1837, an Ordnance Survey memoir stated that Comber's agriculture 'consists of corn, grass, potatoes and flax'

Under Comber *Basset's County Down – A Guide and Directory* (1886) records: “Flax, potatoes and oats are the chief crops. Every Tuesday there is a market for potatoes, hay and straw, and turnips”

The town of Comber is promoted as the home of the Comber potato and is described as being located in the heart of potato growing country.

Restaurants across Northern Ireland promote New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies on their menu, as they are the first local potatoes to be available each year.

New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies have a unique and widely known reputation for their flavour across the whole of Northern Ireland (and beyond) and so command higher prices when they are available. Such is the demand from local consumers to know when New Season Comber Potatoes/Comber Earlies are available, that local press report when the first potatoes are delivered to retailers.

Jim Shannon, Northern Ireland Assembly MLA:

“Growing up in this area I always remember the excitement around the time of the year that the new potatoes were being harvested

For me even as a young boy a plate of new potatoes with a bit of butter was just lovely”

Danny Millar, Great British Menu Finalist:

“I use Comber potatoes in my restaurant as they have a unique taste and quality which speaks for itself”.

4.7 Inspection body:

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4.8 Labelling:

Each box or bag of potatoes is marked with a plant health identification number issued by the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for Northern Ireland which is specific to individual farms as specified at section 4.4.

Traditionally, the product is also known locally as ‘Comber Earlies’ and may be marketed as such. Labelling must include either the term ‘New Season Comber Potatoes’ or ‘Comber Earlies’.