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For Immediate Release

## Best Potato Contest Draws from Across Oregon

*From the Oregon Potato Commission*

Farmers from across Oregon, retailers, researchers, professional chefs and culinary students gathered in Vancouver, Wash., Dec. 6 for the tenth annual Goodness Unearthed Best Oregon Potato Award contest.

“This is an exciting day for Oregon potatoes and a multifaceted opportunity to help tell the story that Oregon growers produce some of the best potatoes in the world,” said Gary Roth, executive director of the Oregon Potato Commission, which sponsors the contest.

In the contest, potato growers and breeders enter potatoes into one of four categories: red, yellow, russet or specialty. About a dozen chefs and culinary students prepare the potatoes and judge them on appearance, aroma, taste and texture.

“When we started this, the chefs didn’t realize there was that much difference between a russet potato or a red potato or a yellow potato,” said Dan Chin, a potato grower from the Klamath Basin and a member of the Oregon Potato Commission. “They thought a potato is a potato. Once they started this, they realized there is a big difference in varieties.”

The event was held at the Tod and Maxine McClaskey Culinary Institute at Clark Community College.

The contest is the brainchild of Chef Leif Benson, who pitched the event to the commission eleven years ago as a way to educate chefs on the multiple flavors available in potatoes.

“In the culinary world you learn two things about potatoes,” Benson said. “You learn that potatoes are either waxy or mealy. And, in the practical world, you bought a box of russet potatoes, you cooked them and that was it.

“This takes it to a whole other level,” Benson said. “When you are tasting these potatoes side-by-side, you find there are dramatic differences in the flavor, the texture, the moisture, the appearance of potatoes depending on where they are grown, how they are grown, the variety and so on.”

Chin, who has entered several winning potatoes over the years, said the contest provides multiple benefits for growers, as well.

“As a grower, we want to produce the best potatoes we can for the consumer,” Chin said. “So, as these tests roll out, you can say, ‘Well, this variety here met the high specs. It looks good, tastes good and cooks well.’ So, if it grows well in my field, it is a variety I will probably produce.”

Brian Charlton, interim director of the Klamath Basin Research and Extension Center in Klamath Falls, Ore., who was on hand Dec. 6, said the contest helps Oregon State University screen varieties in its potato breeding program.

“If at an early stage we know we have something that is off-flavor, then we can discard that instead of wasting research dollars and time to move something through the system that we know is not going to have much success,” Charlton said.

“Secondly, once we understand some of these (taste) profiles biochemically, then we can perhaps understand how those traits are passed on genetically with crosses, which can help us further refine that system,” Charlton said.

OSU potato breeder Vidyasagar Sathuvalli added that the university utilizes blind tasting in its breeding program, but the blind tasting doesn’t provide nearly the depth or sophistication of analysis of the commission’s contest.

“In our blind tasting, people say, ‘this taste’s good and this doesn’t taste good,’” said Sathuvalli. “But this contest actually breaks down quality into different categories, and chefs are the most qualified to understand flavor.”

OSU varieties, incidentally, have done quite well in recent years, winning last year for its russet variety, considered the most important category, and in the specialty potato category.

“The benefits of this contest are multifaceted,” Roth said. “There are scientific benefits. There is information sharing and consumer education about the health and wellness of potatoes. And there are the promotional aspects, where more people learn about the high quality of Oregon-grown potatoes.”

Growers and breeders now have to wait until Jan. 22, when contest winners will be announced at the Washington/Oregon Potato Conference in Kennewick, Wash. At that point, they will learn whether their potato has bragging rights for the next 12 months, and gain a little more perspective on how their potatoes stack up against the some of the best potatoes in the world.

For More Information:

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*About the Oregon Potato Commission*

*The Oregon Potato Commission was formed in 1949 to represent the state's five potato growing regions (Blue Mountain, Central Oregon, Klamath, Malheur and Willamette Valley) in educational, trade development, research, legislative affairs and public relations activities. Development of sales and markets for Oregon's potato crop is one of the Commission's roles. Programs are designed to improve Oregon's market share in- state and in other prominent West Coast markets. Export markets for processed potato products and, increasingly, fresh potatoes and raw product are also included in market development and promotional programs in the Pacific Rim and other market areas. The Commission's largest focus is on a series of ongoing research programs in cooperation with Oregon State University. The results of these programs place Oregon among the top in the United States in potato production volume and yield per acre. For more information, visit [www.OregonSpuds.com](http://www.OregonSpuds.com)*