

**Butler Farms**

# Small Farm, Big Flavor

By Andrew Hind



*Betty was Tommy Butler's first date in high school, but they later married other people. When their respective spouses passed away, love went full circle and Tommy and Betty wed in 2014. "I tell people she was my first and last date," Tommy says. Photo courtesy Butler Farms*



**T**ommy Butler's Vidalia onion-growing operation is an intimate one. He grows his flavorful onions – “Some say they are the sweetest onions they've ever tasted,” Butler says without a hint of boasting – on only 2.5 acres of land. He uses traditional methods, handling each and every onion with care and respect. And, Butler treats his customers with genuine respect and warmth, so much so he even receives Christmas cards and letters of well-wishes from them.

Butler Farms is a throwback to a simpler time in many ways. A true southern gentleman, Butler wouldn't have it any other way.


“I enjoy growing onions. Farming is in my blood. And I enjoy meeting customers – they're like family to me,” he says simply. “This is a passion for me.”

### A Love for Farming

It's also a lifestyle that began early for Butler. He was born and raised on the Dexter, Georgia farm which his uncle owned and on which his father was a sharecropper, and soon the discipline of a farmer was instilled in him. From a very young age, Butler was tasked with doing chores such as milking cows and putting them out to pasture before he headed off to school for the day. When class was let out, the boy had more chores to look forward to, including herding the cows back into their barn. Whereas some children might chaff at




Tommy Butler leaves his onions on the surface to dry in the sun for four days after plowing. Photo courtesy Butler Farms



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Tommy Butler stands beside the sign to the farm founded more than half a century ago by his uncle, and on which Tommy was raised. Photo courtesy Butler Farms

such responsibility, Butler not only accepted it but actually embraced it.

“I enjoyed it, and the work developed an appreciation for the farm. I was born on this land, raised on it and still live on it. In many ways, it’s who I am,” Butler explains.

In 1958, Butler’s uncle sold the land to his father. But only six years later, Butler’s father had a massive heart attack and was reluctantly forced to retire. What was to become of the farm? For Butler, there was never any question; single and working at the time, he would buy the land and keep it in the family. So, that’s what he did, farming evenings and weekends while working full-time weekdays.

Butler didn’t just preserve the farm but added 100 acres to it in 1968 when neighbors to the east offered a spread for sale. Butler Farms sat at 250 acres. In 1996, another 50 acres to the east became available, so Butler added it. His final purchase came in 2006 when he purchased another 50 acres that originally belonged to his grandmother, about 1.5 miles south of his farm, bringing the total for the farm to 350 acres at which size it remains today.

For years, the staples on the farm were cattle and sugar-cane for syrup, but that changed in an improbable way in 1980. Butler found himself in a hardware store when he just happened to spy Vidalia bulbs for sale. Intrigued, he bought





Butler Farms cultivates 2.5 to 3 acres of Vidalia onions each year. Photo courtesy Butler Farms



Sweet Vidalia onions rest on pallets ready to be shipped to independent grocery stores across the U.S. Photo courtesy Butler Farms

100 plants and was impressed with the size and sweetness of the onions that resulted. Butler never looked back, buying a few more every year until he had between two and three acres under cultivation (the most he ever grew was 3.5 acres).

“At first I couldn’t sell them as Vidalia onions because I wasn’t in the right area; to be a true Vidalia onion grower, you need to be located within specific geographic borders. So, for a few years I had to sell them as ‘Sweet Onions,’ which was accurate enough because they are sweet. That changed when the Georgia General Assembly passed a law designating an

official area that Vidalia onions could be grown, and I was able to officially label them as Vidalia onions. I’ve been a certified Vidalia Onion Grower since 1986,” Butler remembers.

### A Reputation for Flavor

The soil and climate in Dexter, Georgia, is ideally suited to growing Vidalia onions.

“The soil here is the loamy, sandy soil favored by Vidalia onions,” Butler says. “And most winters are mild, getting into the 70s many days. The temperature rarely dips be-

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Butler Farms is the smallest of the Certified Vidalia Growers, but has an enviable reputation for sweet onions. Photo courtesy Butler Farms

low freezing. The few times we dip below freezing doesn't seem to affect the onions much. In 2014, we had a full week of freezing temperatures dipping as low as 7 degrees. The onions rebounded, but the percent to grow to jumbo size was less than normal. However, they were still sweet. They're a resilient onion."

Butler plants in November and harvests in May. He grows full-season onions and leaves them in until the majority of the tops fall over, indicating they have reached full maturity. The fields are plowed, lifting the onions to the top of the dirt, where they are left to dry in the sun for four or five days. Butler doesn't have cold atmosphere (CA) storage facilities. Instead, the onions are put on pallets under a shelter with fans to circulate the air and keep them cool.

Sales to independent grocery store operators and the public through website orders begin around May 10 and last into July. He ships to customers in New York, Washington state, California, Florida and many states in between.

"I've developed a reputation for good, really sweet onions. People at some grocery stores I supply specifically ask produce managers for Tommy Butler onions," he says proudly. "I had a gentleman from Maryland call once about onions. He asked if my onions were real sweet. I told him yes and that I would ship him a 10-pound box and if they weren't the sweetest onions he'd ever tasted, he would owe me nothing."

Butler continues, "A while later, he called me back and said, 'my friend, you have a customer for life. I want you to send me a box at the beginning of the season and every three weeks until they are gone, every single year.' He agreed that they were, in fact, the sweetest onions he'd ever tasted."

What's the secret? Butler says it's the process by which he cultivates and harvests the onions – leaving them in the ground to reach full maturity and allowing them to dry in the sun – that's responsible for them containing so much flavor.

Butler Farms is the smallest certified Vidalia Onion Grower, but Butler carries that title with pride. It means he gets to know his customers in a way larger producers can't, and it ensures each and every onion pulled from the soil is treated with the utmost care. Though retired from his full-time job, Butler has no plans to step away from farming. He loves it, and the people it brings him in touch with, far too much. 🍅

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