

CHINA

Donggang strawberries finding favor overseas

SHENYANG — At the break of dawn, amid bone-chilling temperatures in Donggang, Northeast China's Liaoning province, workers were busy picking ripe, red strawberries hidden under leaves in a greenhouse.

The fresh-picked fruit was then weighed, placed on foam trays and packed in cardboard boxes at the strawberry packing factory at the Donggang Nongdao Agriculture and Forestry Technology Co, waiting to be shipped abroad.

"Over 300 boxes of strawberries were sent overseas today. Tomorrow, they will be placed on the shelves of supermarkets in Singapore, Thailand and other countries," said Ma Tingdong, head of the company. "This winter, overseas orders for fresh strawberries have surged."

At the 20th China International Agricultural Trade Fair in November, the company reached cooperation agreements with many foreign customers from Singapore, Indonesia and other nations. The company's fresh strawberry exports reached 2 million yuan (\$281,000) in December, according to Ma.

Donggang, which first cultivated strawberries over a century ago, is now China's largest strawberry production and export base. According to the Donggang agricultural and rural bureau, the strawberry production area in the city exceeds 13,000 hectares, with an annual production of 300,000 metric tons. In the fourth quarter of last year, sales of fresh strawberries in Donggang reached more than 2 billion yuan.

"Donggang's strawberries are popular for their plump shape and sweet taste, thanks to the favorable natural conditions for strawberry planting," said Jiang Zhaotong, deputy director of Liaoning Strawberry Research Institute of Science and Technology.

With the Changbai Mountains blocking the cold air from the north and the Yellow Sea bringing warm and humid air from the south, Donggang enjoys a mild climate compared with other northeastern cities. Sufficient sunlight, rainfall and fertile soil rich in organic matter make the city conducive to cultivating high-quality strawberries, Jiang explained.

New technology applications have also advanced the productivity and quality of strawberries. Jiang said that through a smart temperature monitoring system, farmers can now monitor and control temperatures inside the greenhouse between 5 and 28 C through their smartphones.

"Having adopted the internet of things and other digital technologies, every strawberry produced by our company is traceable," said Ma, also the director of the local strawberry-growing association. When customers scan QR codes on strawberry boxes, information such as date of picking, the producer and the cultivation process will pop up on their phones.

While Ma's fresh strawberries have gradually won the favor of international customers due to their high quality, rapid customs clearance has also made it possible for more Donggang strawberries to be exported.

Donggang Customs has launched a special green channel for fresh strawberries, expediting declaration and inspection procedures to minimize the clearance time. Ma said that through the channel, it takes less than 12 hours for the fruit to clear customs.

"In the future, we will continue to expand our export business and make the world fall in love with Donggang strawberries!" Ma said.

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A worker picks strawberries in a greenhouse of an agricultural cooperative in Donggang, Liaoning province, on Dec 7. PHOTOS BY CHEN WEI / XINHUA



Workers of the cooperative pack strawberries on Dec 7.



Qu Baole (middle) and her colleagues display dragon-themed bobo buns they made in a factory in the Fushan district of Yantai, Shandong province. LIU WEIFANG / FOR CHINA DAILY

Sales of dragon-themed goods boom in Shandong

Foods, clothing and even kites featuring mythical creature captivate consumers

By ZHAO RUIXUE in Jinan
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Dragon-themed products are experiencing a surge in popularity as the Year of the Dragon approaches, with a wide range of items such as food, fashion and traditional crafts featuring the mythical beast captivating consumers.

In the Fushan district of Yantai, Shandong province, Qu Baole has been busy making bobo, a type of wheat bun that is larger than a regular steamed bun, since mid-November. "Bobo decorated with dragon elements have become a hit among consumers, with one particular series called the 'Wealth-inviting Dragon' being especially sought after," said Qu, who has created eight kinds of dragon-themed buns.

The dragon, or long in Chinese, is the only mythical creature among the 12 Chinese zodiac signs. It has existed in legendary tales for millennia, and has long-held spiritual importance in China, said cultural experts.

The Wealth-inviting Dragon bobo is made in the shape of a cartoon dragon. It contains six golden coin-shaped dough pieces, symbolizing the promise of wealth for those who partake. Qu and two other women work tirelessly from 8 am to 10 pm to meet orders for dragon-themed bobo.

The enthusiasm for dragon-themed products extends beyond culinary delights.

Searches for dragon-themed items on JD.com, a popular online retail platform, exceeded 23 million in the first three weeks of January, according to a report released by the JD Consumer and Industry Development Research Institute on Jan 23.

For example, the dragon-themed hanfu, traditional Chi-



Workers make dragon-themed kites in a factory in Wangjiazhuangzi village in Weifang, Shandong. ZHAO FENG / FOR CHINA DAILY

"The total sales of kites is basically the same as in previous years, but the dragon-themed kites are selling better than kites featuring other zodiac animals compared to previous years."

Sun Yuemei, owner of a kite factory in Wangjiazhuangzi village in Weifang, Shandong province

nese attire, saw a nearly twofold year-on-year increase in transaction volume.

Accessories such as hairpins adorned with dragon motifs have seen a remarkable sixfold surge in transaction volume, while sales of gold bracelets are over 10 times higher than last year, according to the report. "Horse face skirts with images of dragons are very popular," said Hu Chunqing, the operation director of Chenfei Clothing Co in Caoxian, a hanfu production base in Shandong.

The company has sold 35,000 sets of hanfu this month, and half of them were dragon-themed.

Sales of dragon-themed kites

have also been soaring. Orders for the kites were placed several months in advance of the Chinese New Year in Wangjiazhuangzi village in Weifang, Shandong, which is renowned as China's kite capital.

With an annual production of over 90 million kites, manufacturers in the village have been designing various dragon-themed kites since October to meet the increasing demand.

"A kite named 'Golden Dragon Playing with the Pearl' has seen a rapid surge in orders, accounting for over half of our total orders," said Sun Yuemei, who has been running a kite factory in the village for 18 years. "The total sales of kites is basically the same as in previous years, but the dragon-themed kites are selling better than kites featuring other zodiac animals compared to previous years."

Many Chinese living abroad also placed orders for the dragon kites on online platforms, Sun added. A hashtag asking about people having dragon babies that began trending on social media platform Sina Weibo in May has been shared over 87 million times.

"The dragon is one of the iconic images in ancient China, and the zodiac sign of the dragon is more popular among young people than other animals," Liu Zhongxuan, design director of the Innovation Culture Service Co of the National Library of China, was quoted as saying by Tide News.

Cooperative attracts Gampa sheep herders

LHASA — As sunshine graces the foot of the snow-covered mountains surrounding Gampa county in Southwest China's Xizang autonomous region, villagers from a sheep breeding cooperative crack their whips to guide thousands of sheep out of their pen.

The county, sitting at an average altitude of more than 4,300 meters, registers an annual average temperature of only 1.5 C. Boasting a unique geographical environment, the county is well-known for its Gampa sheep, and the villagers mainly rely on herding for a living.

In an effort to establish standardized herding practices, sci-tech commissioners have been dispatched to the county. Today, all sheep in Gampa have ear tags that allow herders to keep track of their growth, contributing to a continuous increase in their numbers.

Lhapa Tsering, a member of the sheep breeding cooperative, was once a successful herder but now runs a restaurant.

"I was finding it difficult to balance family life and herding before the cooperative was established in March 2019," he said.

The increasing number of sheep in his family demanded more time, while his aging parents needed more care.

In the past, when confronted with such a dilemma, villagers such as Lhapa Tsering had no choice but to sell some sheep or ask their school-aged children to give up their studies and return home to herd the sheep.

However, villagers today have a new option, thanks to the cooperative. Lhapa Tsering was among the first to join, though many of his fellow villagers were initially skeptical of it.

They doubted if others could care for their family sheep as well as they could, recalled Phurbu Tsering, head of the cooperative. "After over 30 meetings, we finally managed to convince most of them to join the cooperative," he said.

The cooperative only requires just over 20 herders to take care of all the sheep, with the count reaching thousands.

"I had to herd sheep for my family and did not have the opportunity to attend school properly when I was a child," said Phurbu Tsering. Children in the county can now fully focus on their studies, and villagers with spare time have started exploring other income opportunities.

Before 2019, only three villagers had driver's licenses, whereas today almost every household has at least one licensed driver. More than 70 villagers now work in other places, raising the county's per capita annual income to nearly 20,000 yuan (\$2,813).

The modern production and management of the cooperative has also helped to expand sales channels.

Through online channels and contracts for bulk orders, the cooperative sold over 10,000 Gampa sheep last year, generating a total income of over 5 million yuan. Over 2 million yuan and 1,000 sheep were distributed to members as dividends the same year.

By the end of last year, Gampa county had become home to 27 sheep breeding cooperatives. The per capita disposable income of rural residents in the county was expected to exceed 19,000 yuan, a year-on-year increase of 10 percent.

All 146 households in Lhapa Tsering's village have joined the cooperative. He runs a restaurant near his home and continues to enjoy dividends from the cooperative. Today, his family's annual income is about 200,000 yuan.

"My father also works for the cooperative, and my son as well as other children in the county can enjoy their happy winter holidays," Lhapa Tsering said.

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Guangxi county boasts sea of sun-dried persimmons

NANNING — Travelers on a serpentine two-way asphalt road winding through Pingle county, South China's Guangxi Zhuang autonomous region, would assuredly be amazed by a visually stunning sea of glossy orange persimmons that blankets the backyards and rooftops of the locals.

"It's what we call the 'sun-drying' season for the signature produce of our county," said Li Guangshi, an agriculture expert and a go-to guy for persimmons in Pingle. "The process usually takes place between October and February the following

year, which is also the harvest season for persimmons."

Persimmon production and processing are a vital way of life for many locals in Pingle, as it generated about 4.8 billion yuan (\$675 million) in revenue for the county in 2023.

Official statistics show that the designated persimmon growing area has exceeded 10,667 hectares in Pingle, with an annual production yield of 550,000 metric tons.

Apart from the fresh fruit, Pingle is also a main production center for shibing, or dried persimmons, a sau-

cer-like sweet coated with a fine frosting of natural sugar popular in Asia.

The small county, situated in the northern part of the region, possesses a favorable environment for growing and drying the fruit. Pingle cultivated six different cultivars of astringent and non-astringent persimmons. The non-astringent ones, which can be consumed when firm and crisp, are one of the most coveted fresh varieties in winter, while the astringent types are the ones that are normally to be processed into shibing.

"Wind and sun are crucial," said Li. "Northwesterly wind and strong sun rays during winter months are the absolute musts for turning the fresh fruit into quality shibing."

When making shibing, the freshly picked fruit needs to be washed, trimmed and peeled before getting thoroughly massaged to even out their shape and soften the fibers inside.

Over time, persimmons, fully covered with white ash of frosting, lose their original plumpness and become shrunken and slightly wrinkled and dark.

The locals also make full use of persimmons, using the discarded skins and tissues of the fruit from making shibing as fodder for the livestock.

In 2023, the county accommodated approximately 400 companies that recorded an annual sales of over 100 tons of shibing. The amount of shibing shipped from Pingle to places across the country and overseas reached 350,000 tonnes, raking in over 3 billion yuan in sales per year.

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