



Among the first batch of 100 food products, most of which went online on April 18 when the program's second season made its debut, Sichuan sausages, Peking duck and Nyingchi honey were the first to sell out.

Statistics from Tmall show that within three hours that night more than 2 million people visited the website through their mobile phones, and the number later rose to 5.4 million.

The online retail effort has helped bring so-called hidden delicacies within public reach.

For example, the program introduced a type of fish sauce from Leishan, a county in Guizhou province, which the local Miao people describe as their proudest flavoring. But when a huge number of searches for it appeared on Tmall, the online retailer found that no shops were selling it.

Li Lei, a fruit retailer in Shanghai, was quick to seize this opportunity. While the documentary was still being shown, he began making random calls and finally reached a policeman on duty in Lei-shan who knew the only fish sauce factory in town and gave him its contact details.

After reaching an agreement with the 74-year-old factory owner, Li flew to Leishan next morning and managed to put 1,000 packets of fish sauce he bought from the factory on his shelves by 11 am.

Made only from water and fish caught locally, the factory's sauce had been sold mainly to locals for the past 35 years. Li said it took a considerable effort to make the factory owner trust him and finally agree to sell him all the stocks.

With more than 2,000 packets sold in a week, Li hopes that his stock of 9,000 packets will last until August, when new stocks will arrive. "China has so many hidden delicacies. I feel very honored to be able to bring one of them to people around the country," Li said.

He has remained in Guizhou to persuade the two Lei-shan fish sauce makers who featured in the documentary to endorse his products.

Four episodes of the documentary had been broadcast by this week, and more purchasing trends are expected to emerge in the next seven weeks.

Li said it was a coincidence that he had been able to obtain a product from Guizhou. "I doubt I will have such good luck next time," he said. "But it's good for the foodies. I'm sure delicacies will get online even more quickly."

Zhang, the online shop owner in Lhasa, hopes the documentary will help to boost development of an industry. The local government had been supportive of beekeeping, and after the documentary was shown, some businesspeople had also begun to show their interest, Zhang said. "I hope the popularity of Nyingchi honey is just a start," he added.