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Sebastopol's Vintage Treasures

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A fresh pick from the fall crop. As summer slides into fall, Sonoma County embraces apple harvest season in all its glory, from the aroma of the ripe pome fruit to the rattle of laden trucks to the



myriad varieties beckoning at market stands. Erin Gleeson—a photographer, artist, cookbook author and founder of lifestyle brand The Forest Feast—knows the joy of this annual rite firsthand. She was 4 when her family moved to an apple orchard in Sebastopol in the early 1980s. “It was dreamy and beautiful,” she recalls.

In addition to years of attending the Gravenstein Apple Fair and Apple Blossom Parade & Festival, her childhood included copious apple consumption. There were apple pies, muffins, cookies and crisps. Applesauce and apple butter. Dried apples were eaten and used for decorative garlands.

“We made everything imaginable with apples,” says Gleeson, whose fifth cookbook, *The Watercolor Feast*, comes out next spring. “I never got tired of them.”

That sentiment likely rings true for many in Sonoma. After all, apples have been a

staple crop in the county for more than two centuries, with the first Gravenstein trees planted circa 1811 in Fort Ross. By the mid-1900s, with the region's mild coastal climate ideal for growing apples, the industry was booming. Production has since declined, however, with land increasingly earmarked for wine grapes.

In 1943 the county was growing 14,200 acres of apples, according to the Sonoma County Department of Agriculture. By 2022 that had dropped to 2,100 total acres. During the same period, grape acreage rose from 23,500 to 57,000. In February, Manzana—the county's only remaining apple processing plant—made headlines when the 102-year-old company announced plans to move its operations to Washington State.

Still, the desire to preserve and perpetuate this cherished aspect of Sonoma's agricultural heritage holds strong. And for some growers, cultivating heirloom apples decades ago has proved a prescient decision, contributing to their continued success.

Brooke Hazen founded Gold Ridge Organic Farms in Sebastopol in 2000, on an 88-acre "blank canvas." There were no trees on the pastureland that his family purchased. In building the farm from scratch, he homed in on two crops—olives and apples—and emphasized diversification, planting different varieties of both. The olives outnumber the apples in acres occupied, approximately 70 to 17, but he has 13,000 trees of each. Ten percent of his apples are considered heirloom, with over 70 varieties.

Hazen defines heirloom apples, also called antique apples, as follows: The fruit must not be commercially grown on a large scale and "it has to be flat-out old," he says, though allows that this is a gray area. (His oldest is the Ananas Reinette, which dates to 1500s France.) Hazen's third criterion is that the fruit has a history—in his words, "a path that it went on to get to where it is."

As a student at Prescott College in Arizona, he learned about specialty crop production, including the importance of "differentiating yourself from the pack," says Hazen, for whom innovation and creativity are always top of mind. "If you're just standard and doing what everyone else is doing, with the economics of farming today, I'm not sure how you survive. Because it's already super hard."

Hazen devised a novel way to purvey his heirloom table apples, aka dessert apples, or those eaten "fresh out of hand." He sells roughly 2-pound bags through Whole Foods locations and Petaluma's FEED Cooperative. Comprising six to nine varieties, Hazen says, "it's almost like a gift pack that morphs every week because the varieties are constantly transitioning." The ripe fruit generally journeys from tree to store to consumer within a day or two.

Hazen's offerings encompass apples that are available early in the season. "I have Strawberry Parfait that ripens in late July," he says. "By then, people have been eating stored apples or imports for months. So the early varieties are incredibly welcome." August and September are his "real harvest months," he adds.

On September 14, Gold Ridge is hosting its third annual Heirloom Apple Celebration. "We have a full display of apples that are ripe at the time," Hazen says, estimating that about 35 varieties will be at their peak in September. "People can see and taste them—all these beautiful colors, flavors and textures. They can compare and discover the nuances of different varieties."

Attendees can partake of culinary treats such as wood-fired pizzas topped with apples and ice cream drizzled with apple cider syrup. For products like the syrup, dried apples and vinegars, Hazen employs #2, or imperfect, apples. In the wake of Manzana's relocation, he anticipates developing more such uses for these apples.





Stan Devoto doesn't expect the Manzana move to directly impact his long-standing business, Devoto Gardens & Orchards. Devoto's apples are mostly sold at farmers' markets, grocery stores and FEED Cooperative, with the #2 apples going to cider makers and distilleries.

Heirloom Apple Varieties

GALA
New Zealand 1965

JEFFERIS
Pennsylvania 1800

ALLINGTON PIPPIN
England 1870s

PITMASTON PINEAPPLE
England 1785

ASHMEAD'S KERNEL
England 1700s

PINK SPARKLE
Humbolt County 1900s

JONATHAN
New York 1700s

ELSTAR
Holland 1955

MACOUN
New York 1923

PINK PEARL
Humbolt County 1944

CINNAMON SPICE
Bolinás 1980s

SNOW FAMEUSE
Canada 1739

MCINTOSH
Canada 1811

JONAGOLD
New York 1953

ST. EDMUND'S PIPPIN
England 1870

He and his late wife, Susan, arrived in Sebastopol from El Cerrito in 1976, initially residing on a 2½-acre parcel with apple trees. In 1988, they acquired a nearby 20-acre property, where Devoto Gardens is currently located, and embarked on growing heirloom apples—a dozen or so varieties to start.

“I got really bored just eating Gravensteins, Jonathans, Red Delicious, Golden Delicious and Rome Beauties,” Devoto explains. “There are over 7,000 varieties of apples out there. We started researching and tasting apples from other areas.”

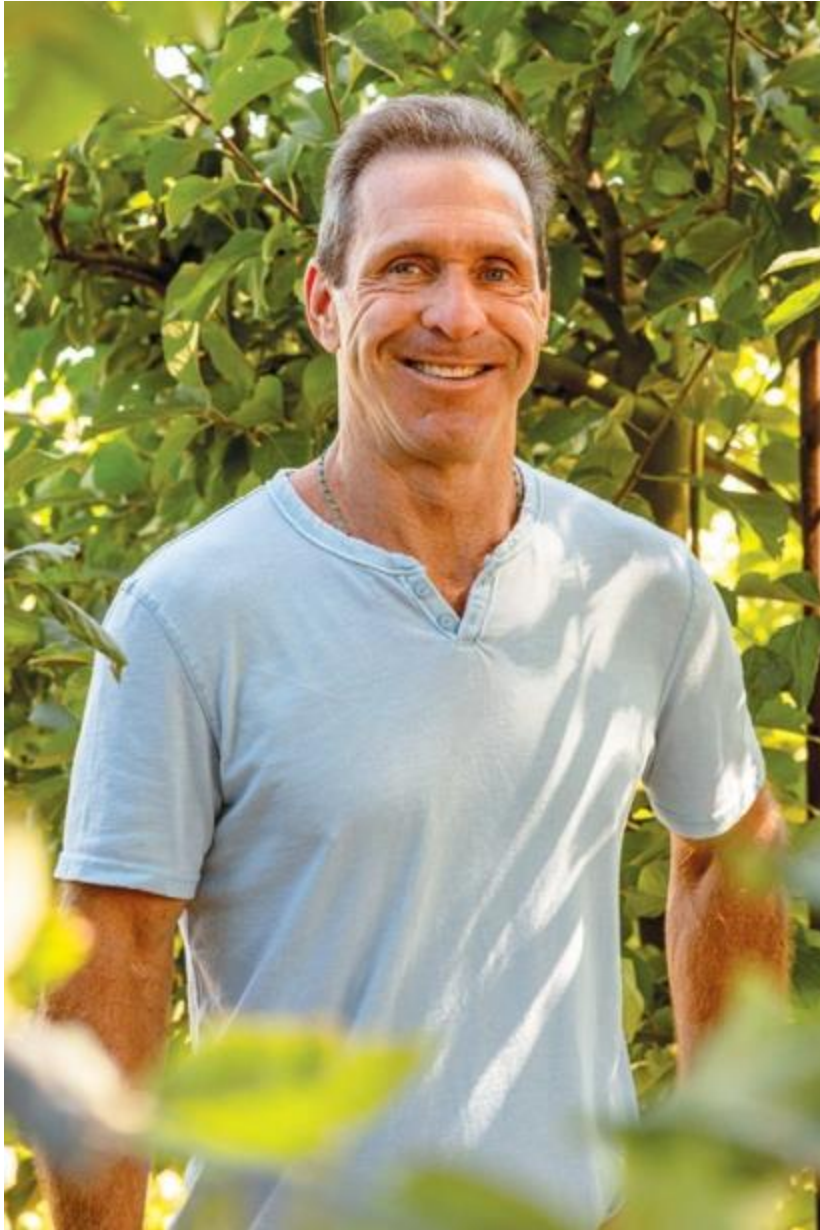






Photo 1: Brooke Hazan of Goldridge Organic Farms grows more than 70 heirloom apple varieties.

Photo 2: Stan Devoto grows more than 100 varieties of heirloom apples at Devoto Gardens & Orchards.

Photo 3: Stan Devoto at home among the apple trees.

Today, about half of his 100 varieties are heirloom; all are certified organic, which also translates to less competition. He has raised cut flowers since early on and expanded into wine grapes in 2006. Between his “home ranch” and leased land, Devoto now farms apples on 27 acres, grapes on 11 acres and flowers on 8 acres. “I’m basically a small dirt farmer,” he says. “I know what I can move myself and don’t have visions of being a large grower. We take great care in trying to grow the best apples we can.”

In 2012, the second of the Devotos' three daughters, Jolie, and her husband, Hunter Wade, founded Golden State Cider. According to Devoto, part of the young couple's motivation was to help make the apple industry in Sonoma County more financially sustainable. "She was buying my apples and my neighbors' apples, and paying three times more than what we were getting from the local processors," he says.

Devoto planted around 200 apple trees specifically for Golden State Cider. Among the heirloom varieties were Yarlington Mill, Harry Masters Jersey, Smokehouse, Herefordshire Redstreak and Golden Russet. (A decade after inception, Golden State Cider was bought by Ariel and Christopher Jackson of Seismic Brewing Company.)

To produce cider, bittersharp and bittersweet varieties are favored. The optimal traits depend on the purpose. For example, Devoto notes, "most bakers prefer a tarter apple, with some flavor, acid and complexity." Versatile varieties for eating, baking, juicing and saucing include Black Twig, Braeburn, Granny Smith, Ozark Gold and Pink Pearl.

Ashmead's Kernel, a russet that originated in England in the 1700s, is a personal favorite of Devoto's. Trees of Antiquity—a nursery that specializes in certified organic heirloom apple trees—describes the variety as possessing a "crisp, nutty snap. The fruit explodes with a champagne-sherbet juice infused with a sugary and sharp character."

Similar to Hazen—who is also partial to Ashmead's Kernel apples, as well as Pink Pearls—Devoto recognizes that his heirlooms offer customers a distinct value proposition. The high quality and freshness factor into their appeal, too.

"We have something special that tastes good," he says. "I think people like supporting a small grower, and the idea that all the apples were picked the day before market. They're getting a piece of fruit right off the tree. There's nothing better."

Cider Houses Rule

Local cider makers make the most of the diverse flavors inherent in the region's heirloom apples to craft ciders of exceptional quality. In addition to the four ciderys featured here, look for ciders produced by Ace, Acre and Spade and Goat Rock in Sonoma, as well as Napa Cider Co. and Sawhorse Ciders in Napa.

Ethic Cider, which has a new tasting room in Sebastopol, farms all local, heirloom apples for its ciders. Many of the signature orchard blends, such as the Good Food Award-winning Golden Rule, uses a blend of these heirloom apples to deliver a dry, refreshing cider. The Gravitude, Wickson and Golden Russet are derived from single-varietal apples that reflect the diversity of heirloom fruit grown in Sonoma County. There are also two limited-releases ciders: the Scarlett with fresh blackberries and raspberries, and the Montage with natural honey.

Ethic Ciders, 8490 Occidental Rd, Sebastopol

Golden State Cider's taproom is located at The Barlow, the Sebastopol open-air marketplace that was once the site of an applesauce canning facility. Multiple ciders are on tap, from core to seasonal offerings—including Save the Gravenstein, made solely of fresh-pressed Sonoma County heirloom Gravenstein apples, and Farms to Cider, comprising heirloom apples from over 100 backyard orchards.

Golden State, 180 Morris St #150, Sebastopol

In a redwood barn surrounded by two acres of gardens and orchards in Sebastopol, **Horse & Plow** offers tastings of its wines and ciders. The latter includes a single-varietal option that stars Sonoma-grown Gravensteins, as well as the Heirloom Cider that blends varieties such as Belle de Boskoop, Akane, Ashmead's Kernel, Northern Spy and York.

Horse & Plow, 1272 Gravenstein Hwy N, Sebastopol

Tilted Shed Ciderworks uses organic heirloom and cider apples grown in the Sebastopol area. Stop by its Windsor tasting room for a flight, glass or bottle. There's an array of ciders (including the nonalcoholic Ellie's), co-ferments and low-ABV shrub spritzes to choose from.

Tilted Shed Ciderworks, 7761 Bell Rd, Windsor



