

# FOOD & WINE

## What to make with apples

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 [foodandwine.com/how-about-them-apples-8346800](http://foodandwine.com/how-about-them-apples-8346800)



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Frans Rombout / PicturePartners / Getty Images

One day in 2004, Brooke Hazen noticed something unusual about one of his Golden Delicious apple trees.

“Some people are lucky enough in their career to have their own bud mutation variety that they get to name,” says Hazen. “Out of the thousands of trees I have, one branch on one tree decided to do its own thing.”

What it did was yield an apple with the typical green-yellow skin but an unusual pink patch where it faced the sun and a sweetness and fragrance beyond any other Golden Delicious he knew. Hazen, the owner of Gold Ridge Organic Farms, an 88-acre orchard and olive grove in Sonoma County, cultivated the new apple, grafting the mutation (or “sport,” in horticultural parlance) onto rootstock and naming it “Sea Breeze.” The name is a paean to the force that, before the rise of the wine grape, once made Sonoma famous as an apple-

growing mecca. “The Pacific Ocean provides the perfect cooling climate for apple trees to thrive and fully express their nuances and variations,” Hazen says. “I’m not kidding when I say I’ve met people that were brought to tears by eating the Sea Breeze.”

## How do you like them apples?

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Hazen, his Sea Breeze, and the consumers who love it are participating in an age-old tradition — one that reveals the magic of apples and the unique intimacy between humans and this fruit. From their origin in the forests of Kazakhstan to a windblown hilltop on the California coast, apples have proliferated and diversified along with us. And with settlers, cider makers, orchardists, scientists, and legions of daily lunch-box-packers all doing their parts, nowhere have apples been more integral to history than the United States. Today, more than 5,000 growers produce over 11 billion pounds of apples per year. They are the number one fruit consumed in this country. It’s enough to make a convert out of an apple skeptic like me.

### The Ultimate Apple Guide to 85 Varieties, From Heirlooms to Hybrids

But given my “no dessert” attitude toward eating, I had never paid much attention to apples — until an olive oil tasting late one fall at Gold Ridge, when I wandered into the cold storage for Hazen’s Fuji apples and was knocked sideways by the smell. High-toned, floral, almost painfully sharp, the bouquet left me with such an ache to know apples better that I started tucking them into my cooking. I sliced Granny Smiths and Pink Ladies into a potato gratin, where they added an ethereal snap. I julienned acidic Empires and candyish SnapDragons for a kohlrabi slaw to pair with cider-glazed chicken. I even made apples into an entrée, cider-braising Galas, which are dense enough to hold their shape when cooked, with bacon.

And that was just using what I found at the grocery store. When I rented a summer house in Vermont, I discovered that every lane held an abandoned tree with tangy, tannic orbs that might not be great eaten out of hand but proved wonderful when softened in a garlicky marinade and piled onto country bread with local cheddar — and even better when made into applesauce or diced into rustic fritters that my family devoured.

Those Northeastern orphans had something in common with Hazen’s pampered Sea Breeze. Both were the product, to riff on Darwin, of human selection and random variation. “Apples don’t self-pollinate,” explains William Shane, a tree-fruit specialist at Michigan State University. “The only way you get an apple tree to fruit is to have pollen from another variety. So if you plant a Red Delicious seed, the offspring don’t look exactly like a Red Delicious.” That genetic diversity, called heterozygosity, means that in order to get many of a single variety, apples must be cloned. “You take a branch and graft it or a bud from a tree and propagate it. Then you have a variety that is locked in place.”

## How we got from Johnny Appleseed to Cosmic Crisp

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In colonial America, where fermented beverages were safer to drink than the era’s untreated

water, “settlers planted seedling orchards primarily for cider,” says Charlotte J. Shelton of Vintage Virginia Apples and Albemarle CiderWorks, makers of single-variety heirloom ciders. “You would come across a wonderful apple, like a Pippin, Queen Victoria’s favorite when it was introduced to her from America, and you would propagate and name it. There were thousands of American apple varieties by the 1900s.” These were fruits of multifarious character — red or green or yellow, striped or mottled or blushed, smooth-skinned or russeted like Idaho potatoes, tangy or sweet or spicy or tannic. Europe’s apples morphed and multiplied here, becoming as “American” as, well, apple pie.

As the nation pushed westward, displacing Native Americans, authorities mandated orchards. “The Ohio Company required settlers to plant 50 apple trees and 20 peach trees to be eligible to receive land. This is what led John Chapman, aka Johnny Appleseed, to travel ahead and plant apple trees he would later sell to whoever wanted to settle on that land,” says Jamie Hanson, the orchard manager at Seed Savers Exchange. A modern-day Johnny Appleseed, she tends to 1,000 varieties of pre-1950 commercial apples — ones someone once found a use for and sold. If you’re hankering for an all-purpose Rusty Coat or a sauce apple like Pound Sweet, Hanson has scionwood for you to graft and a tree you can pick from. Show up in Decorah, Iowa, in person, and you can fill a five-gallon bucket for free.

### 37 Autumnal Apple Recipes From Salads and Glazes to Pie

Heirloom apple experts like Hanson feel a sense of urgency because in the 20th century, apple diversity suffered several whammies. By the 1900s, industrialization and improvements to the nation’s transportation network helped make beer a more cost-effective alternative to cider. Then Prohibition was enacted, and cider orchards, already in decline, were made practically obsolete.

Just as cider apples waned, along came university breeding programs and the mass marketing of sweet, durable “dessert” apples that could be shipped, stored, and advertised for supermarket sales: Red Delicious, McIntosh, Honeycrisp. The last is from the University of Minnesota, where professor of horticulture James Luby works. “Our program was started over 100 years ago to develop varieties that survive our winters. Material from Russia had hardiness as well as good texture, and that made it into the Honeycrisp,” he says. Its crunch is thanks to big, juice-packed cells. “Think of a stack of shoeboxes glued together,” says Luby. “Bring weight down on them, and eventually they explode. With Honeycrisp, your teeth apply that pressure, and the shoeboxes break with explosive force. We appreciate that with all of our senses. We hear it, feel it, and eventually taste it as the aromatic compounds in the juice are released.” Indeed. If you tell me you can resist the sugary crack of a Honeycrisp, I’ll eat my shoe.

The third-most-produced American apple after Gala and Red Delicious, Honeycrisp has done so well that it’s spawned offspring. Bred at Washington State University, Cosmic Crisp is the first commercially successful apple developed in the state. A hardy, disease-resistant, crispy-sweet juice bomb with a cherubic shape and skin like stars in a deep-red sky, it is so valuable that it’s patented. “It’s a licensed product in the same way as Pepsi or Coke.

Growers pay a royalty and promise to use the trademark appropriately, and we provide communications, content development, marketing strategy, and packaging design,” says Kathryn Grandy, chief marketing officer of PVM, a tree-fruit commercialization company.

## **What's next for apples in America?**

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The trademarking of an apple variety makes some people uncomfortable. “I believe in the right to access food and the age-old tradition of sharing seeds and scionwood for growing in your garden,” says Laura Sieger, orchard specialist at the Maine Heritage Orchard, an educational plot that is preserving 360 varieties of Maine apples. But even Sieger admits: “The intersection between commercial and heritage, the blending and melding, has been going on all along. Historically, all these apples that we now consider heritage were once grown commercially. There’s not a place for every variety in a commercial setting, but there’s this constant evolution of what people are interested in. Besides what’s juiciest, crunchiest, and sweetest, people are relearning the array of subtle flavors and textures that apples offer.”

The new trend in apple breeding is complexity, says Luby: “Anise and cloves, a little bit of cinnamon, passion fruit, a cherry-type taste — it’s going to be fun to combine the crunchy, juicy texture with different flavors.”

In the meantime, nostalgic growers are nurturing apples’ historic multiplicity. Some are stalwarts, like Hurd Orchards, located on the New York shores of Lake Ontario since 1816. There, seventh-generation farmer Amy Machamer oversees a crew that, like virtually all apple crews the world over, picks by hand, “cradling the fruit in their palms.” She sells applesauce and preserves from some of her 70 types, and she’s fond of a farmer’s dessert traditional in western New York wherein a lumpy, softball-size heirloom called the 20 Ounce gets wedged and baked with water and sugar until it puffs like popcorn.

There are also newbies, like Peter Klein, who, says he, “freaked out, quit my job, and bought an orchard in 2004” in Michigan. He grows “fun varieties”: “old-fashioned” Golden Russet, with its sandpaper skin and “bone-dry” flesh; the “spicy fan favorite,” Smokehouse; Summer Rambo, which ripens in August and is good for pie before it fades come September. He supplies Chicago chefs like Smyth restaurant’s John Shields, who finds Klein’s Grimes Golden such a “beautifully balanced apple” that he seems hell-bent on destabilizing it by wrapping it in a Cryovac bag, hollowing it out with a drill bit, and stuffing it with sea-lettuce ice cream.

## **Cooking with heirloom apples**

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Your own apple creations might not be as highfalutin, but I assure you, there is an apple for your every need. Just ask Erin Robinson, orchardist at Scott Farm in Dummerston, Vermont. One morning, I crunched through the snowdrifts to watch her prune a Holstein, a variety

whose fruit boasts a tropical panache. Scott Farm dates to 1791 and has seen its share of apple history. In the 1920s, it was planted with then-newfangled McIntosh apples, which were shipped to urban markets via rail. In the 1980s, its apple business was eclipsed by huge operations in the Northwest and South America, and its owner gave the property to the trust, which launched the grafting project that converted Scott Farm to the 130-variety heirloom collection that Robinson now tends. Her father worked here, too. She's known every tree since childhood. And from winter pruning to spring blossoms and autumn harvest, her ardor for apples has only increased.

"Just like humans, apples are unique. They're delicious. They're beautiful. They're interesting. And there's so much potential for so many more," she told me. "I have two children of my own, and sending these apples off the loading dock feels like putting my kids on the school bus. I cared for them as long as I can, and I'm sending them out into the world."

She reached into a brush pile and gifted me a Holstein branch that, just as she promised, bloomed several weeks later, bringing this Vermont orchard into my Brooklyn home. "There are generations before me that loved these apples enough to keep grafting them to make more trees, and I'm in that loop now, doing what I can, so the next generation will continue to appreciate the rare ones and know that apples can really be amazing."

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## Apple, Shallot, and Potato Gratin

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Greg DuPree / Food Styling by Torie Cox /  
Prop Styling by Christine Keely

In this sophisticated yet comforting gratin, tangy Pink Lady and Granny Smith apples, shallots, and potatoes are baked under a golden brown crust dusted with fennel pollen (which has a citrus- and anise-like flavor and is harvested from fennel frond blossoms). Using a mandoline ensures thin, even slices, allowing the apples and potatoes to retain some of their integrity as they slowly bake in the creamy sauce. While a mandoline is ideal for uniformity, carefully slicing your produce by hand with a sharp knife can work just as well.



[Get the Recipe](#)

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## Marinated Apple and Cheddar Sandwiches

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Greg DuPree / Food Styling by Torie Cox / Prop Styling by  
Christine Keely

Sweet and tart crisp apple slices are macerated in an acidic vinegar brine; they add a punchy, crunchy bite to the rich cheddar cheese and peppery arugula in this texture-packed sandwich. You can use any sliced soft bread, but wheat or multigrain add a bit of sweetness to complement the tangy pickled apples and are sturdy enough to house this hefty sandwich.

[Get the Recipe](#)

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## Cider-Glazed Chicken Breasts with Apple-Kohlrabi Slaw

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Greg DuPree / Food Styling by Torie Cox / Prop Styling by Christine Keely

Bathed in a schmaltzy pan sauce made from chicken jus and apple cider, this simple chicken dinner is perfect for a weeknight at home. The accompanying slaw, made with mildly sweet and slightly peppery kohlrabi, white turnips, and a mix of sweet-tart raw apples, offers a crunchy contrast to the rich, tender chicken. In addition to grocery store favorites, check the farmers market for tart-sweet apples like Jonagold or Gravenstein.

[Get the Recipe](#)

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## Cardamom-Spiced Apple Fritters

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Greg DuPree / Food Styling by Torie Cox /  
Prop Styling by Christine Keely

Garnished with vibrant rose petals and chopped pistachios, these apple-studded fritters have craggy edges and light, cakey centers similar to cake doughnuts. The cardamom glaze adds just the right amount of sugary flavor.

[Get the Recipe](#)

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## Cider-Braised Apples, Bacon, and Garlic

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Greg DuPree / Food Styling by Torie Cox / Prop  
Styling by Christine Keely

A savory, apple cider–based sauce infused with alliums and fresh sage pairs with tart-sweet apples and crispy bacon lardons in this simple braise. Gala and Lady apples are firm but also tender enough to benefit from this dish’s relatively short simmering time. Enjoy the juicy apples and smoky lardons on their own or alongside pan-seared pork chops or crispy roast chicken.

[Get the Recipe](#)