

A photograph of an elderly man, Tom Burford, with white hair, wearing a purple and white checkered button-down shirt. He is reaching up with his right arm towards a branch of an apple tree. The background is a lush green orchard with many red apples hanging from the trees. The text is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image.

# HOW 'BOUT THEM APPLES

Tom Burford's quest to save a tasty slice of American culture has made him a hero of the orchards.

BY NATALIE ERMANN RUSSELL • PHOTOS BY SUSAN KALERGIS



**P**LUNK. A ripe Red Delicious free-falls from an overhead branch, and renowned apple historian Tom Burford tracks its descent to the earth. “It couldn’t have happened to a better apple,” he says, staring at the fallen fruit. “Red Delicious is the worst apple in the world.”

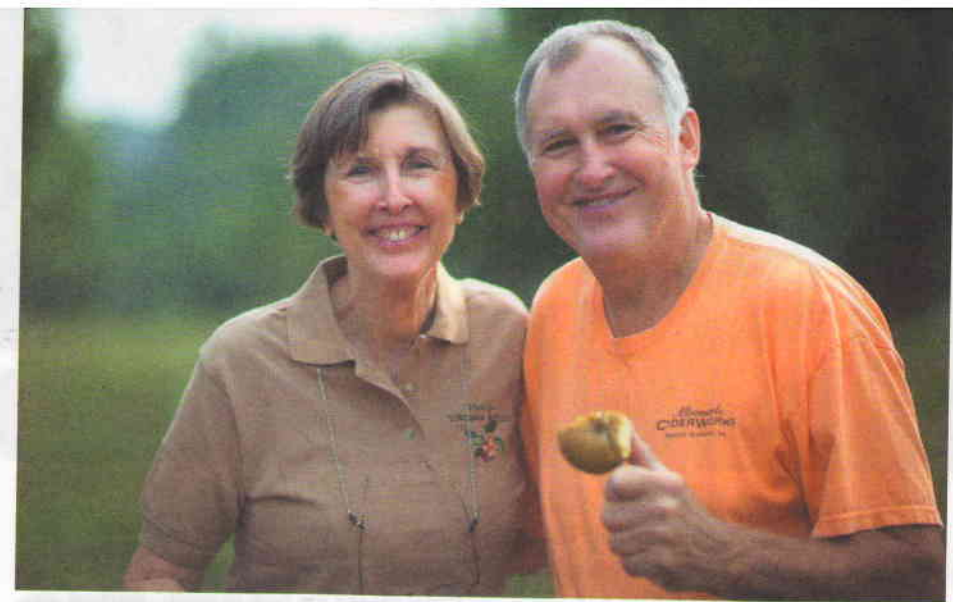
Burford’s disdain for this particular variety is so strong, in fact, that he was once booed off the stage for making disparaging remarks about it at a convention of the U.S. Apple Association. The modern Red Delicious was designed to be big and red, he explains as he picks up the offending specimen. But with a bland flavor profile, it’s the Barbie doll of the apple world—aesthetically unrealistic and lacking substance. “I’ll have to wash this hand later,” he says, only half-joking.

Burford has opinions about apples, for sure. An affable, charming 76-year-old Virginia gentleman, this former orchard keeper has a passion for *Malus domestica* that runs deep—as deep as you’d expect for a fellow who was practically born under an apple tree (and would’ve been if his mother hadn’t rushed in from the orchard to give birth). That day, he entered a family that had been tending orchards on their Amherst County farm since the 18th century. Further proof that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.

In 1997, though, Burford shut down his orchard, passing along much of his generations-old collection (“I stopped counting at 500 varieties”), in order to devote more time to his role as the white knight of America’s apple culture.

Today he’s showing us around Vintage Virginia Apples in North Garden, where the most cherished varieties from his old apple collection reside—the now-ripening Virginia Beauty, Amherst County native Ralls, and the eponymous Burford Red Flesh (one of two fruit varieties that bear his name; the other is the Burford pear, named for his great-grandfather, George, a man who was as passionate about pears as this Burford is about apples). Worth noting, too, is that the Red Delicious tree is here quite by accident, as it was mislabeled a Winesap at the nursery from which it was originally purchased.

Gesturing toward the Burford Red Flesh, he explains that this variety is a surprising watermelon-red on the *inside*. The tree is not



Opposite: Tom Burford, aka Professor Apple. This page, clockwise from top: Charlotte and Chuck Shelton of Albemarle CiderWorks. The red-fleshed Geneva Crab. Burford’s first grafting knife.

producing fruit yet, so he makes his way to another red-fleshed variety, Geneva Crab, and slices it open to expose a paper-white center girdled by a stunning ruby color. It has the reputation of being a great cider apple, but is also excitingly sharp eaten out of hand.

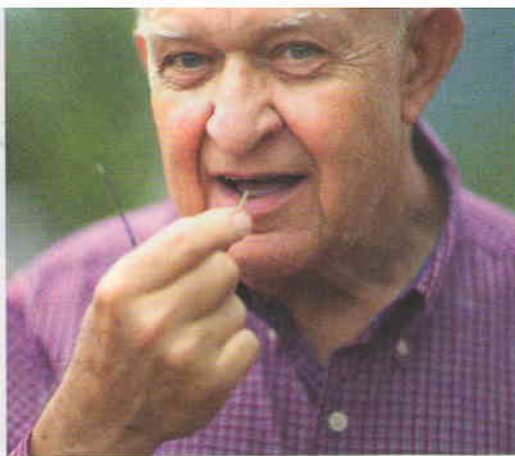
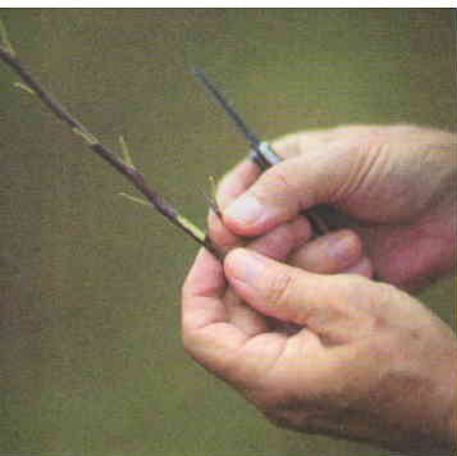
Vintage Virginia Apples owners (and siblings) Charlotte, Chuck, and Bill Shelton—along with their father Bud and mother Mary Margaret—are Burford’s close friends and, you might say, disciples. “Tom’s work is the inspiration for what we’re doing here,” says Charlotte, who also launched Albemarle CiderWorks with her family in 2009, with Burford’s help. “Ours is a small world, but Tom is a large figure in it. He’s as knowledgeable as anyone in the country. What he does is all part of the eat-local movement—grow what grows well in your yard.”

Sadly, what may grow in the yard now is probably not what grew there 200 years ago. Of the 16,000 apple varieties that existed in the late 19th century, today there are an estimated 6,000 worldwide and only 1,000 in North America. Even worse, in most supermarkets, you’re lucky to find a dozen varieties, if that—the most popular of which (at 41 percent of all apple sales) is, you guessed it, the Red Delicious.

It’s no surprise then that Burford is on a mission to bring some of those antique varieties back to the fore. He’s teamed up with Slow Food Alliance’s Ark of Taste, which aims to preserve and promote regional foods in danger of extinction. Unlike endangered pandas, though, the way to “save” these heirloom fruits is to *eat* them—create a demand that encourages people to tend their own trees and more orchards to grow and sell them. Problem is, many antique apple varieties have fallen out of favor with commercial orchards because they don’t suit the bottom line. In general, the trees are not easy to grow and often don’t produce the Barbie-perfect fruit that supermarkets demand.

Some antique varieties don’t even taste very good, admits Burford. When he was interviewed for a *Gourmet* magazine article a few years ago, he was quoted as saying that 90 percent of heirloom apples are “quick spitters”—meaning one bite, and you want it out of your mouth. “I got grief from people all over the country,” he says. “There was a misperception that anything heirloom was good. But people were confusing cider apples for dessert apples. We’re trying to make the case for using them for the purpose they were intended.” It makes





From left: To graft, slice off a bud from one tree branch. Transport it in the mouth to retain moisture. Affix it to an exposed branch on another tree.

perfect sense when you think about it: The best wine grapes aren't good for eating out of hand, so why would the best cider apples be?

Lucky for us, several regional historic apples are most definitely not spitters—even though they make a fine cider—including the Albemarle Pippin (aka Newtown Pippin). It was once a favorite of the Queen of England, and the Commonwealth was a major exporter. "It's so significant to this place, to the world," Burford says, gesturing toward the eastern slopes of the Blue Ridge that give it—much like Virginia wine—its distinctive terroir. When New York City Mayor Mike Bloomberg recently declared the Pippin his city's apple and trees were distributed for planting, guess where those trees came from?

Burford's mother's family orchard in Nelson County. Forget Kevin Bacon; in the world of apples, it's Two Degrees of Tom Burford.

Burford also played a role in rediscovering the historically significant Harrison, one of the three great American cider apples that was, until 1989, believed to be extinct. "Its general appearance was telling, but I pressed it and measured the juice volume to an equal amount of Winesap juice, and it was about 20 percent greater, which was stated in William Cox's 1817 work *A View of the Orchard*," explains Burford, who has, not surprisingly, earned the handle Professor Apple. "This was the clincher."

One day in March 1943, Burford's father handed 7-year-old Tom a brand-new, handsome grafting knife with a celluloid hilt—a gift that could be fully appreciated only by the son of an orchard keeper. It was his first such tool, and looked much like a Swiss army knife—but with springs so strong, his young

hands had difficulty maneuvering the shiny blades. "Right after I was given this knife, my father taught me how to graft," Burford says, wielding the instrument that—100,000 or so grafts later—now shows the abrasion of time. He brought it today as a symbol of his personal history, even though it was retired in 2001 after being temporarily confiscated on a flight from New York City immediately following 9/11. He simply can't risk losing it again.

Putting it to good use once more, he slices off a "bud" from a Grimes Golden tree that itself is a product of scion wood Burford brought back from Utah (ever see a man with a suitcase full of twigs?). His skill is effortless; grafting looks as easy as peeling a carrot. And this guy, by all accounts, could graft with his eyes closed.

For mere mortals, though, it's a little harder. Grafting is an art—and a necessity. As strange as it sounds, if you were to simply plant an apple seed in the ground, you'd wind up with an apple tree of unknown variety. And even with hundreds of thousands of seeds planted, you'd only get a few edible apples when the trees fruited.

Grafting gives the orchard keeper more control (and more fruit). But it's a tricky process that can be quite difficult to grasp via the written word, which is why Burford conducts workshops at Vintage Virginia, Monticello, Randolph College—and around the world.

To finish today's graft, Burford will tuck that Grimes Golden bud into his cheek to keep it moist (prudence also passed down from his father). Then he'll make his way to a tree of another variety, and whittle a same-sized patch on one of its branches. After fetching the bud from his mouth, he'll attach it to the newly

opened "wound," and within two to four years, that bud will be a branch from which coppery orbs of Grimes Golden can be plucked.

"When I was in my 30s and 40s, I would take really odd apple varieties and sneak into friends' orchards to graft them onto their trees," Burford says with an impish glint. "They would grow out, and invariably those friends would say, 'Tom, you need to come see this. I think I have a mutation.' I'd say, 'You'll make a million dollars.' Of course, I would eventually fess up."

Beyond this knack for grafting (and making mischief), Burford was endowed by his father with an arsenal of other skills: cooperage, blacksmithing, stone masonry. "I was

## Forget Kevin Bacon; in the world of apples, it's Two Degrees of Tom Burford.

### CHARLOTTE SHELTON'S APPLE SCALLOPED POTATOES

A Tom Burford favorite.

Serves 6 to 8

Unsalted butter, for dish  
2 pounds potatoes (preferably Yukon Gold), peeled and thinly sliced  
1 cup heavy cream  
1 cup half and half  
2 tsp. chicken bouillon granules or two cubes  
½ tsp. freshly ground black pepper  
1 medium tart apple, peeled, cored, and finely diced  
1 cup grated Swiss cheese

1. Preheat oven to 350°F. Generously grease a 3-quart baking dish with butter.
2. In a large saucepan, combine the potatoes, creams, bouillon, and black pepper. Bring the mixture to a simmer, and cook, stirring, until liquid thickens slightly.
3. Pour half of potato mixture into prepared pan. Scatter diced apple on top. Add remaining potatoes. Press down to submerge potatoes; add more cream if necessary. Sprinkle with cheese. Bake until golden, and potatoes are tender, 45 minutes to 1 hour.



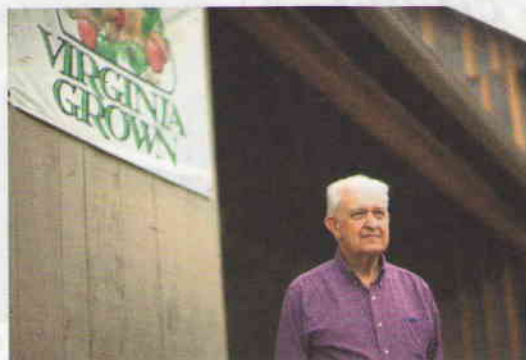
never formally educated in horticulture; I just grew up in it,” Burford says. His mother, a great lover of art, provided lessons in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, among other subjects, when he was a mere toddler. “I was one of the very early homeschooled children. All of this was, I like to think, a perfect education.”

Time-honored skills and traditions like these have kindred ties with today’s local-foods movement. “There’s a demand for immediacy that the world is making now—we never had that,” Burford says. “We were so self-sustaining. Even then, I knew it was ideal.”

By the time Burford was just 16, he was off to UVa, where he earned a degree in philosophy. (Always the jokester, he’s been known to start off an apple lecture by delving into French existentialism—just to make sure everyone is paying attention.)

After college, it was back to the family orchard business, which evolved to include a variety of forward-thinking ventures. Starting in 1970, he and his brother Russell (who passed away in 1994) ran a construction company that specialized in passive-solar housing. They also operated a sawmill, made 18th- and 19th-century furniture reproductions, and handcrafted exquisite violins.

Concurrently, Burford was earning a reputation as an orchard consultant. It was, in fact, 31 years ago that he got a call from Monticello’s head gardener, Peter Hatch, asking for help resurrecting Thomas Jefferson’s beloved orchard. “We were able to develop an overlay from Jefferson’s very detailed records,” says Burford, who laments that specific tree



Above: Burford pears—named for Tom’s great-grandfather—growing at Vintage Virginia Apples. Bottom left: An apt label for a man with deep Virginia roots.

information at other historic homes hasn’t been as well documented. “We worked with archaeologists, who found tree stains [marks in the soil where trees had been], so we could put it back to the way it actually was.”

**S**mile, Tom,” teases Charlotte Shelton, as he poses for the camera. “Just think about how cider is going to put Jim Beam out of business.”

A joke, but also a goal Burford has perhaps dreamed about. He is as serious about restoring the American tradition of hard cider (i.e., the kind with alcohol) as he is about promoting lost apples.

In Colonial times, everyone drank cider. It provided nutrients and vitamins that weren’t available during colder months. Plus, cider tasted good, and paired nicely with the salty, cured foods that also made regular appearances on the dining table. “It’s hard to overestimate how important cider was in the early American diet,” says Burford, whose family made about 60 barrels each year, many of which were used for barter. “I had the great advantage that, even as a small boy, my parents served me a small glass of hard cider for the meal.”

The recent rise in the number of cideries in the region is in large part due to Burford. There were none for 40 years, until Diane Flynt established Foggy Ridge Cider in Dugspur, Virginia, where Burford spent many hours designing her first orchard. And then the Sheltons opened Albenarle CiderWorks, also with Burford’s help. The same narrative has played out at the new

Castle Hill Cider in Keswick and at cideries throughout the country.

As Charlotte Shelton sees it, the more cideries there are, the better it is for everyone. “Without all of the wineries in Virginia, there wouldn’t be an industry—the same holds true for cideries,” she says, knowing that her biggest ally in this mission is standing right beside her.

Getting there, though, takes hard work. Even as a septuagenarian, Burford has been known to put in a 20-hour day. “I think by the time I’m 100, I won’t sleep at all,” he jokes, slicing open a Golden Russet.

Indeed, he is a man in demand. Recently he collaborated with Alice Waters and Michael Pollan to design an orchard for the White House, which will include 13 trees of varieties that originated in the 13 Colonies—but when it will be completed is anyone’s guess. Meanwhile, Burford is consumed with the massive book he’s finishing up—*Apples: 200 American Varieties*, due out in June 2012.

It’s a labor of love, for sure, but such academic pursuits don’t compare to actually getting out in an orchard. Watch him move from row to row, with a story to tell about each tree he encounters, and one realizes that the history of these apples is the history of Tom Burford, and vice versa.

Still, his enthusiasm, like the young saplings he nurtures, is very much rooted in the present. Just try to pin him down as to which apple is his favorite, for instance, and his reply comes quickly. “The last one I ate,” he quips, and carves off another thick slice of Golden Russet to share. ●

#### WHERE TO CATCH TOM BURFORD

**OCTOBER 1** Apple tasting at Foggy Ridge Cider in Dugspur. [foggyridgecider.com](http://foggyridgecider.com)

**OCTOBER 15** Apple tasting at Monticello. [monticello.org](http://monticello.org)

**NOVEMBER 6** Burford will lead the North vs. South Apple Tasting Contest in Old Deerfield, Massachusetts. Best of each region, head-to-head. [ciderday.org](http://ciderday.org)

**NOVEMBER 12** Cidermaking demo at Saunders Brothers Orchards (“sweet cider,” aka nonalcoholic). “This is one of the best days for me,” says Burford, who considers the Saunders to be some of his oldest and dearest friends. [saundersbrothers.com](http://saundersbrothers.com)