

Vidalia Onions- the sweet gift from Georgia

I must admit that Vidalia Onions are my version of a chocolate fix. Until recently with an extended season, I anxiously anticipated the arrival of these sweet beauties towards the end of each April- another sign of spring to Northerners, a sign of 6 months of air conditioning to us southerners. Vidalia onions are the "apple" of Georgia farmers, both in similar taste and popularity and like a great apple; Vidalia onions make the perfect side dish as a pie. A bit pricier because of their sweetness (higher water and sugar content) Vidalia onions bruise easier so must be harvested by hand.

Since many of gourmets prefer to buy large quantities of these delicious onions, proper storage is essential.

Vidalia onions may be refrigerated, wrapped separately in paper towels or newspaper. You can also use panty hose. In the leg of clean, sheer pantyhose, tie a knot between each Vidalia onion and cut the knot when you want one. Hang in a cool, dry ventilated area.

Vidalia onions may also be frozen but should be used for cooking only since the texture is changed once they are frozen. The best use of a Vidalia onion, however, is in its raw state. To bring out the freshest flavor and sweetness, refrigerate an unpeeled onion for one hour before serving.

While Vidalia onions have become a specialty item during its prime season of April to late summer, nothing speaks to the sweetness as a crispy onion ring atop a grilled cheeseburger or flat iron steak. A simple trick is to cut thick slices and soak them in buttermilk that has a few splashes of hot sauce. Toss in seasoned flour and fry in clean vegetable oil. Do not be afraid to serve something as simple as a Vidalia onions sandwich. The chill from refrigerating the onion will add to its sweetness, layer with crisp iceberg lettuce and a thick slice from a beefsteak tomato, season with kosher salt and fresh ground pepper and top with a small amount of Russian dressing or mayonnaise. This may be perhaps the one time I think that white bread works best.

Looking for a notch up? Try adding a few slices of crisp apple wood smoked bacon and sliced hard boiled egg to your sandwich.

This recipe is my spin on an old classic onion pie. You may substitute sharp white cheddar for gruyere.

VIDALIA ONION PIE

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1 1/2 cups finely crushed buttery crackers (such as Ritz crackers)

6 tablespoons (3/4 stick) unsalted butter, room temperature

2 cups thinly sliced Vidalia onions or other sweet onions

3/4 cups half and half (do not use low-fat or nonfat)

2 eggs

1 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon freshly ground white pepper

3/4 cup packed grated gruyere cheese

Paprika

Fresh chopped chives

Preheat oven to 350°F. Mix crackers and 4 tablespoons butter in bowl until well blended. Press mixture on bottom and 1 inch up sides of 8-inch pie plate.

Melt remaining 2 tablespoons butter in heavy medium skillet over medium heat. Add onions and sauté until tender, about 10 minutes. Season with salt and ground pepper. Arrange onions in cracker crust. Beat milk, eggs and salt in medium bowl until blended.. Pour egg mixture over onions in crust. Sprinkle cheese over filling. Sprinkle with paprika.

Bake pie until knife inserted into center comes out clean, about 30-40 minutes. Garnish with chopped chives and serve.

Serves 6.