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NEW KID ON APPLE BLOCK

Mixed reviews for Cosmic Crisp amid changing market PAGES 4-5

Cosmic Crisp apples, released on Dec. 1, are a cross between HoneyCrisp and Enterprise that Washington State University spent 20 years developing. Local farmers are split on the quality of the new variety. [JUDY RIFE/TIMES HERALD-RECORD]

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Does Cosmic Crisp live up to the

Mixed local reaction to new variety released by Washington state growers last month

By Judy Rife
Times Herald-Record

Dominic Romero looked in surprise at the bag of Cosmic Crisp apples spilling on the table.

Whatever he expected from his first encounter with the much-ballyhooed new kid on the apple block that Washington state growers released Dec. 1, it wasn't this.

"It looks just like an Empire," said Romero, orchard manager at Pavero Cold Storage in Highland, twirling the apple in his hand.

The other Hudson Valley growers who gathered before sunrise for breakfast at Kirky's, the popular deli on Route 9W in Milton, agreed.

"Washington growers have always thought redder is better - look at Red Delicious - and consumers, regardless of what they tell you, really do buy with their eyes," said Anthony Fino, co-owner of Fino Farms in Milton. "So this is likely to sell on looks."

But if the small, round, red Cosmic Crisp is a ringer in appearance for the small, round, red Empire, a variety developed in the 1940s that is still popular today, what does it taste like?

Brad Clarke, co-owner of Clarke's Family Farm in Modena, got a knife out and started cutting up the apples.

Checking all the boxes

At first blush, the growers decided Cosmic Crisp checked all the boxes for current fashion among consumers and chain stores.

"It's okay," said Jeff Pavero, co-owner of Pavero Cold Storage in Highland.

It has a sweet-tart flavor that should satisfy fans of either or both and its dense flesh produces the sought-after crunch that made HoneyCrisp a star.

"I don't know about the thick skin, though," said Ben Trapani, co-owner of Trapani Farms in



Cosmic Crisp apples, released on Dec. 1, are a cross between HoneyCrisp and Enterprise that Washington State University spent 20 years developing. [JUDY RIFE/TIMES HERALD-RECORD]

Milton. "A lot of people don't like thick skins."

The dense flesh and thick skin, however, protect the apple from damage and prolong its shelf-life in storage for as long as 12 months, an attribute that even

Washington growers are hesitant about advertising.

"In that sense, it's a grower, packer, chain store apple," said Clarke.

"With their volume, they (Washington growers) need an

apple that's durable - easy to pick, easy to pack - that they can sell all year," said Fino. "Not necessarily a better- or best-tasting apple."

"The flavor's good but it's got an aftertaste," said Chip Kent,

co-owner of Locust Grove Fruit Farm in Milton. "I can't figure it out. Can you? It's sort of a starchy storage taste."

"Are people going to buy it at \$2.99 a pound (roughly twice what other apples sell for)

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apple hype?

Cosmic Crisp at a glance

Cosmic Crisp is a patented new apple that Washington state growers introduced Dec. 1. Growers are counting on the apple, a cross between HoneyCrisp and Enterprise that Washington State University spent 20 years developing, to supplant their once-popular Red Delicious in consumers' affections and maintain their dominance of the industry. They have ripped out thousands of acres of Red Delicious to plant 12 million trees of Cosmic Crisp – and they're far from done. Royalties from tree sales are bankrolling a \$10 million budget to market the new apple, the biggest in industry history, and restrictions on tree sales will give Washington growers a monopoly for 10 years. This first year, growers have enough Cosmic Crisp to ship 450,000 boxes; next year, enough to ship 2 million boxes, and in subsequent years, as these initial plantings mature, enough to ship 15 million boxes. If production stops at 15 million of Washington's average yield of 125 million boxes a year, Cosmic Crisp will still have gone from zero to one of the state's top five apples almost overnight. In comparison, New York, the No. 2 apple state, produces an average of 30 million boxes a year – of more varieties than any other state, particularly in the Hudson Valley, where the crop is grown almost exclusively for fresh-eating.

when they're only going to get two, maybe three, apples to a pound?" said Clarke.

Comparing Mom and Dad

Then Trapani produced some HoneyCrisp and Clarke some Enterprise, the parents of Cosmic Crisp, for comparison to their offspring.

They speculated the dark red Enterprise had contributed its color and tempered HoneyCrisp's sugar – and

perhaps some of the traits that make HoneyCrisp even more difficult to grow in Washington than in New York.

Washington's climate, hotter and drier, exacerbates HoneyCrisp's tendency to develop bitter pit, a calcium deficiency that can destroy the crop. The apple, in addition, tends to bear heavily only every other year.

The faults have spurred an explosion of new introductions as the industry searches for a better HoneyCrisp, a search that won't include Cosmic Crisp since Washington intends to maintain a monopoly on it for 10 years.

"I really like this apple," said Kent as he pushed some EverCrisp across the table to Clarke to slice into samples. "It's got a great flavor – the Fuji does it – and it's got a great snap and pop when you bite into it."

Another contender?

A child of HoneyCrisp and Fuji borne in Ohio, the apple is just becoming available in enough quantity for sale beyond Hudson Valley u-picks and farmstands.

"Cosmetically, Cosmic Crisp is the nicest apple on the table, but EverCrisp is the best-tasting," said Pavero, delivering a verdict that none of the growers contested.

"In comparison, I don't think Cosmic Crisp lives up to the hype," added Romero. "The flavor's just not there."

The marked preference so disconcerted the growers as potentially self-serving that they started asking Kirky's other customers to compare the two apples. EverCrisp still prevailed.

"There's a \$10 million marketing budget behind Cosmic Crisp so it's almost as though if you don't like it, there's something wrong with you, not with the apple," said Fino.

Then, the sky showing the first streaks of dawn and plates and cups empty, the growers said their good-byes and went to work.

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Hudson Valley apple farmers compare their first Cosmic Crisps to other apples over breakfast at Kirky's Deli on Route 9W in Milton. The proliferation of other new varieties amid changes in consumer tastes will be topics of discussion at Cornell Cooperative Extension fruit school in February. (JUDY RIFE/TIMES HERALD-RECORD)

Cornell fruit school to focus on apples

New varieties amid changes in consumer tastes pressing concerns for growers

By Judy Rife

Times Herald-Record

The conversation at what Art Soons calls "the big fruit meetings" hasn't changed in his 60-plus years of growing apples.

"After 'How are you?' and 'How's the family?' it's always 'What are you planting?'" said Soons, co-owner of Soons Orchards in New Hampton.

The introduction of Cosmic Crisp and the proliferation of other new varieties amid changes in consumer tastes has made the perennial question so pressing for Hudson Valley growers that Cornell Cooperative Extension will devote one day of its annual fruit school on Feb. 24-25 to answering it.

"We want to look at new varieties from a horticultural perspective – how do you grow them successfully, as well as from a marketing perspective – how do you introduce them successfully," said Dan Donahue, Cornell's tree fruit expert in the Hudson Valley. "Both perspectives are important to their ultimate profitability."

Cornell's experts, however, can't predict what consumers are going to want in seven to eight

years, the lag time growers face between ordering trees and picking fruit from them.

But commercial and retail sales data offer some clues about what's hot and what's not – and hard, sweet apples like HoneyCrisp are still ascendant if still behind such market leaders as Gala and Fuji.

"It's that lag time that makes it such a tough decision," said Anthony Fino, co-owner of Fino Farms in Milton.

Donahue expects growers will be eager to discuss what they can plant that's easier to grow than the demanding HoneyCrisp or that's an alternative to the potentially popular Cosmic Crisp, the apple Washington state growers are banking on to replace their once-dominant Red Delicious.

"I don't think Cosmic Crisp is any more special than any other apple but with a \$10 million marketing budget, it's going to be a factor in the industry," said Alisha Albinder Camac, operations manager at Hudson River Fruit Distributors in Milton.

Donahue said the marketing campaign, the biggest in industry history, "just blew me away" when he got an inside look at it last month during the Washington State Tree Fruit Association's annual meeting.

"We've never seen anything like it here," said Donahue, adding the New York Apple Association's

annual marketing budget is around \$500,000. The extensive use of social media to create grassroots buzz for Cosmic Crisp captured his attention, Donahue said, because he thinks New York growers could replicate it and become less dependent on farmers markets and farmstands to generate demand for new varieties.

"I was surprised that I had five customers in a matter of days (after its Dec. 1 release) ask specifically for Cosmic Crisp," said Dan Tiberio, produce manager at Adams Fairacre Farms in Newburgh. "How did they know to ask if not for the marketing campaign?"

But Tiberio said "the real sleeper apple of the season" in his opinion was a locally-grown one that he stocked for the first time: EverCrisp.

"People absolutely love it; they come back for more of it," said Tiberio. "I'd like to see growers promote it."

Soons, who grows more than 50 varieties for his retail store, has decided to finally let go of his Jonamacs but is undecided about what he will plant in their place – although he can't keep Snapdragon in stock.

"You can't make any money growing apples people don't want to buy," said Soons. "You've got to keep up."

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