

By Joe Link

# Where cabbage is king

*People in Upstate New York take great pride in their favorite crop*

**L**ike any farmer, Ed Hansen worries about the weather. But rain—neither too much nor not enough—isn't his concern this first week of August. Temperatures are at 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and that's not good for Hansen's 600 acres of cabbage.

Harvest is in full swing, and Hansen, his family, and migrant workers are moving quickly to get the cabbage out of the field and into a cooler to chill at 33 degrees F. It stays there 18 to 48 hours, loaded onto "reefers"—slang for refrigerated trucks—and shipped off.



"I see these trucks roll out and wonder, 'Who's eating all of this cabbage?'" Hansen says with a laugh.

Years ago, in the area south of Rochester, N.Y., most of the crop went to make sauerkraut, and although sauerkraut consumption is down, someone is indeed eating all of this cabbage. ♦

► **Large photo:** Thanks to good soils and cool temperatures, cabbage is a significant crop in western Upstate New York. ► **Left:** Ed Hansen's concern for food safety means every head of cabbage is handled with sanitized gloves.





►**Above:** Field workers harvest cabbage as gently as possible, putting them into large boxes before cooling, storage, and shipping.



►**Above:** The Sauerkraut Festival parade includes plenty of young princes and princesses, kings and queens. ►**Right:** First-place winner of the festival's cabbage decorating contest.

It goes into grocery stores for fresh sales, is processed into coleslaw, and is shredded to make egg rolls. (Hansen has heard that Long Island alone uses 300,000 pounds per week for egg rolls.) Cabbage growers plant different varieties for all of these products. Egg rolls, for instance, require a denser, whiter variety that contains less water. For sauerkraut, the cabbage heads are huge, weighing up to 20 pounds.

Anything this labor intensive requires excellent workers, and Hansen maintains that he has some of the best.

But always foremost in mind, is food safety. Hansen Farms has one employee who mostly focuses on only that, scouting the fields for wildlife waste, and ensuring all field workers wash their hands, wear gloves, and sanitize their stainless steel knives.

Hansen knows that one food safety slipup could mean the end of his farm. He's seen it happen. "If someone gets sick from our cabbage and they trace it back here, we're in trouble," says Hansen, noting the much-reported listeria outbreak from melons that eventually pushed a Colorado farm into bankruptcy. "It hit home," he says. "I thought, what if they'd said 'Hansen Farms.'"

When trailers arrive from the field, each box of cabbage is coded so that it can quickly be traced back to the field of origin should there ever be a problem.

There may be fewer sauerkraut processing plants these days, but the enthusiasm for this traditional food hasn't diminished, especially in the town of Phelps, N.Y., population 2,000. Every first weekend in August, the town holds its Sauerkraut Festival. If it sounds a little odd, use your imagination: Think of all the ways you can have fun with a head of cabbage.

The cabbage-head decorating contest gives children with wild imaginations an excuse to stick anything and every-

thing in the heads for ears, nose, mouth, and hair. At the cabbage bowling area, children knock pins down with—yes, heads of cabbage. (It's harder than you'd think; cabbage definitely doesn't roll straight.) Hungry and brave? Then enter the sauerkraut-eating contest. And if you have a really good sauerkraut recipe, bring your dish to the cooking contest. Expect to see some sauerkraut cakes which, sources say, can actually be pretty good.

On Saturday, the community closes down Highway 96, the busy downtown thoroughfare, to hold the Sauerkraut Festival parade. It brings in fire departments, scout troops, marching bands, and muscle cars from all over. Have a cement or propane company? Wash your trucks and get a place in the parade and give your business a boost. Truckers, rather than taking their rigs through the detours in neighborhoods, just park for a while. "I've been through here before during this," says one trucker taking a break. "It's good to see a small town having fun. But they obviously take their sauerkraut seriously." ■



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