


Sebastopol grower spreading 'joy and love' through his heirloom apples

PD pressdemocrat.com/article/lifestyle/sebastopol-grower-spreading-joy-and-love-through-his-heirloom-apples

JENNIFER GRAUE

September 5, 2023

Gold Ridge will hold its second Annual Heirloom Apple Celebration later this month, and Brooke Hazen couldn't be happier about opening his farm to celebrate the season. 



















Slide 1 of 11

Gold Ridge Organic Farms owner Brooke Hazen focuses on antique heirloom apples like Hoople's Antique Gold, Red Gravensteins, Hudson's Golden Gem, Ashmeads Kernel and Cox Orange Pippin along with many more on the Sebastopol property. Photo taken Wednesday, Aug. 30, 2023. (John Burgess / The Press Democrat)

Brooke Hazen doesn't immediately give off farmer vibes.

Sure, he has the deep tan and lined face typical of someone who has worked for years outside in the sun and wind, but his pristine pink T-shirt and two pink jeweled stud earrings in his left ear belie that this is a man who lives to tend the soil and trees at Gold Ridge Organic Farms, his 88-acre apple and olive farm in Sebastopol.

"I love the color pink. I think it brings joy and beauty," Hazen said. "Pink is really a symbol of the apple blossom, a huge part of what we grow here. So, the power of Gold Ridge is pink power."

Skip Ad
X

But brown is the color most people might associate with Gold Ridge. That's the color of the paper bags filled with Hazen's apples that have been sold for years at 47 Whole Foods Markets all over Northern California.

The handled tote bags hold about 2½ pounds of an ever-changing mix of heirloom varieties he began marketing as an heirloom blend because stores won't create bar codes for each type of apple

"Every time a person picks up one of those bags each week, they're getting a whole new different blend of whatever's at peak season, peak ripeness at that time," he said. "They're getting an incredible range of flavors, colors and textures, all in one bag."

While customers may recognize the brand, Hazen said he's trying to transform how he does business so it's not just about a label. He'd long wanted to sell directly to consumers. The pandemic helped put that desire in motion.

Gold Ridge will hold its second [Annual Heirloom Apple Celebration](#) later this month, and Hazen couldn't be happier about opening his farm to celebrate the season.

"I felt like I was losing my soul through anonymous wholesale. Now I'm getting to put faces to it and put emotions to it," he said. "It's bringing the culture back into the agriculture I'm engaged in."

'Promise of the seeds'

Hazen spent his childhood on the beaches of Malibu before moving to the Bay Area when he was 11. He considered a career in natural resources until one day, he picked up a packet of seeds and had an epiphany.

"I fell in love with the promise of the seeds," he said.

For several years, he worked at Green Gulch Farm, an organic farm and Zen center in Marin County. In 2000, his family bought the property on Canfield Road "when the land was still affordable," Hazen said.

"(This land was) a huge empty canvas I could paint my dreams on," he said.

The windswept rolling hills offer stunning views from every direction. An Old World-style stone tasting room and production facility is surrounded by neat rows of olive and apple trees that undulate along the hillsides.

On a late-August morning, the 18 acres of apple trees hung heavy with fruit in an array of reds, yellows and greens, some 70 varieties. Their origins are scattered across Europe and the U.S. Some varieties can be traced back more than 500 years.

When asked to name a few favorites, Hazen spent almost 20 minutes describing apples in order of their ripening windows — early, mid or late season — with details as poetic as their names.

The Pink Pearl he called “sprightly, punchy ... a rebel of an apple.” Hudson’s Golden Gem “can get sort of warbly, sort of bumpy. It’s got quite an interesting personality.” Pittmatson’s Pineapple is a small variety that was a favorite of a tour he did for Whole Foods.

He also has a new variety that developed on its own from a parent tree.

“One branch decided to do its own thing, and that’s called a bud mutation,” he explained. “(It) reverted back to an unnamed variety, so I got to name it.”

He chose the name Sea Breeze for the aromatic, Golden Delicious-style apple he said is quite special.

“I’ve had people actually get really emotional and even had one person cry when they had it. (It) evokes a lot of emotions in people,” he said.

Hazen said the cool coastal climate his farm enjoys is optimal for the golden family of apples.

“Those varieties are very nuanced and aromatic. (This) climate really nurtures and expresses those nuances best,” he said.

Romance versus reality

Heirlooms account for just 10% of Hazen’s apple production. The romance of those heritage varieties is balanced by the reality that Honeycrisp and Fuji are the most popular varieties, so he grows those, too.

He has a hard time keeping up with the demand, especially for Honeycrisp. He attributed their popularity to texture.

“For Honeycrisp, it’s what ‘s called the explosion. The cell walls are larger than other apples, so when you bite into it, it explodes in your mouth,” he said. “For the people that love (texture), this apple meets their wildest dreams.”



Sponsored Content



Oakley Fuller

By [EyeBuyDirect](#)

In addition to selling apples for eating, Hazen is also focused on creative ways to use the fruit grocery stores can't or won't sell. He has nearly 100,000 pounds of apples that don't make the cut for fresh eating, so he's developed vinegars and syrups which he sells at the farm.

The Gold Ridge Heirloom Apple Celebration on Sept. 16 will include orchard strolls with Hazen and tastings of heirloom apples and fresh cider.

Gold Ridge Farm Heirloom Apple Celebration

When: 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., Saturday, Sept. 16

Where: 3387 Canfield Road, Sebastopol

Cost: \$25 adult/\$10 children 6 - 12. Pizzas (\$15), apple hand pies (\$10) and apple ice cream sundaes, both dairy and nondairy (\$5), will be available to purchase.

More info: goldridgeorganicfarms.com/events

He chose the date intentionally; it's when he'll have the greatest number of heirlooms available.

"The reason is to celebrate this ephemeral, creative expression of all the different colors, flavors and textures and heritage of heirloom apples in this small, fleeting window that we experience in September," he said.

In addition to offering tastings of freshly picked apples, Gold Ridge will bring in two top Sonoma County bakers who will make sweet and savory treats to showcase the produce at its peak. "Mike the Beijer" will make pizzas highlighting the farm's apples and olive oils, while Jenny Malicki of Buttercup Baking will have apple-filled hand pies for sale.

They've also engaged San Francisco-based consulting chef Bruce Hill to develop recipes, including homemade ice cream sundaes topped with Gold Ridge Honeycrisp-Fuji syrup and mochi baked apples.

In future seasons, Hazen hopes to offer apple picking as another way to build relationships. Duckworth Farm across the road has been an inspiration, he said.

Getting more people to experience heirloom apples in all their various colors, tastes and textures is a top priority for Hazen, but there's more to it than that.

To hear him tell it, he's not just hoping to expand people's palates. He's on a mission to open their minds.

“I’ve always gravitated to finding beauty in diversity and sort of reminding people of the immense joy that diversity brings to our lives,” he said. “I feel like I’m growing joy and love through the heirlooms.”

Brooke Hazen’s favorite apples

Strawberry parfait: An early-season apple. “It’s kind of like a godsend after nine months of famine with apples.”

Nonesuch: “Not a great name, but a great apple.”

Ashmead’s Kernel: “It has one of the most complex range of flavors of any apple I’ve ever had.”

Hudson’s Golden Gem: “It’s gold with a beautiful pink kiss on it.”

Calville Blanc: An old French dessert apple, shaped like a rounded star.

Mochi Roasted Heirloom Apples

Makes approximately 2 cups

San Francisco chef Bruce Hill calls these “mochi” apples for the rice flour in the recipe. He said the flour keeps more delicate apple varieties from falling apart during cooking and imparts a nice texture. Although you can roast any kind of apple for this recipe, Hill likes to use pink apple varieties because they’re both colorful and delicious.

[Print Recipe](#)

1¼ pounds of apples, peeled, cored and cut into ¾-inch chunks

¼ cup sugar

2 tablespoons rice flour

2 teaspoons fresh lemon juice

Canola oil for oiling the Silpat or parchment

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Line a large sheet pan with a Silpat mat or parchment paper and oil lightly with canola oil.

In a medium bowl, add sugar, rice flour and lemon juice and whisk to combine. Add the apple chunks and toss to coat well with the sugar mixture.

Spread apples on the lined sheet pan, making sure to leave space between them so they cook evenly.

Bake for 20 minutes, then rotate pan and bake for 15 minutes more. Check the apples to make sure they start to caramelize around the edges. If they have not, bake a couple minutes more. Remove from oven and let cool for 2 minutes before removing them from the pan.

Serve warm over ice cream with apple cider syrup or caramel sauce.

Apples can be chilled and rewarmed. They're also great on yogurt, cereal or oatmeal and with French toast, crepes or pancakes.

Heirloom Apple Almond Cake

Makes 8 servings

[Print Recipe](#)

3 cups peeled, cored and grated organic apples, drained of liquid

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup vegetable oil or good-quality olive oil

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup butter, melted, plus more to grease the pan

2 cups sugar

3 eggs

2 cups all-purpose flour, plus a bit more to flour the pan

1 cup almond flour

1 teaspoon salt

3 teaspoons cinnamon

1 teaspoon baking soda

1 teaspoon vanilla

1 cup sliced almonds

Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Prepare a 9-inch springform pan (see Note) by greasing the bottom and sides with butter. Add 1 tablespoon of flour to the pan, tilting and tapping it so a light dusting of flour covers the pan.

In a mixing bowl, beat the oil, butter and sugar together for five minutes. Then add the eggs and vanilla and beat at medium speed until they are combined and creamy.

In a separate bowl, sift together the flours, salt, cinnamon and baking soda. Stir into the butter and oil mixture, just until you see no trace of dry ingredients. Fold in the grated apples.

Transfer batter into the prepared baking pan and cover the top of the batter with almond slices.

Bake for one hour and 15 minutes, or until a toothpick inserted in the middle comes out clean.

Remove from oven and allow to cool in the pan before releasing the sides of the springform pan.

Note: If you do not have a springform pan, use a round 9-inch baking pan. To turn the cake out, gently run a butter knife around the sides of the cake to loosen. Cover the top of the cake with a piece of parchment paper, then turn the pan upside down. The parchment will catch any almonds that might fall off. Turn the cake right side up, topping with any almonds that came off.

Apple Carpaccio with Smoked Trout and Herbs

Makes 8 servings

This recipe comes from Chef Perry Hoffman of the Boonville Hotel. It makes for a pretty seasonal appetizer that is quick to put together.

[Print Recipe](#)

For the smoked trout pate

¾ cup crème fraîche

1 pound smoked trout, skin and bones removed and flaked

Sprigs of fresh tarragon, approximately 1 tablespoon

Sprigs of fresh chives, approximately 1 tablespoon

Juice and zest from 1 Meyer lemon

2-3 Pink Pearl apples (or another heirloom variety)

1 or 2 small red spring onions

3 tablespoons preserved lemon rind, chopped

1 small handful mixed fresh herbs such as chervil, tarragon, celery hearts, parsley or chives

Meyer lemon olive oil, for drizzling

Squeeze of lemon juice

Sea salt and pepper, to taste

In a bowl, combine crème fraîche, trout, tarragon, chives, lemon juice and zest. Fold together gently, being careful not to overmix. Keep refrigerated until ready to serve.

Prepare the remaining ingredients. Slice the apple horizontally into thin circles. Shave the onions thinly, on a mandoline if you have one, then place in ice water for a few minutes and drain.

When ready to assemble, spoon the pate on a platter and spread to flatten. Arrange apple circles over the pate to cover completely. Sprinkle the red onion, preserved lemon and herbs over the apples.

Add a squeeze of fresh lemon juice, which will keep the apples from discoloring, then add a drizzle of Meyer lemon olive oil.

Season with sea salt and freshly ground pepper. Serve with buttered crostini.

You can reach Staff Writer Jennifer Graue at 707-521-5262 or jennifer.graue@pressdemocrat.com. On Twitter @JenInOz.

Sponsored Content on Press Democrat



[Top 5 things to look for when purchasing a modular in-law unit](#)

By [Perpetual Homes](#)

As the demand for affordable housing solutions in California continues to grow, prefabricated homes, or prefab...