Broad beans (Vicia faba var. major) are the same species as faba, horse or Tic beans, but with a larger seed. They are also known elsewhere as “fava bean” from the Italian meaning ‘broad bean’.

Broad and faba beans are one of the oldest domesticated food legumes, having been cultivated for at least 5,000 years. Australian house-holds are most familiar with broad beans in the home garden and immature broad bean seeds they consume as a green vegetable either fresh or cooked from fresh or frozen product. The Australian broad bean industry is largely based on exporting mature, dry broad bean seeds.

Australian Industry

Australia exports dry, mature broad bean seeds graded and packed to size. Broad beans are considered a specialty crop and service overseas niche markets. The dry broad bean industry in Australia is centered in high rainfall or irrigation areas, predominantly in the Lower South-East of South Australia. Australian production is now relatively stable with its development in the early 1990’s estimated at 16,500t by Pulse Australia 2008, and expected to produce some 40,000t of dry product for processing and export.

Market requirements

Broad bean markets are very quality conscious. Grading is to size. Pricing is determined on size, uniformity of size, uniformity of appearance. Larger broad bean seeds (eg. 16mm or 45-50 seeds per 100g) often bring a premium over the smaller types (eg. 10-12mm or 90-110 seeds per 100g). Bean seeds must be light in color, have no skin blemishes and appear “fresh” in that they show a slight green tinge but not a darkened seed coat. Broad beans do darken naturally with age, and will need to be dehulled and sold as split or kibbled product if the seed coat darkens.

Global production and trade

China is the world’s leading broad bean producer (60%) of the seed. Other important production regions are western Europe, the Mediterranean, the Nile Valley, Ethiopia, Central and East Asia, Oceania and the Americas. Few countries are major exporters. International competitors to Australian broad bean grain exports include China and the United Kingdom. China is headed to being a net importer of beans.

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Peak consumption of pulses including broad beans is during Ramadan, the religious period of Islamic daylight fasting (1st September to 30th September 2008, but moves forward 11 days each year).

Health Issues

Like other pulses, broad beans are high in protein (20-30%), are low fat and a good source of dietary fibre and B complex vitamins.

For people with the rare but inherited condition of “favism”, eating undercooked faba or broad beans can lead to a serious anaemic condition.

Broad beans are high in complex carbohydrates called oligosaccharides, which may cause gas and abdominal pain.

Information provided by Wayne Hawthorne, Pulse Australia