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Preserving apples

Restaurants feature fruit as part of drive to save heritage foods



Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat

Gravenstein apples sit in a crate after being packed and sorted Tuesday at Walker Apples in Sebastopol.

By ROBERT DIGITALE
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

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The humble Gravenstein, an heirloom apple whose fortunes for decades have declined in Sonoma County, will appear next month on the menus of such renowned restaurants as Yountville's French Laundry and Berkeley's Chez Panisse.

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Nearly 60 Bay Area restaurants will highlight the apples in cooperation with Slow Food Russian River. The summer harvest of the Gravensteins, an iconic part of the county's farm history, was getting under way this week.

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Miguel Hernandez picks Gravenstein apples for Walker Apples in a Sebastopol orchard on Tuesday. Christopher Chung / The Press Democrat

The international Slow Food organization based in Italy has designated the Gravenstein, prized for its taste in pies and applesauce, as one of a handful of heritage foods to be preserved in the United States — and the only one in California.

“We agreed to get involved because I think it’s really important to preserve these heirloom apples,” said Karen Martin, a chef owner with her husband Lucas Martin of K & L Bistro in Sebastopol.

Their menu next month will include a Gravenstein apple tart with apple caramel ice cream.

At Monti’s restaurant in Santa Rosa, chef Paul Schroeder plans to feature a barbecued Duroc pork chop with jalapeño Gravenstein apple sauce.

Yountville’s Ad Hoc, a casual, family-style restaurant also owned by the French Laundry’s Thomas Keller, will serve a breakfast dish of a Gravenstein apple compote atop sourdough waffles.

And at Cyrus in Healdsburg, chef owner Douglas Keane will give each diner a Gravenstein apple sphere — solid on the outside and liquid on the inside — in canapes that feature five spoon-size tastes: sweet, salty, bitter, savory and, in the case of the tart Gravs, sour.

Farmers consider the restaurants’ offerings a boost in the efforts to save the apple as a commercial product.

“Just getting the Gravenstein news out, no matter how you do it, is a plus,” said Lee Walker of Walker Apples outside Graton.

Walker, one of the last farmers in the county to operate his own packing shed, sent out pickers for the first time this season Tuesday and began packing apples in cardboard boxes for shipping to the wholesale market in San Francisco. He said the restaurants will reach a younger generation “that doesn’t know what a Gravenstein is.”

In the days before cold storage, the Gravensteins were the first fresh apple shipped each summer to market in the United States. In the 1940s, the county had about 15,000 acres of apples, mostly Gravensteins. But last year, according to crop reports, the county had only 2,800 acres of apples, and fewer than 900 were planted in Gravensteins.

In the United States today, the only freshly picked apple available in early August is the Gravenstein, according to the local food preservation group Slow Food Russian River. The group maintains that anything else either was kept in cold storage since fall or was shipped from the Southern Hemisphere.

Its leaders maintain the Gravensteins are an important part of the county’s culture and worth saving. Their aim is to increase the sale of fresh apples, which bring farmers far more than for those that go to processing.

“I’m all for fresh and local. And you don’t get any fresher or local than Gravs,” said Susan Campbell, who helps coordinate the Gravenstein apple project, called a presidia.

The group will promote the restaurants Sunday when the Gravensteins are highlighted at the Sebastopol Farm Market and again Aug. 15 and 16 at the town’s annual Gravenstein Apple Fair. The fair is expected at the height of this year’s harvest.

Along with the white tablecloth restaurants, the Gravensteins are slated to be on the menu at Screamin’ Mimis Ice Cream in Sebastopol and at Cici Gelateria in Mill Valley.

“It’s the best apple we can get to make sorbet out of,” said Liana Orlandi, who with her husband Michael Orlandi specialize in making local, seasonal and organic gelato and sorbet.

Last fall, she traveled as a Slow Food delegate to the group’s conference in Turin. There she viewed a map depicting all of the organization’s projects to save local foods.

“It was really cool to see the map of the world and to see that Gravenstein apple on the map,” Orlandi said.

You can reach Staff Writer Robert Digitale at 521-5285 or robert.digitale@pressdemocrat.com.

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