

A photograph of David Claiborne, a man wearing a cap and a dark shirt, sitting on a red International tractor in a field. The tractor has a yellow tank and the word 'INTERNATIONAL' and 'FARRELL 140' on it. The background shows a line of trees under a clear sky.

David Claiborne, Noonday, Texas, is shown here on a tractor cultivating a field of sweet onions. Locals claim the "Noonday" onion has "the most unique taste in the world." About 20 farms grow "Noondays," a certified variety, along with other vegetables, south of Tyler, Texas, in Smith County.

David Claiborne....

Noonday Onions Are Known for Their Unique Taste

By Andrew Hind

Noonday, Texas, is a small town with a big reputation within the world of onion-growing. This community of just 515 people, located south or Tyler in Smith County, is said to be home of the sweetest onion in the world, the nationally-famed Noonday Onion.

David Claiborne is passionate about this sweet onion. For two decades he's pinned the fortunes of his farm largely on its appeal and currently serves as vice-president of the Noonday Onion Growers Association (NOGA).

Unique tasting onion

"The Noonday Onion is a special onion," he explains. "It's a sweet onion known for its unique taste. To be a Noonday Onion, it must be grown in the fertile soils within a 10-mile radius of Noonday."

A relatively young variety, the Noonday Onion was developed about 30 years ago in the early 1980s almost by accident. "Several farmers here in East Texas started experimenting with growing yellow onions and soon discovered that they had the proper type of sandy soil to produce a sweet onion. They began selling their crops along the side of the road and word got it. The onion grew in popularity, more farmers began to grow it, and the rest is history.

Today, the Noonday Onion is a certified sweet onion here in Texas," explains Claiborne.

The onion became so popular that at one time there were 45-50 members of the NOGA... Since this peak, the numbers have dropped so that there is now about 20-member farms. Claiborne explains that the drop in membership is no reflection on the appeal of the onion itself—which, indeed, is more widespread than ever—but largely due to the evolution in agriculture that has seen smaller farms swallowed up by larger, corporate operations. This is especially the case in East Texas, where many farms have traditionally been small plots (known locally as "trunk" farms).

Claiborne's family has its roots in these small 'trunk' farms. He's the third generation of his family to make his living from the bounty of the soil. "It's something bred into an individual. I'm a lifetime farmer, following in the footsteps of my dad and granddad. We have a saying down here in Texas: 'farming gets in your blood'. That's how it was for me as well," Claiborne says in his thick, Texas drawl.

First established as a tomato operation

Beginning as a tomato grower on a farm south of Noonday, he took note of the famed

Noonday Onion about a decade ago and decided to experiment with the crop by putting half an acre under cultivation. Claiborne admits he didn't see positive results initially: "I wasn't good at it at first. It takes time to learn how to grow a great onion," he explains.

But he saw the potential in the Noonday Onion and wanted to be a part of what he was certain would be a bright future for it. Looking back now, Claiborne is glad he stuck with it.

From a modest half-acre under cultivation, selling his harvest along the roadside, he now has 30-40 acres of onions per year now. He still has a roadside stand, but also sells at the Tyler Farmers Market (which he serves as president) and in regional supermarkets (such as Brookshire's, Central Market and HEB stores). The Noonday Onion is primarily popular in Texas, but is also marketed in Oklahoma, Arkansas and Louisiana. That's just the beginning: Claiborne has ambitious plans to expand the market nation-wide. His new website will debut this spring and enable him to ship anywhere in the United States.

But while Claiborne looks to the future with enthusiasm and confidence, he knows first-hand that nothing is a certainty when it comes to farming.



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"Farming is a gamble because there are so many variables we don't have much control over," he explains, thinking back to the disastrous 2011 spring that saw farmers in East Texas lose as much as 50 percent of their onion crop. "The last couple of years have been really dry, and since onions like water we've had to adapt to drip irrigation or risk losing our harvest. Below average winter temperatures are bad for onions as well. But we've also had problems with a nasty little thing called thrips. This insect has created difficulties throughout the region. Thankfully, things are looking real good this year."

Claiborne, like all area farmers, planted in December and watched anxiously as the onions developed over the next 4-and-a-half months. Thankfully, the weather this winter has been near-ideal for onion development: cool, with temperatures in the 40s and 50s, and with lots of rain. Cured onions mature in mid-May. In a good, high-yield year 60 onions per bushel and 240 bushels per acre can be harvested.

Grows other crops

But while Claiborne anticipates a great season, many East Texas farms don't depend solely on onions for a living. Most also grow watermelons, squash and—like Claiborne—tomatoes to help supplement their income. It's necessary to help survive years when nature works against them.

Claiborne is sanguine about the realities of farming, the opportunities and the challenges. He knows it's a lifestyle not for everyone as it requires patience, determination and, most importantly, resilience. The experiences of his father and grandfather before him have helped prepare Claiborne for whatever comes his way.

"I appreciate that previous generations of farmers had it more difficult than me. Farming was a manual operation back then, without mechanization and modern technology," he says. "But, in some ways, things are the same. We're

still dependent on the weather for our success. Onion farming in particular is little-changed. It's still largely hands-on for harvesting and sorting because onions should be handled carefully."

The one thing Claiborne anticipates to see changed in the near future is the popularity and availability of the Noonday Onion beyond its traditionally range. Already considered regionally to be the 'world's sweetest onion', the lifetime farmer believes word will soon spread across America. And he wants to be at the forefront. 🍅