What’s Wrong with Kirby Cukes?

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It all started with an e-mail. “What's wrong with Kirby cukes?”, demanded a Rutgers faculty member to a general inquiry e-mail distribution list at Rutgers.

The concern was that late last Fall, all of the small pickling cucumbers that could be found in several groceries were covered with small, water-soaked pits or lesions and would decay before they could be eaten.

Jack and I responded with a few suggestions that started a dialog about the Kirby name, but mostly lamented the lack of proper post-harvest handling of pickling cucumbers. Jack happened to work on a pickle farm in Cumberland County in his youth. He recalled the days when early season fresh market prices were high, that he would sort cukes otherwise heading to the Vlassic pickle factory in Delaware, pack them into baskets and deliver them to the Philadelphia Produce Terminal Market to be sold fresh. In that fresh market trade, they were called ‘Kirbies’, which in fact, is a misnomer.

My research led to an online article at Practically Edible (Kirby Cucumbers. Published 02/18/2005. Updated 09/04/2007. Web Retrieved 11/11/2010 from http://www.practicallyedible.com/edible.nsf/pages/kirbycucumbers). It turns out that about ninety years ago, Norval E. Kirby developed several improved varieties of small, thin-skinned cukes for pickling. If you find an occasional reference in heirloom seed catalogs to the likes of Black Diamond, D. and B. Special, Dark Green, Dark Green Slicer, Earliest Black Diamond, Green Pack, Kirby’s Stays Green, Stay Green or Sunny South, then you’ve found one of Kirby’s varieties. Though they were replaced in commercial production in only about ten years by the National Pickling Cucumber variety, the Kirby moniker stuck to pickling cukes diverted to the fresh produce trade.

Today, when someone is looking for a Kirby cucumber, they’re referring to a pickling type sold fresh, i.e. before they are brined. Pickling cucumbers are bred to have a short, blocky shape to increase the yield of ‘chips’. They’re also bred to have a small seed cavity and a thin cuticle or skin. Those traits allow the brine to soak through the pickle more quickly. Pickling types usually have a slight to pronounced curve, often with ridges, bumps, and small black or white spurs.

In the thirty-five years he’s been farming, literally on the Atlantic-Cumberland County border, Charlie Muzzarelli Sr. told me only a couple of old timers still use the term ‘Kirby’. Though his father, Delmo, used to call them ‘Kirbies’ when he was a boy, he has always sold ‘pickles’ at the Vineland Produce Auction. Of course, I didn’t want to tell him that his wife, Rita, was the only person I had ever heard use the term, which is why I stopped at their farm when our colleague sent out that e-mail asking about his Kirbies.

As for those pitted lesions causing his concern, it turns out that thinner skin allows the pickling brine to soak in easier, but it’s not tough enough to take the rough handling and cold storage to get it to grocers’ shelves. Pickling cucumber varieties are bred to be picked fairly immature and to be packed in brine as soon as possible after harvesting with minimal handling. To get to the fresh market, they are

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Tip: Buy pickling cucumbers very fresh, very young (immature), and store them in some kind of shrink wrap, cello, or bag to prevent desiccation.

Cukes not making the grade:  
Knobs usually have one end larger than the other due to poor pollination. Crooks are too crooked, almost curled. These off-grades may go to other markets or to a pickle broker (who sends them to the processor), and otherwise inedible ones go back to the field to be turned back into the soil.

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washed, dried, sorted, packed into baskets, boxes or crates, shipped to market and put on display. At every step, they are bumped and/or squeezed which can cause bruising. To add insult to injury, cucumbers should not be stored below 50°F, but most refrigerated storage in the fresh produce chain is set closer to 40°F which causes cold injury. Also, for potential brining by the consumer, pickles are not waxed like regular slicing cucumbers, further exacerbating desiccation in the fresh market chain.

Charlie said he’s never heard any complaints about post-harvest problems, which further supports the thought that the further from the grocery the more likely there will be either cold/desiccation/bruising damage. Regardless, a pickling cuke destined for wholesale undergoes a lot of handling. After going over the washing/grading line, they’re dumped almost two feet into a bushel basket (research has shown a drop more than 8” will cause bruising on a potato), a top layer is neatly arranged, and then a lid is squeezed on tight to reduce potential bounce bruising in transit (and give the buyers that ‘full’ package they demand), but there can be a whole lot of crushing within and between those stacked bushels.

Pickling cucumbers sold direct at local farm markets are more likely to be in top notch condition. The time between harvest and sale is less, as is the distance transported, not to mention they don’t undergo the rigorous packing for wholesale markets.

If you prefer a crispy pickler, a ‘Kirby’, for your salads more than a standard slicing cucumber and the quality at the local grocery is lacking, Jack says the best bet is to get them straight from farmers, like Charlie and Rita Muzzarelli, as soon after harvest as possible and before they get too banged upon the way to the store. If that’s not possible, he also recommends searching for a farmer or store selling Israeli Beit Alpha cucumbers. Usually sold five on a plastic wrapped tray and about four inches long, they look like miniature Dutch greenhouse cucumbers. Developed and grown for decades in Israel, the Beit Alpha cucumber is parthenocarpic, requiring no pollination and producing no seeds. In Jack’s words, they “are some of the tastiest on this earth.” Luckily for cucumber fanciers, American farmers have recently started to grow them too.

Rick Van Vranken also shared this information with his listening audience in his Facts from the Farm radio broadcast on Ed Hitzel’s ‘Table for One’ Radio Show – WOND 1400 AM in Atlantic County.