



Taste 70 apple varieties at Sebastopol farm fest

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Gold Ridge puts its heirloom bounty on the table, with tastings, slushies, and live music for the whole family.

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Gold Ridge Organic Farms just gave late summer a proper anchor: the Fourth Annual Heirloom Apple Festival lands Saturday, Sept. 20, 10 a.m. — 3 p.m., in Sebastopol. It's family-friendly, hands-on, and priced so locals can bring the whole crew — \$25 for adults and \$10 for kids 12 and under. Reservations are required.

What you get is the good stuff, not a parking-lot fair. The farm sets out curated tastes from a handful of the 70-plus heirloom apple varieties grown on site, along with their estate extra virgin olive oils, apple cider balsamic, and apple cider syrup. Founder-farmer Brooke Hazen leads orchard walks. There's an apple-themed trolley, fresh-pressed juice from the hand-turned cider press, and demos all day: Alli Keyser-Marti shows apple-pie top techniques, and Merrilee Olson covers easy apple preserves. Kids run an apple scavenger hunt; everyone else can follow the music — Spike Sikes & His Awesome Hotcakes are on the schedule. Chef Seamus fires pizzas; there's apple crumble and slushies. It's harvest, built for tasting and learning.

Plan ahead. Book your spots now and block the day. This festival has become a reliable September draw at Gold Ridge, and the farm caps capacity. If you prefer to browse as you

go, note the basics: the Farm Shop is open Fridays and Saturdays, 10 a.m. — 4 p.m., with tastings and seasonal products on the shelves.

If you want a warm-up before festival day, Honeycrisp U-Pick opens Saturday, Aug. 30, 8:30—11:30 a.m. This is the farm's first-ever u-pick and it's tightly run: reserve ahead; adults \$8 (includes a canvas picking bag), kids \$3; apples are \$4/lb. Important note — heirloom apples aren't part of u-pick; you'll find those in the shop. That said, a morning in the rows followed by slushies and a Farm Shop sweep sets you up nicely for the festival three weeks later.

Why this matters county-wide: West County's farm-shop boom keeps accelerating. More growers are opening their gates with real retail hours, tastings, and workshops, giving locals a way to buy where it's grown and learn while they're there. Sonoma Magazine's spring guide to 28 standout farmstands maps the breadth of it. And Farm Trails' Apple Trail pulls the apple-season picture into focus with an interactive map of producers, cider, u-pick, and more. Gold Ridge sits right in the middle — an orchard and olive mill that pairs production with education and community-scale events.

If you're the designated host in your circle, this festival earns its place on your calendar. Tasting heirlooms side by side calibrates your palate fast. You'll learn which varieties sing raw with only salt and oil, which ones want heat, and which ones carry a salad. Those demos translate directly to your kitchen — pie tops you can actually pull off, preserves you'll use all winter. Walk the orchards and ask the questions you can't answer from a recipe card. Then bring that knowledge back to your table.

How I'm doing it: I'm booking the festival, blocking a little extra time to sit on the crush-pad with a slushy and watch the pizza line move, then I'll sweep the Farm Shop for oils, the cider balsamic, and a bag (or three) of apples. If you can swing a scouting run before Sept. 20, hit the Aug. 30 Honeycrisp pick, keep it light, and leave room for a proper festival day. Either way, you'll come away with better instincts and a trunk full of Sonoma.

Details at a glance

- Fourth Annual Heirloom Apple Festival, Saturday, Sept. 20, 10 a.m. — 3 p.m.; reservations required; \$25 adults / \$10 kids.
- Farm Shop hours: Fridays & Saturdays, 10 a.m. — 4 p.m.
- Honeycrisp U-Pick: Saturday, Aug. 30, 8:30—11:30 a.m.; reservations required; u-pick pricing applies; heirlooms available in the shop, not for u-pick.

See you in the rows.