

The Orchard According to Ken



by Henry Verden

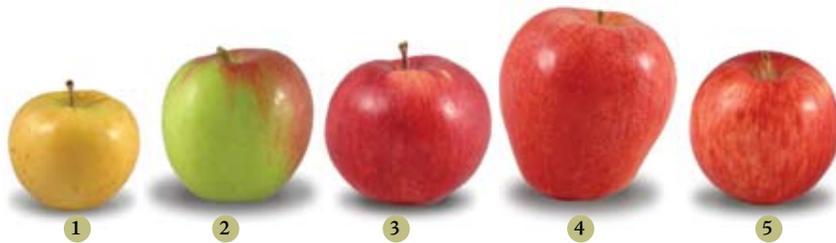


We all grew up with the story of Johnny Appleseed, a man who walked the western frontier randomly sowing apple seeds to provide trees for those who would come after. The true story is that Johnny Appleseed's name was John Chapman, and the trees he started were in carefully planned nurseries, complete with fences to protect them from livestock. They were left under the watchful eye of a neighbor and Chapman returned to tend them every year or two.

In New Berlin, Wisconsin, the spirit of the real Johnny lives on in Ken Weston and his sister Genevieve who run Weston's Antique

Apple Orchard. Ken has a passion for apples that's at once refreshing and infectious. He can walk his 16-acre orchard and name every one of the more than 100 heirloom apples he grows on approximately 700 trees. Some varieties date back as far as the Roman Empire. He has made it

his life's work to preserve varieties that are rare or extinct anywhere else. Heirloom apples are a thing apart. They are nothing like the hybrid commercial apples you see at your local grocery store. No two varieties of heirloom apples look the same. They run the gamut of sizes, shapes, and textures. What really defines all these varieties is an incredible range of flavors. Some have overtones of strawberry, pineapple, pear, lemon, or nuts. They range in taste from syrupy sweet to snappy tart and in texture from extremely soft to almost rocklike. What they have in common is an intensity and clarity of



ANTIQUE APPLES

- 1 *Pink Pearl* (1944, California)
- 2 *Williams Early Red* (USA)
- 3 *Russian Raspberry* (Russia)
- 4 *Chenango Strawberry* (1850, New York)
- 5 *Double Red Melba* (1898, Canada)

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flavor that will make you realize when you bite into one of these delicacies that you've never tasted a real apple before, only pale copies.

Weston's sits on high ground called Prospect Hill that is now an historic district comprised of a number of buildings from the early days of New

**“COMFORT ME WITH APPLES:
FOR I AM SICK OF LOVE.”**
—THE SONG OF SOLOMON 2:5

Berlin. The orchard and a nearby church are both on the National Register of Historic Places.

Ken has been around apples most of his life. He is the third generation of his family to tend the trees. “My grandparents bought the orchard as a hedge against the Depression,” Ken explained as he took a break from cleaning up his barn for the annual New Berlin Historic Days Celebration. The family initially tried a

Weston's didn't start out growing heirlooms. “My mother had the idea in the beginning and I expanded on the idea,” explained Ken. “We weren't growing heirlooms to begin with. They just became heirlooms as time went on. We grow 101 or 102 varieties now and we still sell them all at the West Allis Farmers Market, the Dane County Farmers Market, and here at the farm. We also sell varietal ciders.”



small foundry business in the basement of the barn and they also tried raising chickens, but neither lasted for more than a couple of years. In 1936 they expanded the orchard and started selling apples at the side of the road. “A roadside stand was the only outlet we had before the farmers' markets,” Ken said.

Many of the varieties that Weston's grows have fallen by the wayside because they are not commercially viable. Many are simply too delicate to transport and store. Ken gave one example. “The Chenango Strawberry is a wonderful apple. It has a fragrance that's just incredible. Some people



ANTIQUe APPLES *The charming pink tint of the flesh near the skin develops as the Pink Pearl variety ripens. It has a tart flavor with a hint of grapefruit and originated in California around 1910.*

used them in place of flowers. It's a very soft apple. When we are picking Chenanago Strawberries, we have to use gloves because otherwise we leave fingerprints on it. You have to treat them just like eggs. Now who in the world would do that? It's one of our biggest sellers, however."

Ken is always searching as the hunt for new varieties is never ending. "We have to replace 60 trees soon. One of the new ones is a Turkish apple. I do a lot of research and read a lot about them and look for the ones that strike me like the Blemheim Orange (from England in the 1740s). Then I go through different nurseries to find the variety we want. I get some from growers at swap meets. Some are the result of cross-pollination. We sell 15 different varieties that heaven only knows what the parents are, but some

of them are pretty good so we kept them. One is the Old Church apple that only grows in our orchard, nowhere else."

Ken gets really enthusiastic when it comes to talking about apple diversity. "Apples are probably one of the most genetically interesting of all the fruits. You can just



Large and luscious, Sweet Sixteen apples ready for picking.

about do anything with them. They survive under almost any conditions. In Kazakhstan they've got apples that grow like potatoes. They taste something like potatoes and grow on vines. There are apples that are

humongous and apples that are tiny. There are orchards that go back hundreds of years that were discovered by the Black Sea where the apples don't get scabs or insect damage, so Cornell University is cross-pollinating them with more popular varieties hoping to produce apples that are disease resistant. Some apple varieties are over 10 thousand years old; apples are very, very old."

Over the years, it has become increasingly difficult to maintain the orchard. Property taxes, for example, have steadily risen as modern New Berlin has crept ever closer and the land was zoned residential. Ken and his sister made a decision to guarantee the orchard's future. Ken explains, "The way to keep things that are very old is to give them away. To preserve these orchards and preserve these varieties, we gave the whole thing, intact, to the city with the stipulation that they are to maintain the orchard no matter what and that it will be kept as it is otherwise it reverts to the Weston family for one dollar. A foundation was formed to oversee things. It's worked out beautifully, we have volunteers who help maintain the orchard and equipment." The foundation also helps generate the funding to pay for maintenance.

If you're anxious to

be your own Johnny Appleseed, Weston's offers bench-grafting classes. Apple trees grown from seeds may remain true but are more likely to revert to one of the parent varieties. In order to get a predictable variety, you need to do a bench graft. Scion wood (one year old growth) from the tree you want to produce is grafted to rootstock. The rootstock can vary and determines the size of the tree. For \$25 the class teaches you to graft and you get to take home your own brand-new apple tree. The instructors

will give you all the help you need to do it right.

Of the over 17,000 varieties of apples that have been recorded throughout history, many fell out of favor and an unfortunate number have become extinct. Today between 7,000 and 8,000 remain with only about 700 available from nurseries. Growers like Ken Weston are doing all they can to preserve the varieties that are left. Pay a visit to Weston's Antique Apple Orchard and find out why it's all worthwhile. You'll become a believer.



• IF YOU GO •

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