

An Ogre Makes Onions Especially Appealing to Kids

By Hawking Vidalias, 'Shrek' Has Helped Sweeten Sales

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VIDALIA, Ga.—On a recent visit to a Thriftway supermarket near this onion-growing center, Aiden Harvill spotted a jolly green giant at a bin stuffed with Vidalia onions.

"Mama, there's Shrek," the three-year-old shouted. He then threw a tantrum until his mother plopped a bag with Shrek's image into her shopping cart.

"He never, ever eats vegetables, but when we got home, he wanted me to cook them," Elizabeth Harvill says. She diced the onions into a casserole, which Aiden gulped down. "I was astonished," Mrs. Harvill says. "It was like a toy in a cereal box."

"Shrek Forever After," the fourth Shrek movie, had a slow start at the box office before picking up steam. But in the produce section it is creating a minor sensation, by making onions popular with kids.

The movie, which has since gone on to do big business, has spawned tie-ins with companies ranging from Hewlett-Packard Co. to Bank of America. But none is as bold as the one advanced by the Vidalia Onion Committee, an association that represents 100 growers of the Vidalia, a trademarked sweet onion that is unique to south-

eastern Georgia.

The campaign, "Shrek Forever After, Vidalias Forever Sweet," was unveiled this spring in conjunction with the release of the flick and the start of the

Vidalia season, which stretches to September. The onion association's partnership with DreamWorks Animation SKG Inc. uses the movie's characters on packaging, store displays and on a website.

Through June 14, the U.S. Department of Agriculture said, farmers had shipped eight million more pounds of Vidalias than by the same date last year—though the 2010 season started two weeks later than in 2009. "We've sold more onions up to this point in the season than we ever have in the past," says Brian Stanley of Stanley Farms, a large Vidalia grower.

The third-generation onion farmer recently had to get his produce-bag supplier to fly in an emergency order of "Shrek" packaging. His onions are packed in mesh bags coated with color

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photos of the ogre Shrek, the Vidalia onions logo and the question: "What do Ogres and Onions have in common?"

The Vidalia Onion Committee has promoted with A&W root beer, to appeal to families and with Corona beer, to appeal to young adults. "My problem was how to market onions to kids. It's a lot easier when you're talk-

ing apples, strawberries and bananas," says Wendy Brannen, executive director of the Vidalia Onion Committee.

In Atlanta, Steve Langston, a food marketer who had been courting the committee, was brainstorming last summer in his office with two college students. One remembered a scene in the first Shrek movie, in which the ogre tells Donkey that "there's a lot more to ogres than people think...." Ogres are like onions, Shrek says. It's not that both might be stinky, make you cry or get all brown in the sun. Rather, it's that "we both have layers," he explains.

Mr. Langston, who has arranged tie-ins with Hollywood studios before, took the idea to Ms. Brannen, who got the go-ahead from the farmers. He took the idea to DreamWorks. "There was a natural connection between their brand and our character, since onions were rooted in Shrek's personality from the first movie," says Anne Globe, head of world-wide marketing at DreamWorks Animation. A tie-in with McDonald's Corp. backfired, after the fast-food chain had to recall glasses tainted with cadmium, a toxic metal.

DreamWorks and the grower association spent a year hammering out details of the ogre-onion campaign. The Georgia farmers covered the costs of marketing, including making the stands and promotional items.

When Vidalia hired a chef to develop recipes for the cam-

paign, DreamWorks perfected their names. The results: Swampy Joes, Shrek-O-licious Summertime Succotash and Donkey's Savory Onion Parfait.

"There's no question that Shrek has driven sales at the consumer level," says John Tumino, a sales director at Richter & Co., a Charlotte, N.C., company that supplies onions to

Safeway, Hannaford and other chains. "Children are enamored of Shrek." He estimates that demand for medium-size Vidalias, which typically fill Shrek bags, is up 30% to 35% this year.

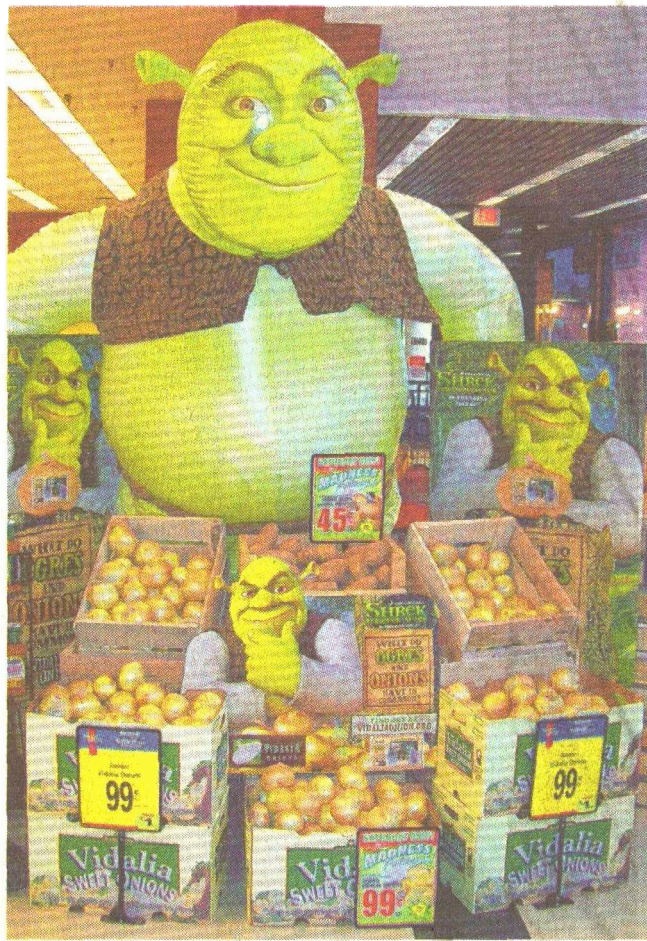
Elias Freij, produce manager at a Food World supermarket in Mobile, Ala., says he has been selling nine or ten 40-lb. cases of Vidalias each week, nearly three times last year's weekly volume.

"Don't get me wrong, Vidalias always sell," says Mr. Freij, who was recently selling four-pound Shrek onion bags for \$3.49 and loose Vidalias for \$1.29 a pound. "But when you promote it with kids, it's an automatic sell."

Tamara Gibson, a 40-year-old personal trainer and mother of three, says her four-year-old, Grayson, could hardly contain his excitement at the sight of Shrek at the Hy-Vee. Normally, "he only gets that giddy when we're in the packaged-food aisle with really sugary things."

She had made multiple trips to Hy-Vee to stock up. "I was at the store last night and thought, 'gosh, I'm going through onions like crazy these days.' It's like buying milk!"





'Shrek' has been the perfect pitchman for Vidalia onions.