



**A**re all oranges created equal? If it's orange and round is it the same no matter where you buy it?

Not necessarily.

Our taste buds know some oranges are juicier than others, some watermelons sweeter, some chili peppers hotter.

What's harder to know and understand is the best place to buy fruits and vegetables and get not only quality but value as well.

Produce specialists in Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA), Europe, hear these questions frequently. "Produce grading and pricing is complex and it pays for customers to understand," said Randi Robinson, DeCA Europe's produce specialist in Kaiserslautern, Germany.

Robinson shares her expertise with customers who sometimes say, "I bought bananas last week in a local (read German, Italian, English, Spanish) market and they were cheaper than in my commissary. How come?"

While Robinson is often on commissary sales floors all over Europe, Petra Pulze, DeCA Europe's contracting officer for European products, is generally behind her desk or visiting commercial companies holding DeCA contracts. "There are very specific requirements in the contracts we currently hold with three produce suppliers in Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom," said Pulze.

"We require at least 25 percent savings over commercial pricing and buy class one produce for high quality at low prices. We require closely-monitored, temperature-controlled storage and shipping and deliveries inspected by military food specialists and produce specialists at our stores."

(In the case of organics recently added to European commissaries, the highest rating is class two. Organic produce has been grown without chemical fertilizers, insecticides and herbicides on farms using environmentally-friendly methods. Selected DeCA Europe commissaries began carrying organic produce in early 2009.)

"Every month a market basket survey is conducted to ensure we are on track with savings," said Pulze. "The survey is done at local grocery stores considered equivalent to commissaries."

The January 2009 price survey was conducted at two European supermarkets. Fourteen fruits and vegetables from Italy, Austria, Spain, South Africa, Panama, France and Germany were surveyed. Total cost of one pound each (14 lbs.) of the 14 items showed a low of \$18.65 in store one, \$18.89 in store two and \$14.23 for the contractor's catalog price to DeCA, supporting the required 25 percent savings.

"We follow the market prices to see that DeCA prices for like products are always lower than the economy but, at the same time, follow the overall trend," stated Pulze. "As economy prices go up and down, DeCA produce prices will follow suit, but still be lower."

Robinson says conversations with customers often reveal they don't understand why oranges they bought at the local supermarket were cheaper. "Oranges, for example, are not all created equal," she comments. "Yes, they might find oranges cheaper outside the commissary, but they have to be aware of other factors to determine if the oranges are of the same quality."

Back in contracting, Pulze outlines the factors which impact the produce market and its prices.

**Class:** "The traditional (non organic) produce bought for DeCA Europe stores is class one--the highest rating granted based on size, appearance and taste," stated Pulze.

"American consumer standards for size are often different from European standards. Traditionally, Europeans want smaller produce because they believe it is better. Americans want the best quality but they also want each item to be bigger—for the very same reason."

For instance, the required American size standard for apples is 80 to 88 apples per case while the European count is around 100 apples per case.

A class two apple, pear or carrot, would likely cost less than a class one, though they may look very similar to the casual eye.

European stores are required to clearly post specific information for each produce item. A recent visit to a large store in Germany revealed signs stating class and country of origin along with price and whether the produce had

been treated or waxed. Bananas were offered from different companies and countries including Ecuador. “If you don’t see a sign with this information,” stated Pulze, “pay attention to the box it is in. The country of origin should be on the box.”

**Origin:** “It is not unusual to see oranges from Cuba, pears from North Korea or pistachios from Iran (considered the very best) in a European market in good quality and low price,” said Pulze, “but you will not find products from those countries in a commissary because of political restrictions.”

Major suppliers of produce can trace the fruits and vegetables they carry all the way back to the field. On several occasions, commissary produce employees have received on site training in growing fields owned and operated by large growers of fruits and vegetables sold throughout Europe.



**Price:** Customers in Europe must always consider fluctuating exchange rates in deciding if the local produce price is a bargain. “Even with the Euro,” states German-born Pulze, “the market basket surveys still reveal the commissary is the better deal. Commissary prices are impacted by the overall produce market as it reacts to worldwide supply and demand. By contracting with large produce suppliers we enjoy bigger buying power and both the contractor and DeCA customers benefit.”

**Season:** In order to provide a wide selection of produce year round, major produce suppliers “follow the sun.” “Obviously strawberries aren’t available from a German farmer in February,” stated Pulze. “Commissary customers often see strawberries from Spain. As the harvest slows in one hemisphere, suppliers reach further south following the crops as they ripen.” Produce picked at the end of the season may be of lower quality than that at the peak. With quality in mind, DeCA requires its suppliers to move to new crops as early as possible.

**Weather:** Prices and quality can both be impacted by fuel costs, weather, insects and fire. Erratic rainfall, dry spells, high heat and unusual freezes can greatly reduce a farmer’s crop and/or the quality of fruits or vegetables causing short supply and high prices. Insect infestation or fires can destroy a crop altogether. These occurrences will cause buyers to seek

supplies in other areas of the world and prices will likely increase.

Americans in Europe have three choices for purchasing produce: the commissary, local grocery stores or street markets.

Hans-Juergen Kirsch is the business director for fruits, vegetables and plants for the 140-store, German supermarket chain Wasgau. Exposed to every aspect of the produce industry, he is a subject matter expert. “Street markets have lower standards and fewer controls,” said Kirsch. “Only a small percent of the vendors are actually farmers. Many of them buy from terminal markets what the big grocers have not chosen and then re-sell in the street markets. Temperature control is mostly at the mercy of the weather except in very cold weather when some heating requirements exist. Many Germans buy from them as well as from the modern market.”

“Americans also enjoy shopping on the local economy, both in traditional markets or street markets,” comments Robinson. “But, all things considered, the Defense Commissary Agency, Europe believes, for the authorized American military shopper, the commissary is the best overall buy. If customers have questions about produce or need something special in the way of a large quantity for canning or an exotic they don’t see in the displays, they should ask their produce manager for assistance. We’re always happy to satisfy our customers.”

So, are all oranges created equal? No. Consider size, appearance, quality, class, origin and the care provided from picking to sale. Commissary produce is temperature controlled from the time it reaches the produce warehouse to the time you buy it at your local commissary.

There is an abundance of information available today in books, magazines and on the web regarding selecting and storing produce. Be a smart shopper and you’ll have a better chance of getting the best buy for your hard-earned dollar.

Wherever you shop, think healthy eating!

