

Apple Market!

Exploring the World of Apples from McCarren Park to China

by Chester Layman

Before fully launching into a panegyric on the comeback of apple cultivation, I should note that Henry David Thoreau, who knew a few things, claimed that the domestic apple is an uninspired imitation of the real thing, and the real thing is the WILD apple. Wild apples on the branch, wild apples in the grass, wild apples under the snow in December which if thawed out yield, he claimed, a juice superior to any cider. He even expressed affection for the old apple under the leaves that shared its skin with a cricket, as if such a distinction lent it a special taste. Maybe it did. But cricket or no, according to Thoreau the real zest, for the taste with panache and zip and tang, the wild apple is unbeatable...But in fairness to the tamer members of the apple family, it should be added that Thoreau found the source for much of the wild apples' zest to be the outdoor air in which one must saunter to find them – it's the woody walk, setting the senses a-buzzing, that makes them so tasty. They don't taste so good indoors. It was a mistake to put a few in his pocket and hide them in a drawer: taking a nibble later he found they were not at all pleasant. A milder tasting fruit is required for a winter's evening indoors, around the hearth, and for that we have the cultivated varieties. So let's move indoors, leaving wild-man Thoreau savoring his wild outdoors, and turn our attention to these more humanized apples.

For much of my life I paid them little attention, though I recall how my mother would mention with relish the name of one variety or other. Now their names alone enchant me. *Stayman Winesap – Northern Spy – Crispin – Mutsu – Fuji – 20 oz. Pippin – Ida Red – Cortland*. I don't know what the Pippin tastes like; and what in the world does "20 ounce" mean? I suppose it means *big*. How does an apple get a name like Northern Spy? and are several of them called Spys or Spies? Are Mutsus of Japanese origin, as Fujis presumably are? Are Mutsu-Crispkins a hybrid? I could find the answers to these questions, but for the moment I prefer the mystery, and the feeling that I'm benefiting from a world apple culture. Other names have no mystery – Empire, grown in the Empire State, or the ubiquitous Red Delicious, which rules a veritable empire in the grocery chains. The Red Delicious is surely a product of American agribusiness with its banalizing, flavor-draining tendencies. More on that shortly. The Empire, in spite of its dull name, is a fine apple: colored deep red – almost burgundy – not very large, and tasty.

I like best to buy apples at the local farmers' market. If I had a car, I would look for roadside stands in October. Was it the allure of the names, or the attraction of the market itself that fed my interest? Probably a bit of both. The location of the Greenpoint/Williamsburg market, in a corner of McCarren Park, is like no other I know of, and we are lucky to have it. There is grass underfoot, and those grand old sycamores, leaves a-rustle on breezy days, shade us from the summer sun or keep us company in the colder air. The next best thing to finding wild apples in the woods, perhaps, is to find them at a market-in-the-park! Over on the playing fields on Saturday morning there are little kids playing soccer, and early risers strolling about or, in warm weather, basking in the sun. The Bedford Avenue traffic is at a safe distance. The hot-dog stand is across the street. There's often a jazz ensemble set up

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amidships, and the market is a-bustle. The market! The age-old attraction of markets owe as much too their role as a gathering place as to their commercial role. The market is, in the broad sense of the word, an erotic occasion. It's a tool for conviviality, in the late Ivan Illich's phrase. The conviviality owes partly to its somewhat ad-hoc organization based on the geography of its location; to its temporary nature; to the outdoor location; and, these days, to the feeling that we marketeers are escaping from the hyper-capitalism that prevails, briefly giving the slip to the monotone commodity culture which thrives on middle-men and sterility and mediocrity and waste. At this market, the farmers' stands with their canopies are placed around a fork in the park road – potatoes, squash and cucumbers over there, apples and pears and plums here, baked goods in the fork of the Y, organic greens and New Jersey tomatoes farther on. All this under a spring or summer or fall sky, with a steady stream of people coming and going, queuing at the stands, or just standing around talking to friends. It's a select but varied company, the market-goers.

At the McCarren Park market in 2002, there were two apple sellers at the peak of the season; the seller with the most varieties, and the one that sells throughout the winter, is Red Jacket Orchards, from Geneva in New York's Finger Lake region. On a December day I count about a dozen varieties for sale. Peter L. Wilson has written that there were hundreds of varieties in cultivation in New York a hundred years ago which have since disappeared. Perhaps some of those hundreds have been saved; one of the apple sellers tells me that Cornell University is keeping as many as a thousand in cultivation.... The apples for sale on this winter day were a varied lot. The smallest is the Lady, which seems to be quite popular in New York City this year. A woman friend of mine claims that the Lady is a libidinous apple. Hmmmmm.... Sometimes the market sells something even smaller, the crabapple, which my mother, I remember, made jelly from. Thoreau mentioned that the crab is the only native American apple. I do not bother to find out what the largest apple is; bigger is not better. I usually pay little attention to the ciders, though I did try a sip of semi-hot cider today. Too sweet for my taste. Thoreau offered the fact that the cider made only from skins and cores is more flavorful than the whole-apple cider.

My informant from Red Jacket Orchards spoke to me about why they don't sell organic apples. The soil in the northeast is the type that retains moisture, so that fungus is a big problem, for which the best solution seems to be a fungicide. Experimentation with other methods is very expensive, since it takes three years for a seedling to grow to a mature tree. I'm only half convinced by this explanation: why can't a few mature trees be set aside for experimenting with alternative kinds of fungus control? I suppose his answer would be that the loss of a single tree is a sizable one, and such losses are inevitable when trying new pest-control systems. At any rate, he is well aware of the growing popularity of organics, so I must take his word for it that if they could profitably grow them, they would. Most of the organic apples on the market, he went on to say, come from the West Coast. The Red Jacket man also told me something that was a surprise to me: the world's big apple producer is China. So there is a whole vast other continent of apples to explore!

I have on the table in front of me one of my favorites, a Braeburn, which I love for its beautiful name, redolent of the Scots dialect and famous poet, and for its tartness. I bought it this morning at the market. It is a little smaller than a tennis ball. I turn it round in my hand, noting with pleasure the symmetrical indentation on each "pole." It

is a pied apple, light red shading off into yellow with a tinge of green, with a red stem. At the market, among the other apples, the Braeburn yellows shine more golden even than the Golden Delicious. Why would anyone prefer a solid-colored apple? The Braeburn's skin is freckled with tiny brown spots that add a slightly rough texture to the skin; and there are various other little spots and scars — this apple has led a full life before arriving at my table. It's the sort of apple which agribusiness has been trying for a century to replace with a sleeker, prettier, more uniform, more tasteless product. Of course, tastelessness was not the goal, but that's where you end up when you breed for less important features like shelf life, transportability, size and good looks. If you don't breed for the sensuous pleasure of eating, you end up with — what else? — banality. There are signs that people are coming to their senses, and not only those who buy from natural food outlets. Among my recent newspaper clippings is a *Times* front page story on the declining profitability of the Red Delicious. A ninety-year old friend of a friend said, when she saw the petite Lady apple, that she had not seen apples like that since she was girl. So-called natural foods are more and more popular; they made up the fastest-growing sector of the food market in the 1990s. And the popularity of the greenmarkets, or farmers' markets, is part of the same trend. Both these trends go back to the sixties counter-culture, and many members of that culture were reading books by none other than — wild-man Thoreau! So the next time you go to a farmers' market for some fresh produce, consider what you owe to old Henry David, that odd character rooting around under the leaves and snow for apples, and then writing about what he has found for our delectation.

I bite into my freckled Braeburn — ah, gentle reader, you have not lived until you get a taste of a new Braeburn. A tinge of lemon, a tang to keep you going all day. Perhaps it owes its zest to cooler weather, for these apples are picked later in the season — I did not see them at the market until November. "No mortal has ever enjoyed the perfect flavor of any fruit," wrote Thoreau, "and only the godlike among men begin to taste its ambrosial qualities. For nectar and ambrosia are only those fine flavors of every earthly fruit which our coarse palates fail to perceive, — just as we occupy the heaven of the gods without knowing it."

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