



POLSKA...
tastes good!

Fruit and Vegetables Risk-Free



IJHARS

Food sold in Poland is constantly monitored by several different institutions; among other things, they check whether European Union quality requirements for fresh fruit and vegetables are enforced.

The panic caused by the EHEC bacteria in Germany and unconfirmed reports about the sources of the deadly infection has led to a significant drop in the sales of foodstuffs and especially vegetables in many countries of Europe. The crisis has also affected Polish farmers, who estimate their losses at more than zł.100 million. It did not even help that Agriculture Minister Marek Sawicki repeated many times that Polish fruit and vegetables were healthy and safe and were being checked by Poland's inspection services on a continuous basis. The institutions whose task is to make sure that food sold to Polish consumers is safe are: the Chief Sanitary Inspectorate, the Trade Inspectorate, as well as the Agricultural and Food Quality Inspection, the Veterinary Inspection, and Main Inspectorate of Plant Health and Seed Inspection, which are overseen by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. Among other things, they monitor whether fresh fruit and vegetables fulfill Polish and EU quality requirements.

The aim of defining marketing quality standards for fresh fruit and vegetables for direct consumption is to help eliminate products of poor quality from the market. Also, the availability of products of different quality, that is belonging to different quality classes, helps increase competitiveness and enables farmers to get better prices for higher-quality produce, which improves production profitability.

The first quality standards applied to fresh fruit and vegetables sold within the European Community were developed in the 1960s, on the basis of earlier initiatives by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN/ECE). For almost 60 years, experts from 56 countries meeting regularly in the Specialized Section on Standardization of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables of the UN/ECE Working Party on Agricultural Quality Standards have been setting down and modifying marketing standards for various fruit and vegetables in accordance with the expectations of producers, traders and consumers on international markets. Though these standards are not obligatory, they are used or serve as the basis for national standards in many countries.

Up to June 30, 2009, under the regulations of the Common Organization of Agricultural Markets, the EU had separate regulations setting down the requirements for 36 products from the fruit and vegetable sector. These standards defined the minimal requirements for a product to be able to be traded on the market - it had to be whole, healthy, clean, free of disease and pests, properly ripe, and also fulfill more detailed requirements regarding quality, size, shape, presentation and packaging labels. Depending on what kind of defects, serious or less so, were present, such as cuts, bruises, stains on the peel or misshaping, products were placed in one of two or three quality classes.

These standards applied to watermelons, avocados, eggplants, Brussels sprouts, peaches and nectarines, onions, zucchini, chicory, sweet and sour cherries, garlic, beans, peas in pods, pears, apples, cauliflowers, cabbage, artichokes, kiwi fruit, carrots, melons, apricots, cucumbers, hazelnuts, walnuts, citrus fruits, bell peppers, button mushrooms, tomatoes, leeks, lettuce and endive, celery, asparagus, spinach, plums, strawberries and table grapes.

As part of its reform of the fruit sector, the European Commission decided to reduce the number of detailed marketing standards from 36 to 10 for the main and important products being traded within and outside the EU. At the same time, a new General Marketing Standard was introduced for all the other products. The new regulations have been in force as of July 1, 2009.

Detailed standards are in place for the following fresh fruit and vegetables: apples, citrus fruits, kiwi fruit, table grapes, peaches and nectarines, pears, strawberries, lettuce including endive (including curly endive and broad-leaved endive), bell peppers, tomatoes. These standards contain detailed requirements divided into six sections setting down the regulations as to quality, size, acceptable tolerance, presentation and labeling of the different products. Lists of varieties are attached to the standards for apples, pears and table grapes. As in the case of the general standard, the packaging has to feature the name of the product's country of origin.

The general marketing standard, on the other hand, encompasses all the species from the fruit and vegetable sector not included in the detailed standards. If a seller of fresh fruit and vegetables subject to the general standard is able to prove their compatibility with any binding standard adopted by the UN/ECE, such fruit and vegetables can be recognized as meeting the general marketing standard. The GMS specifies the minimal requirements of quality and ripeness without any division into classes, and its aim is to make sure that produce on the market is healthy, properly ripe and of adequate marketing quality.

Based on a European Commission regulation from 2007, EU member countries are obliged to conduct inspections of fresh fruit and vegetables at all stages of market trade, i.e. to control imports from third countries, to control exports to third countries and to control products on the community market. To fulfill these tasks, each member country establishes its own inspection services.

In Poland, based on the law on the organization of fruit and vegetable markets, the hops market, the tobacco market and the dried fodder market, the task of monitoring the marketing quality of fresh fruit and vegetables as required by EU regulations has been entrusted to the Agricultural and Food Quality Inspection (IJHARS). This body conducts inspections checking compliance with the fresh fruit and vegetable marketing standards on the internal market, at the point of export, at the point of import, and also runs a database of traders bringing fresh fruit and vegetables to the market. IJHARS inspections check compliance with the requirements of the detailed marketing standards and the general standard. A.R.



Polish Seasonal Fruit Valued at Home and Abroad

Poland is a major European player as far as the production and export of fruit is concerned. Seasonal fruit, plentiful in summer and early fall, is especially popular with consumers.

According to the Central Statistical Office (GUS), over the past few years the consumption of fruit in Poland has been steady, about 55 kg per person a year. Polish people eat about 80 percent domestically grown fruit and 20 percent imported fruit, most of which is citrus fruit and bananas. Of local fruit, Polish consumers most often eat apples (about 30 percent of consumption), followed by pears, plums and berries. Polish fruit is appreciated not only here but all over the world, in particular for its unique flavor and aroma, the result of traditional cultivation methods and the use of optimal amounts of pesticides. People describe it as “tasty, clean, organic.”

Fruit is extremely good for our health. It has the most nutritional value when eaten freshly picked.

Strawberries, for example, are an excellent source of vitamin C and A and vitamins from the B group. They also contain potassium, iron, magnesium, calcium and manganese. They reduce blood pressure and help reduce the level of bad cholesterol. Sour cherries contain large amounts of fruit acids, pectin (a kind of fiber), manganese, a little iron, calcium and iodine. They are a good source of potassium and quite a good source of vitamin C. Sour cherries stabilize the heart and protect the body from circulatory diseases. They are also good for the skin and contain substances that help prevent cancer.

Sweet cherries have more iodine as well as calcium and iron than sour cherries, despite the latter popularly being considered healthier. They also contain sizable amounts of vitamin A, C and those from the B group as well as flavonoids. Sweet cherries neutralize free radicals and therefore slow down aging of the skin. They remove toxins and harmful products of metabolism from the body. Raspberries are a great source of vitamin C and fiber. They contain a little calcium and iron, vitamin E and folic acid, and also salicylic acid. Raspberries also help remove toxins from the body, are good for treating indigestion and diarrhea. Raspberry juice alleviates coughing when you have a cold. It also helps warm you up.

Currants, which are very popular in Poland, have anti-inflammatory properties. They contain a lot of flavonoids, pectin and vitamin C. Black currants have three times more vitamin C than red currants—half a cup of these satisfies the body’s daily demand for this vitamin. Black-currant skin contains antibacterial substances effective in combating the E. coli bacteria that can cause intestinal problems. Gooseberries are also anti-inflammatory and strengthen the immune system as well. They improve digestion, speed up the metabolism, and thanks to their diuretic properties also remove harmful products of metabolism from the body. Blueberries are also good for you, as they contain vitamin A, C, PP and B vitamins as

well as many valuable elements, to mention selenium, zinc and copper. They are a good source of folic acid, phytoestrogens and flavonoids. They contain lots of fiber, neutralize free radicals, kill viruses and bacteria, reduce the level of bad cholesterol. They contain substances that make the blood vessels more flexible and take part in the production of red blood cells.

Apples are very healthy fruit. They are a good source of vitamin C, contain a lot of potassium, iron, magnesium, copper, silicon, zinc, beta-carotene, quercetin and lots of pectin. Apples slow down the progress of circulatory diseases and cancer and also seal the blood vessels. Apples increase resistance to infections, so they should be eaten by people prone to colds. They are effective at removing toxins and cholesterol from the body. They have a positive effect on the nails, skin and hair.

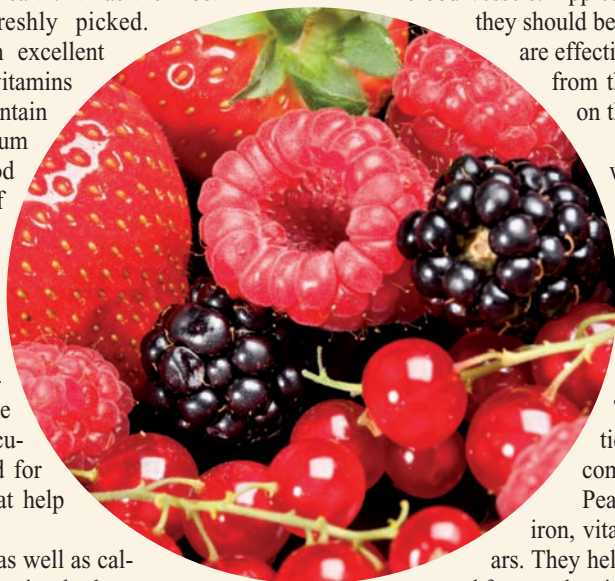
Plums are a rich source of pectin as well as containing organic acids, flavonoids, vitamin A and E, a little vitamin C, B vitamins, magnesium, iron, phosphorus and calcium. Substances contained in plums neutralize the negative effect of free radicals, so they can help prevent atherosclerosis and heart disease. They are recommended for constipation. Dried plums (prunes) and prune compote also have laxative properties.

Pears contain a lot of potassium, fiber, iron, vitamin C and quite a lot of simple sugars. They help regulate blood pressure, so they are good for people with hypertension. They stimulate digestion and peristalsis, helping treat constipation.

The health and nutrition benefits of fresh fruit mean that their role in the Polish diet is growing. Polish consumers’ improving eating habits are also the result of the fact that Poland has been a European leader in fruit production for many years. The production structure is dominated by apples (over 70 percent of the domestic fruit market and 24-25 percent of total EU production), followed by currants and sour cherries (6 percent each of the Polish market). As far as sour cherries are concerned, Poland is the EU’s biggest producer and one of the leading ones in the world. Poland enjoys a similar position in the production of soft/berry fruits, especially strawberries and raspberries, of which Poland is one of the biggest suppliers to EU countries.

It is not EU countries that are they biggest buyers of Polish fruit, however. In 2010 Poland exported 917,500 metric tons of fruit worth 369.3 million euros. The vast majority—78 percent—of this fruit ended up in the Commonwealth of Independent States. This is the direction in which Polish producers sent more than 243,000 tons of fruit in the first quarter of this year, of which more than 214,000 tons were Polish apples. In the same period, Polish fruit exports to the EU stood at just over 18,000 tons.

A.R.



Regional and Traditional Products

Kashubian Strawberries

The first Polish fruit to enjoy protection under European Union law is the Kashubian strawberry (*truskawka kaszubska* in Polish, *kaszebskô malena* in Kashubian). Its name was registered in November 2009 as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) in the EU.

The Kashubian strawberry comes in different shapes: round-conical or round-kidney shaped. Its longitudinal cross section is heart-shaped, when cut across it is round. The early-harvest fruit is large or medium-sized. The skin color is dark red, consistent across the whole surface, slightly glossy, and the flesh is bright red when cut. The fruit is firm, slightly hard but also juicy. It is covered in a silky, very thin skin on which pips are visible. Kashubian strawberries are sweet and aromatic. Because of the conditions in which they ripen, Kashubian strawberries stand out from varieties grown in other regions due to their higher sugar content. This is the result of the special microclimate of the Kashubian Lake District, and particularly the daily temperature fluctuations—cool nights and scorching days.

Kashubian strawberries are produced in Kartuzy, Kościerzyna and Bytów counties in Pomerania province, and in the communes of Przywidz, Wejherowo, Luzino, Szemud, Linia, Łęczyce and Cewice. Only the following varieties may be sold as Kashubian strawberries: Senga Sengana, Elsanta, Honeoye that have been graded as Extra or Class I.

It is not quite clear how strawberries arrived in Kashubia, but we do know they appeared there in the early 20th century. It is also a fact that the area on which they were grown increased with every year. The taste and popularity of the strawberries led more and more farmers to grow them. Strawberry fields kept expanding for over half a century until they became a permanent part of the Kashubian landscape. It was this proliferation that led the locals to establish and organize the Strawberry Picking Festival. This is an outdoor event held since 1971 on the first Sunday of July on Złota Góra (Golden Hill) near Brodnica Górna. The popularity of the festival is reflected in the number of people who take part in what is the biggest event in the region. Estimates put the number of participants at 30,000 in 2002, growing to about 40,000 in 2004 and

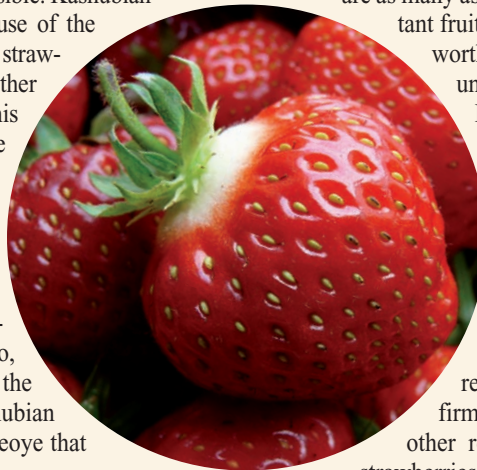
2005. During just one day in 2005, almost 2 metric tons of strawberries were sold at the Strawberry Picking Festival. Many different contests are held during the event, some connected with strawberries, to mention the best strawberry cake contest and a competition for a “strawberry epigram.”

The reputation of the Kashubian strawberry is confirmed by numerous articles and facts demonstrating that it has become a part of the culture and identity of local residents. The local press publishes information about general meetings of the Kashubian Association of Strawberry Growers, about a plan for the association to have a logo featuring Kashubian motifs and so on. The unique character and popularity of the Kashubian strawberry is also reflected in the volume of strawberries grown in the region. There are as many as 1,500 plantations, making this a very important fruit for the regional economy. In particular, it is worth noting the efforts of strawberry growers to unite and act together in matters involving the Kashubian strawberry, including measures to preserve its quality and flavor.

The attitude of buyers (businesses running cold storage facilities and processing plants) also reflects the reputation enjoyed by the Kashubian strawberry, as they set aside reserve capacity to accommodate this fruit, taking into account that it is available later than strawberries from other regions of Poland. This reputation is also confirmed by attempts to market strawberries from other regions, which ripen earlier, as Kashubian strawberries.

The quality of Kashubian strawberries is closely linked to the areas where they are grown. The poor soil and harsh climate of the Kashubian Lake District delays the time of flowering and shortens the growing season. The diverse postglacial land forms with numerous ponds and ribbon lakes are conducive to strawberry growing and facilitate effective watering. Exposure to natural factors, in particular the tough climate, has a positive impact on the formation and ripening of the strawberries, while the very poor soil and unfavorable farming conditions are unsuitable for other crops. The big variations in relative altitude enable strawberries to be grown on slopes exposed to sunlight, ensuring proper ripening of the fruit. All this coupled with slightly acidic soils makes Kashubia the perfect place to grow strawberries.

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About Food Safety

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The recent dioxin scandal and the current problems with the *E. coli* bacterium have highlighted the importance of food quality safety. Food safety is, obviously, a much broader topic. Another question is how to ensure sufficient quantities of food. We must not forget that research and demographic forecasts indicate that three decades from now the world will have to double the volume of food production.

The commotion over the particularly toxic *E. coli* strain is an example of how irresponsible statements can cause chaos. Food inspection services in Germany clearly got lost in what they were doing. First, they advised the public about the *E. coli* threat too late and then, lacking solid and unambiguous evidence backed by research, they came forward with very serious accusations. That was a scandalous attitude and statements from German food inspection officials and some politicians triggered a panic on markets, further fueled by the media.

The above shows how important it is to feel responsible for the consequences of one's words. Completely unjustified actions made consumers anxious and caused farmers who grow vegetables across the EU, Poland included, to incur tremendous losses. Polish farmers have been losing up to zł.10 million each day and as of June 10, the panic, combined with the Russian embargo on imports of fresh vegetables from the EU, has cost them over zł.160 million. These losses cannot be fully compensated for.

Meanwhile, Polish food—including Polish fruit and vegetables, of course—is perfectly safe. As they meet EU standards, obtain direct payments and benefit from EU aid under the Rural Development Program, Polish farmers conform with all EU requirements and norms. Food production is under supervision at all stages and it is noteworthy that Polish soils have never been overexposed to chemicals and as a result they are not degraded. Polish farmers run their farms with care for the natural environment and they respect principles of ecology. Rather than just because of agricultural and environmental norms, they do so because they love their land. It is Poland's tradition to hand arable farms down from generation to generation, hence the urge to keep farms in the best possible shape in order to make sure that the value and quality of the land remains unchanged when the children and grandchildren take it over.

This approach ensures very high quality of the produce that farmers deliver to the market and the food processing industry. Such are the underpinnings of Poland's success in selling food and agricultural products abroad. This is the only foreign trade segment where Poland has had a positive balance for years, and last year it totaled 2.6 billion euros. That could never happen without good produce, but agricultural products alone are, obviously, not enough. We should remember that prior to EU accession and during the first years in the EU, the Polish food and agricultural industry underwent

tremendous changes. Polish meat processing plants and dairies are nowadays among the best such facilities in the world.

Poland has excellent produce, modern food processing plants fitted with state-of-the-art technology and superb recipes that have been well tried for years. Combining it all, Polish food has been increasingly successful making its way to buyers not only in the EU, but also Asia, Arab countries and America.

To further stimulate exports of Polish food and introduce Polish and foreign consumers to top quality foods, a program called Try Fine Food (PDŻ) was launched several years ago. Participation in the program is voluntary and it is open to companies in EU member states. The Science Committee for Foodstuff Quality, a body made up of outstanding experts, has worked out very demanding criteria that food producers need to meet in order to be able to apply for the PDŻ quality stamp. Only food which meets the criteria can bear the stamp, as PDŻ is designed to help consumers make the right choices. The program also pursues one of the EU food policy's objectives which seeks to improve the quality and diversity of food on the single EU market.

The PDŻ quality stamp also aims to increase consumers' trust in food by advising them about the food's high and stable quality. The PDŻ quality stamp is granted to products for a maximum of three years at a time, which ensures high quality and a reliable origin of the ingredients.

When I think of all this and about the efficiency of Poland's inspection services in charge of animal- and plant-derived products, combined with the quality of marketed food and agricultural products, I am positive that produce from Poland not only tastes good and stands for high quality, but is also entirely safe for the consumer. Taking into consideration the losses which Polish food producers have incurred recently and which have by no means been their fault, I am planning to soon strengthen promotional campaigns for Polish fruit and vegetables in order to restore consumers' confidence in them.

