

## Taste Tests Prove It: U.S. Peanuts Are Tops

Imagine you've just sampled an ounce of chopped peanuts. You chew them between your molars and savor the taste. Were they peanuty? Were they sweet? These are just a couple of the 18 attributes that 300 European peanut consumers were asked to rate after tasting peanut samples from three different countries. The purpose of the taste test was to determine the European consumers' responses to samples of peanuts grown in Argentina, China, and the United States.

Timothy H. Sanders, research leader of the ARS Market Quality and Handling Research Unit in Raleigh, North Carolina, coordinated the project, which is called the European Peanut Consumer Research Study. The findings will be used as a marketing tool for U.S. peanut exporters.

To eliminate any bias in the samples used in the test, a commercial expert panel, highly trained in taste analysis, rated the flavor quality of about 20 samples from each of the three countries. Then, three samples—one high quality, one medium quality, and one low quality—were selected from each country for use in the consumer taste test.

The Europeans who later participated in the 2-day test were selected based on their answers during telephone screenings and from questionnaires they'd completed. One of the criteria was that they be regular buyers and consumers of peanuts or peanut products.

"The data showed that there would be virtually no likelihood of consumer complaints about the flavor of U.S. peanuts," said Sanders. But European consumers would likely identify about 70 percent of Chinese lots and 40 percent of Argentine lots as problematic, the data showed.

"The largest U.S. export market is Europe. So we conducted the taste tests with 100 peanut consumers from each of three cities—London, Berlin, and Amsterdam," says Sanders. About 4.1 billion pounds of peanuts were produced by U.S. growers during the 2003-2004 marketing year. Of that, about 12.5 percent—516 million pounds—were exported.

The effort aids the U.S. peanut industry by providing overseas buyers of U.S. peanuts with information to support their current purchase levels and to develop future buyers.

In June of this year, Sanders traveled to Berlin for the largest snack and peanut trade show event in Europe—SNACKEX. He presented the consumer taste-test findings to snack-trade manufacturers, importers, exporters, suppliers, distributors, and brokers.

"The reason we're presenting this data in Europe is to assure international buyers that although U.S. peanuts come at a premium price, they also come as a premium product," says Sanders. —By **Rosalie Marion Bliss**, ARS.

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## Flax Fiber Has New International Standards

Flax fiber went out of vogue in the United States when the cotton gin was introduced, vaulting cotton ahead of one of the first crops domesticated by man. Linen—cloth made from flax fiber—was used to wrap mummies in early Egyptian tombs.

Flax is currently grown here for its seed, linseed, mostly in North Dakota. But a market for flax fiber has been difficult to establish, partly because there weren't any standards in place to govern its quality.

That is being changed.

Scientists with the Agricultural Research Service (ARS) and several universities have established quality standards for fineness, color, and cleanliness. "Standards are useful to assure uniform quality and performance," says microbiologist Danny E. Akin, of the ARS Quality Assessment Research Unit in Athens, Georgia. "Since natural fibers, such as flax/linen, are by their nature variable, standards are particularly useful for manufacturers of textiles and composites. Standards tell them how to set equipment for optimal production, which affects efficiency and product quality, and how to best use available resources."

Akin chairs the ASTM International subcommittee "Flax and Linen," which is responsible for establishing the standards for flax fibers. ASTM International, originally known as the American Society for Testing and Materials, was formed more than a century ago, and is one of the largest voluntary-standards-development organizations in the world.

Four standards have been developed since 2002. The first, "Standard Terminology Relating to Flax and Linen," reduces confusion and ambiguity when discussing the fiber. "Standard Test Method for Color Measurement of Flax Fiber" was the first standard to characterize fiber properties. Next came "Standard Test Method for Assessing Clean Flax Fiber Fineness" and "Standard Test Method for the Measurement of Shives in Retted Flax."

These standards set the stage for flax to expand into the manufacturing or medical arenas. For instance, flax composites could be used as lighter, environmentally friendly replacements for glass in cars. Some major car manufacturers have expressed interest in such a product. And short flax fibers can be blended with cotton or other fibers to make medical products such as bandages. —By **Sharon Durham**, ARS.

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