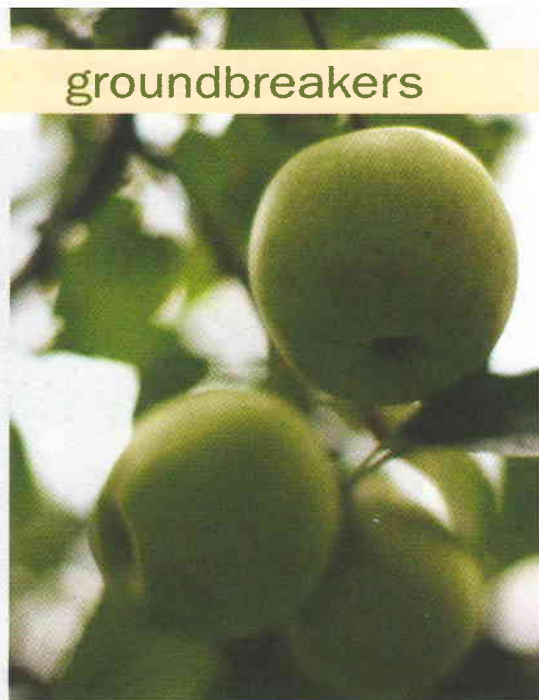


PRESERVING

Virginia's Best Apples

Theresa Curry

On Rural Ridge Farm, a Virginia family grows more than 200 apple varieties, most of which nearly vanished more than a century ago—including the award-winning Albemarle Pippin.



Those colorful ornaments in the kitchen fruit bowl once had a role as important as that of bread or salt. Even before the rugged Virginia settler cleared a piece of land for his home, he planted a couple of apple trees.

He wasn't just dreaming of pie for dessert or even a warming cup of hard cider. The apples that fell from his trees each autumn made an enormous difference in the health and the very survival of his extended family. They were pressed for cider, which, when fresh, was considered a nourishing drink for children. Applesauce, cider, and cut-up raw apples were the tonic of choice for the difficult stomachs of the young and the elderly: in fact, apple pectin is still included in medicines formulated to aid digestion.

The cider that ran from the presses was distilled into brandy, the sole pain reliever and anesthetic available on the frontier. Part of the cider was set out in open containers to catch an airborne starter that would turn it into vinegar, which had disinfectant properties to clean wounds, acted as a grime cutter to shine windows, and provided acid to serve as the agent for turning vegetables into pickles.

The pectin from apples was added to the juice and pulp of other fruits to provide the "jell" for the jellies and jams that embellished endless pans of cornbread. Sweet apples were baked into pies, dumplings, and cakes.

Today's Johnny Appleseeds

As Virginia matured, so did its apple trees. Farmers came to use their orchards as a reliable cash crop, sending tons of apples sailing below decks to Europe in huge wooden barrels. At that time there were hundreds of varieties of apples grown: some for cider, some for pies, and some for sauce. But none were as much in demand as the Albemarle Pippin, the fruit of choice for kings and generals.

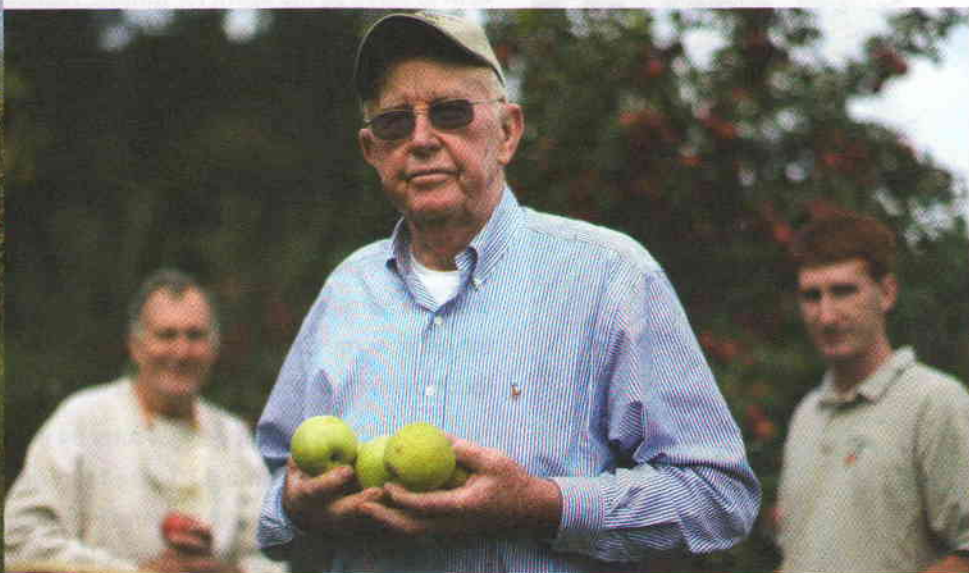
"It ages well. In fact, it gets sweeter as it ages," says Charlotte Shelton, who grows Albemarle Pippins on a 130-acre farm orchard in Albemarle County's rural North Garden region. A growing demand for uniformity led to the near demise of the Pippin and hundreds of other Virginia apples that didn't fit the dark-red, smooth-skinned,



sweet, bland, and crisp profile of the Red Delicious. Consumers got used to choosing among a few perfect, waxy specimens—originating mostly from Washington State—for their fruit bowls and pies.

But centuries later, fans of the old apples remain. Every year, a handful of apple lovers gathers at Monticello for an event the third president would have loved: an apple tasting designed to acquaint the public with the wide range of apple varieties and tastes available in Jefferson's day. There were literally thousands of kinds of apples for the founding fathers to enjoy, says Tom Burford, who conducts the tasting.

Burford, nicknamed "Professor Apple" for his longtime interest in preserving and promoting valuable apple varieties, picks from an assortment of 20 or so Jeffersonian and more modern apples for the Monticello tasting. As the tasters chomp on apple slices and clear their palates between samples with unsalted crackers, the Lynchburg horticulturist and orchard consultant presents a bit of each apple's history. There's no one all-purpose apple, Burford explains. Colonists would plant some for cider, some for saving, some for eating whole, and some for pies and cobblers.



Monticello's event, now in its 20th year, is the country's oldest formal tasting, as far as Burford can tell, and each year the tasters vote for the apple they like best.

As votes are cast on the chilly mountain, the Newton (Albemarle) Pippin is always in the running, according to Peter Hatch, Monticello's horticulturist. The Pippin—reputed to be George Washington's favorite—consistently places near the top of the list. In 2007 it was a clear taste winner, just as it has been four out of the five last tastings. Other wonderfully named varieties vie for the No. 2 spot, such as Pomme Gris, Esopus Spitzenburg (Jefferson's favorite, Shelton says), and Ashmead's Kernel.

A Taste of History

Never tasted any of these apple varieties? That's exactly the problem Burford and Shelton are trying to address. You can remedy your ignorance with a drive out to Shelton's farm, about eight miles south of Charlottesville. Shelton has many varieties of noncommercial apples, and she supplies Burford with the fruit for his annual Monticello tasting.

The orchard at Rural Ridge Farm is a family affair. The Shelton family left its Amherst County holdings, a subsistence farm with cattle, grain, vegetables, and fruit, in the mid-1950s so Shelton's father could work in Charlottesville. It was well-understood that everyone would return to farming some day, and the family bought the North Garden farm for the senior Sheltons' retirement home. Now, Shelton and her three brothers—Charles, Bill, and Todd—are there with varying frequency as their current jobs allow.

Shelton, whose full-time job is as a Charlottesville stockbroker, joined her brothers in trying to figure out what they could do to make the rugged land pay at least part of the mortgage. "I knew Tom Burford, of course. He was like a member of the family," Charlotte says. Burford is also originally from Amherst County. "I think my uncle married his cousin," she recalls. She knew about his work with apple history and preservation, attended one of his apple tastings, and planted a few dozen trees, with peaches, plums, and cherries among the apples.

In no time, it was a runaway hobby. She ordered 40 more trees, joined the North American Fruit Explorers, and somehow ended up with 250 old apple varieties. The farm markets the apples under the name Vintage Virginia. The Sheltons bypass the typical commercial spray program to care for the trees as needed. As their orchard grew, the Sheltons also became very interested in making cider and are presently building a cidery. "Our cider is nothing like what you find in the apple juice section of the supermarket," Shelton explains. For last year's cider on the farm, the Sheltons used 30 or so different varieties, achieving a complexity normally associated with wine. The cider operation, once complete, will be governed by the same regulations as Virginia's farm wineries.

Rural Ridge Farm also has a nursery, so those interested in growing old varieties have a source for seedlings. Shelton has encouraged the two remaining commercial Albemarle County orchards, Chiles and Henley's, to grow the old-style fruit. "We'll need to buy more apples as our cider-making operation grows," she said. The farm has also become a center in the community, offering classes in cider-making and holding an

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Rural Ridge Farm, run by the Shelton family, serves the community not just with its heirloom-preserving orchard and nursery, but also with its classes and events.

old-fashioned harvest festival in November. This year, Rural Ridge also helped sponsor a heritage seed event at Monticello. "Whatever we do, we try to look at how it fits in with our overall goals," Shelton says. "We want to encourage the promotion of local products and rural businesses."

Theresa Curry is a Virginia-based freelance feature writer. She writes for a number of publications, including Charlottesville's Daily Progress and the Augusta Free Press.

Virginia Apple Tart

When apples are full of flavor, go easy on the sugar, spice, and other flavoring. This tart, which comes from Shelton's heritage apple recipe collection, showcases complex, richly flavored apples such as the Albemarle Pippin, Roxbury Russet, Stayman, and Winesap. Shelton encourages mixing varieties. For more recipes, see the Vintage Virginia website at www.vintagevirginiaapples.com/usingapples.

Preparation time: 30 minutes

Cooking time: 1 hour

Makes 1 tart.

1 cup flour

½ teaspoon kosher salt

1 tablespoon sugar

½ cup cold, unsalted butter

2–3 tablespoons ice water

Several large Virginia heritage apples, mixed varieties

¼–½ cup sugar

1–2 tablespoons melted butter

Preheat oven to 400°F.

Blend flour, salt, and sugar. Cut in cold butter. Add ice water to make a soft dough that just holds together. Chill. Roll out and line a 9-inch tart pan. Place in freezer until frozen or almost so. Line with foil and weight with dried beans or rice. Bake at 400°F until set. Remove foil and weights and bake another minute or two, but do not allow to brown. Remove from oven and cool.

Reduce oven temperature to 350°F. Peel several medium to large apples. Core and slice approximately ⅛-inch thick. Overlap the slices, arranging in concentric circles over the baked crust, starting at the edge of the tart. Sprinkle with sugar, depending on tartness of apples. Drizzle with melted butter and bake until apples are tender in a 350°F oven. Serve with ice cream, caramel sauce, crème anglaise, or a hard sauce if desired.

Virginia Cheeses, Virginia Apples



At the annual Harvest Festival, Tom Burford and Kate Collier (of Feast) team up to introduce some natural companions to a hungry crowd at Rural Ridge. When possible, they pair Virginia cheeses with the heritage apple varieties sold at the North Garden farm. The Virginia cheeses are available from the cheesemakers and from Feast. The following are some picks from previous festivals.

Mild and buttery cheeses like Monastery Gouda or commercial Brie styles pair well with crisp, mild to slightly tart apples like Honeycrisp, Stayman, or Ashmead's Kernel.

Stronger, aged Swiss-type cheeses like Virginia's Meadow Creek Mountaineer or Middlebrook Swiss pair well with firm, textured, and flavorfully aromatic apples like Black Twig, Arkansas Black, or King David.

Hard parmesan types like three-year Gouda or Piave are delicious with sweet, tender-skinned, coarse-grained fruits like Russets or McIntosh apples or Burford pears.

Cheddars of any age go with mild to sweet apples like fresh Golden Delicious or Albemarle pippin.

Blue-veined types like Maytag, Stilton, or Gorgonzola match almost any complex, crisp, sweet apples like Lady or Virginia Gold.

Washed-rind, flavored, or stinky cheeses like Meadow Creek Grayson, Middlebrook Pepper Jack, or Marshall Farms' flavored cheeses match up with crisp, tart-and-sweet balanced apples like Ralls or Fuji.