

Popcorn



Popcorn is a specific variety of corn grown for its shape, size, starch type, and moisture content. Illinois produces around 93,288,000 pounds of popcorn seeds each year. Illinois is ranked third in the nation for popcorn production.

Not all corn will pop; popcorn has unique traits, like a thick outer shell and a strict moisture content, that allow it to do so. In the U.S., Americans consume about 14 billion quarts of popcorn. That makes about 11 gallons of popcorn per person each year!



Popcorn is a type of flint corn. When grown in a field, the plant looks very similar to dent corn, regular flint corn, and sweet corn. Popcorn is grown in 25 states. Once the kernels are popped, they form two different shapes: mushroom and butterfly. Mushroom shaped popcorn is used to make kettle corn and other flavored popcorn. Butterfly is the type you get in a microwave bag or movie theater.



Popcorn is the Illinois State Snack Food. Popcorn is said to have been around since 3000 B.C. In the early 20th century popcorn was eaten as a breakfast food. Since then it has taken over movie theatres, carnivals, holidays and even homes. The invention of the microwave and microwave popcorn changed the way Americans consumed popcorn.



Meet the Bowman Family

Pilot Knob Farm | Oneida, IL

Tell us about your farm.

We're a fifth generation family farm located just north of Pilot Knob, a local high point in Knox County that is the divide between the Illinois and Mississippi River watersheds. We grow corn, soybeans, and popcorn.

How do you sell your popcorn?

We wholesale and direct sell our popcorn. Wholesale means that we will sell our popcorn to retailers, like your favorite local grocery store, and then they sell it to customers like you. Direct selling is where we sell to customers without a grocery store—usually through our website. We're in about 900 stores nationwide, depending on the time of year.

What is your favorite way to eat popcorn?

Popcorn will always, always taste best when popped in a cooking oil under even heat, and our favorite way to enjoy our specialty popcorn is cooked in bacon grease.



How do you harvest your popcorn and get it ready to sell?

Popcorn in many ways is like its cousin, corn. We use lots of the same equipment but with different settings. For example, we set our combine harvester much more “gentle,” because we can clean dirt, husks, and crop debris from our popcorn but we cannot “un-crack” a kernel. We also use an old ear – corn picker, which harvests a portion of our popcorn crop as an entire ear from the stalk, rather than shelling the kernels off. This is like what was once done over 60 years ago on most corn farms. We do it so we can sell our ears as a healthy, microwave option. We want folks to enjoy the taste AND experience of our popcorn. That means we have to get the moisture just right (about 13%) so it pops optimally. We clean our popcorn with a gravity table and aspirator to sort the kernels by weight and clean out dust and debris from harvest. Once cleaned, we keep our popcorn in <50 degrees and <50% humidity storage to keep the quality excellent until we package and ship to stores around the country.

All photos on this page courtesy of Pilot Knob Farm