

APPLES OF OUR EYES, NOSE AND MOUTHS

Gary Paul Nabhan



When the leaves of New England begin to glow with crimsons, purples and golds, many of us remember that it's time for crimson, purple and gold apples to be picked, packed, sequestered in storage sheds, or processed into cider, butter, sauces or pies.

Apples exemplify that taste of the fall for many of us, but just what kind of apples we taste depends upon just where exactly we live, and how well we know our neighboring orchard-keepers.

Some eight hundred kinds of apples once enriched the kitchens, taverns and inns of New England, but most of these have already disappeared from the region's cuisines. In fact, just nineteen varieties monopolize the bins in our grocery stores, the pies of our cafes and the ciders of our bars. That is but a paltry sample of what it means to be an apple.

When the Renewing America's Food Traditions (RAFT) held workshops in Vermont and Massachusetts last year, we learned that at least seventy of the heirloom apples unique to New England that remain are so infrequently featured in nurseries, farmers markets and roadside stands that they can be considered threatened or endangered.

If nothing is soon done about them, their colors, textures, flavors and fragrances might forever be lost from Yankee culinary traditions. But we might also forget the lovely poetry of their folk names: Baker Sweet, Bottle Greening, Coles Quince, Gloria Mundi, Graniwinkle, Hightop Sweet, Pumpkin Russet, and Sheepnose.

Fortunately, in some rural communities, grassroots efforts to keep these old-timey apples alive and thriving appear to be on the rise. From the coastal plains of the Clambake foodshed, to the inland mountains of the Maple Syrup foodshed, named nursery stock of heirloom apples have been newly planted and are flourishing.

However, one additional source of heirloom fruits is often overlooked---the abandoned orchards lost amongst the underbrush on old homesteads, in national parks and historic farms. Perhaps as many as half of all the trees surviving in remnants of historic orchards and hedgerows are what we call "forgotten fruits"---heirloom apples that have been orphaned, losing their original names, as well as the horticultural and culinary traditions which went with them. And yet they have genetic, historic and perhaps gastronomic significance, just as much as Johnny Appleseed's original plantings in the Ohio River Valley, or as the ancient apple forests of Kazakhstan first explored by Nikolay Vavilov and Aimak Dzangaliev, and recently heralded by Frank Browning and Michael Pollan.



This autumn, folks from the Renewing America's Food Traditions partnership are teaming up with the staff at Old Sturbridge Village outside Worcester, Mass to explore what can tangibly be done with the forgotten fruits of such abandoned orchards and hedgerows. The oldest trees out on the landscape may be well over a century old, and the last of their kinds that have not perished. We are also sponsoring a similar forum in the Grand Traverse foodshed of northern Michigan, where cherries as well as apples also abound. We are hoping to form local workgroups in each of these foodsheds to inventory, protect and share "scion"-wood cuttings from these neglected reservoirs of food diversity.

But such rescues of old-timey varieties form only the first of many steps needed to bring the diverse fruits unique to American landscapes back into our kitchens, public festivals and community feasts. We also need to taste them when fresh, to document their keeping qualities, to bake with them, to press their juices and to ferment them. We need to see which are best used in blends to make hard ciders, and which are best savored as alone distinctive flavors.

If you love apples like we love apples, we need your help. Millions of people in this country need our guidance and encouragement to experience the simple fact that apple encompasses more than what Jonathan or Granny Smith can offer. We need to bring back a wider range of fruit diversity into American landscapes, and return their forgotten flavors to our tables.

Gary Nabhan is founder and facilitator of RAFT. His latest book, Where Our Food Comes From, is now available from Island Press.