THE STORY BEHIND THE INGREDIENT:
Chicory Root Fiber
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In September, just before harvest, fields of chicory root grace the regional hillsides of Belgium and Northern France. Chicory root, a plant that thrives only in specific regions, requires a cooler summer climate and fertile, well-drained soil.

Chicory root is a valued source of soluble fiber used as a naturally sourced bulking agent to reduce sugar, while functioning as a digestion-supporting prebiotic and promoting mineral absorption. New studies point to fiber as a key player in gut health – and overall health in general – and chicory root is in demand as a high-fiber, low-sugar, label-friendly, non-GMO* ingredient.

Yet, like many small-batch regional crops, the growing cycle for chicory root is long and requires an investment over time. Thanks to a long-term relationship with Cosucra in Warcoing, Belgium, Cargill is able to offer the high-quality chicory root fiber to customers. Here’s a behind-the-scenes look at how chicory root is grown.

**Trusted supplier**

The relationship between Cargill and Cosucra began 16 years ago, says Taylor Halstead, Product Line Manager at Cargill. “We wanted a partnership where there was reliability, trust, knowledge and expertise,” he says. What Cargill valued about Cosucra was the care, intelligence, and thoughtfulness that went into its approach to farming and harvesting the root. Their investment in quality soil, farming and seed product resulted in a superior end product. “Their product is differentiated by how they utilize nature,” says Halstead.

**Two-year growing cycle**

Anthony Claeyssens, Business Manager, North America, at Cosucra, says the chicory root crop cycle occurs over a two-year period. Claeyssens says there is a solid year between securing the sales contract and the actual seeding. They contract their land in August, and then plant in March and April. The root is harvested between September and December.

“Market changes during this time can impact how much chicory we want to plant, so it is a long-running balancing act trying to gauge what market interest will be two years later,” says Claeyssens.

**Partnering with local farmers**

Cosucra grows chicory root locally. “We only work in an axis region that’s 200 miles around the factory,” says Claeyssens. “It’s a relatively small radius of farmers in Belgium and the north of France that we engage with to grow the crops.” Cosucra secures early contracts with the farmers to grow the chicory root, similar to how they secure the land, and thinks of the farmers as partners. They help the farmers grow sustainably, providing the right education and tools to grow chicory root efficiently and successfully.
Improving seed quality

Cosucra also invests in chicory root seed development to create seed varieties with functional properties that are sustainable with climate change, says Claeyssens. Their seed-breeding program includes research on the growing and harvesting process to develop the best seed variety for farming chicory root. “Eighty percent of the chicory root seeds in the world are coming from our seed business unit, Chicoline®, “ says Claeyssens.

Immediate extraction for freshness

“Chicory root grown with these quality farming practices produces a robust plant with different chain lengths of inulin that allow us to offer different qualities of fiber ranging from highly soluble to longer chains that can provide texture, body, and mouthfeel,” says Claeyssens. After the root is harvested and transported to the Belgium facility, it is immediately processed using a hot water extraction to separate inulin from the pulp. The end product is then shipped by sea freight to North America.

Delicious at the table

Chicory root is enjoyed in different ways, depending on the culture. In Europe, it’s not uncommon to find the root or the upper part of the plant served as an ingredient at a restaurant. “There is a long history of chefs, especially in Belgium and the North of France using this root,” says Claeyssens. Chicory root fiber has also been used for a long time as a coffee substitute. Today, this ingredient is used to reduce sugar, reduce calories, modify texture, increase fiber, support gut health and improve calcium absorption, among other functions.

Label-friendly and health-promoting

Dietary fiber has a long history of clinical research and has been identified as a nutrient that is often under-consumed. Chicory root fiber is part of Cargill’s overall label-friendly ingredient portfolio, says Halstead. Research indicates that increased fiber consumption is related to maintaining good health, and specifically that chicory root fiber has an ability to help improve mineral absorption, which can help maintain bone health and support gut health.

Dietary fiber

There is a gap in the amount of fiber consumed and the dietary recommendations of most countries around the globe, making fiber fortification of foods important. Cargill and Cosucra have worked together on nutrition research supporting the consumption of dietary fiber, says Claeyssens. “Fiber used to be associated with something gritty and tasteless,” says Claeyssens.

“The fact that with chicory root you have something invisible in the formula, but with solid health benefits, makes it an attractive fiber option.” All wonderful benefits from a beautiful, fragile plant from the fields of western Europe.