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# To every apple, there is a season

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco, For The Star-Ledger

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Autumn is still more than two weeks away, but rosy-cheeked apples, freshly picked from local orchards, are already diverting shoppers' attention from the more traditional fruits of summer.

"The apple crop is looking really good. The size is nice and the color's coming up on them," said Kim Best of Best's Fruit Farm in Hackettstown, where some 30 varieties of apples grow on 35 acres. So far, the Bests have picked

early-maturing varieties like Summer Treat and Paula Red. Soon, they will turn their attention to Mollie's Delicious, a local favorite that customers have been asking for since early August.

Yes, apple season, which stretches into November, has started in earnest, but to every apple variety there is a specific season -- and that means apple fans may need to wait awhile until their own particular favorite is ready to be picked. That's if they want it to taste like it really should.

The hugely popular Macoun, for example, won't be ready until October "and we won't pick them until they're ripe and ready," said Best. Eating a Macoun at its peak is like "biting into a glass of cider, and until it tastes like that, it's just not ready," she added.

"It's not a tart apple. It's a sweet apple. If you see them green and tart, they're immature," noted her father, Bob Best, Sr., 72, whose own father, Ernest Best, established the farm in 1945.

Since then, Best has seen the rise and fall in popularity of many an apple variety, even the Macoun. "Back in the '50s you couldn't give it away. Nobody knew it. About 20 years ago, it became an apple of the yuppie generation.

Now it's probably the most asked for variety," he said. "We had to plant extra because we didn't have enough to meet the demand," noted his daughter.

Gauging the public's fickle tastes and responding to them are crucial to local growers' survival. Though some have set up pick-your-own operations that combine farming with entertainment, the Bests prefer to harvest their own fruit for sale at their farm and to area markets. Their hillside orchards are ideal for growing apples, not for handling crowds, explained Bob Best. "I can't see people destroying my trees and knocking half the stuff on the ground," he added. To keep his business thriving, he focuses on planting -- and, if necessary, replanting -- the types of apples people most want to eat.

"There's definitely been a change, a shift. There are a lot of new varieties that have come along, particularly in the last 10 years," he said. Traditional favorites included McIntosh, Stayman Winesap and Northern Spy. Now, customers look for such varieties as Gala and Honeycrisp, which should be available later this month. "But that's not harvesting until the first of November," stressed Best.

A favorite among bakers, the Stayman Winesap is still one of the Bests' biggest sellers "because a lot of people don't grow it anymore and lots of grocery stores don't carry it," said Kim. Her own baking favorite, however, is Northern Spy. "It's got just the right amount of tartness for a pie," she said.

"The new varieties have sugar and a flavor that stays on the palate, and people love it. And they're hard and crisp. They're not looking for an apple to bake and cook because nobody does that any more," said her father. Though some customers favor the Stayman, and the McIntosh is still a top seller, "how many more years that's going to be true, I can't say," he added.

His local experience reflects a broader, nationwide trend. "The varietal picture has changed considerably over the past five years, and will continue to change with the 2007 crop," according to a report from the US Apple Association in Vienna, Virginia. "Red Delicious still dominates variety production nationally, while Gala holds the second place ranking for 2007, as it did for the first time in 2006. Golden Delicious, which held second place for many years, moved to third place last year." According to the Association's 2007 forecast, the next two most widely produced apple varieties this year will be Granny Smith and Fuji.

To Jim Cranney, vice president of the US Apple Association, variety improvement is a form of new product innovation. "Consumers like to try new things," he said. Coupled with advances in handling and storage practices, providing consumers with ample apple options is essential to securing the domestic industry's future. China, the world's largest producer of apples, is seeking permission to export its fresh apples to the United States. In the 1990s, the importation of apple concentrate from China forced some American juice companies out of business and drastically cut apple acreage in Washington state, a leading apple grower, according to Win Cowgill, a fruit specialist with the Rutgers Cooperative Extension of Hunterdon County.

"We're quite concerned," said Cranney of the possibility of fresh apple imports from China. "Apples are a very labor-intensive horticultural crop."

In a joint venture with Purdue University and the University of Illinois, breeders at Rutgers University are trying to develop "apples with exceptional eating quality, a nice, crisp breaking texture, and spicy flavors" that thrive in

Research and Extension Center in Cream Ridge. Getting better-tasting new varieties to market will help solidify local growers' niche in the face of foreign competition, he added.

Though Bob Best agrees large wholesale growers are sure to be hard-hit by the eventual importation of inexpensive apples from abroad, he's optimistic about the survival of small farms like his. "The only future is the small guy who can raise them and sell direct to the consumer," he said. "Do you know that apples in the supermarket are waxed? Waxing keeps an apple looking beautiful on the outside, but it can be deteriorating on the inside. We do not wax our apples. We polish them, yes, but we don't wax them. We can give people a crisper, fresher apple." And not a minute before its time.

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