Farm Notes

CSA Newsletter

Vol. 25 No. 11 October 27 - 31, 2024

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Looking Back: What Frost Meant to Us

by Hana Newcomb

Back in the olden days -- and by that I usually mean about 40 or 50 years ago -- our season ended with the first real frost. Nowadays, we barely notice frost, except that it does stop the bean picking abruptly. Back then, our main crops were summer vegetables. We picked tomatoes until the last possible moment, scrounging and scraping, picking the green ones and ripening them in newspaper. Today, we haven't had a real frost yet and every single tomato patch has already been disassembled, disked under, relegated to memory. We are busy picking so many other things, as you know. Tomatoes grown outdoors can't survive the whiplash of heat and drought and floods, and so we let them go and move on.

Forty years ago, the only people who grew kale and other hardy greens were gardeners. We didn't know about bok choy and arugula, mustards and Red Russian kale. Little by little, these crops came into our collective consciousness, and the season grew longer and longer. Frost-hardy food was a revolutionary season-extending idea.

Pumpkins from the past.

Because we didn't have all these post-frost options, we marketed other things. In the olden days, our main location for sales was our roadside stand on Leesburg Pike. The farmers markets had not yet bloomed into action. Our stand had huge piles of pumpkins out in the front, and we did dozens of school tours every week, and we made apple cider and gave hayrides. We did events like hosting huge groups of Boy Scouts at dusk, and we had to have someone dedicated to parking the school buses for three hectic hours every weekday morning.

I am so much happier now, picking bok choy on a chilly morning, quietly. Luckily, we learned to grow lots of late fall vegetables just in time. While we started to teach people to love eating "Autumn Poem" (I love that name, and it's just a big mustard green that no one would eat now that there are more choices.), we began to lose the open space that surrounded our tiny farm. The hayrides of the 1970s and early 1980s went through our neighbor's big field -- it is now a development called Middleton -- and down through the woods to what is now swampy parkland, donated when Middleton was planned so they could squeeze more houses onto their high ground. Our front area, where we had piles of pumpkins and lots of parking spaces, is gone now because of the road widening. If we wanted to be a hayrides-and-pumpkins farm now, we could not possibly do it. Thank goodness for the CSA!

Being in business for over 60 years has meant adapting and changing, figuring out what else might work. In the olden days, we never imagined there would be a business model that could ignore frost, basically, and keep on going. We didn't dream of stashing sweet potatoes in a warm room, carrots in

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Making "Apple Burritos" with Michael Bradford

Some of us spend all year waiting for Autumn. There's a lot to love about this season, and when it finally rolls around, it brings delicious, locally-grown apples. While some apples are set out at the farm stands for customers to purchase, others are destined to become apple cider. This year marks a passing of the baton: Jon manned the machine for 40 years, and occasionally, his nephew Michael would help. Now Michael is responsible for the pressing.

Can you walk us through the apple pressing process from the top? What are you watching for as it happens?

Carl Sagan said "if you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you must first invent the universe." Pressing apple cider is a bit simpler, I start by driving a van to Winchester to pick up large bins of cider apples from Marker-Miller Orchard, then drive those back to our farm in Vienna.

The cider press is inside a large shed, or perhaps it is the large shed. In the shed there is a bathtub where we pour in apples from the bin to wash them, and then scoop them out with a milk crate and pour them into a conveyor that brings the apples up an incline about nine feet high. The conveyor dumps the apples into a little chamber with loud spinning metal, and the resulting apple mash falls through a grate, through a chute, down onto a wool blanket that is lovingly tucked into a square wooden frame, probably about two feet wide and three inches deep. When the frame is filled with apple mash, we fold the blanket over the mash to make a nice square apple burrito, and then take away the frame. Then on top of that burrito we put a wooden lattice, then the wooden frame, then a new blanket tucked nicely into the frame, and then of course apple mash again.

Seven woolen apple burrito layers makes one complete stack, which I slide over to the hydraulic press. The press presses upward and squeezes the cider out through the blankets into a basin, then through a screen into another basin, then it gets pumped up into a barrel six feet off the ground. The barrel feeds directly to the bottling station, where we can fill three jugs at a time.

When I was a kid I would sometimes help with the first and last parts of the pressing, washing the apples and filling the bottles with Cider, while my uncle Jon operated the machinery. Now I pull the levers and flick the switches and press the buttons. It's important to know when to do those things. For example you're not supposed to turn on the conveyor before you turn on the masher, because that would be like shoving whole apples in your mouth without chewing. And you're not supposed to pump cider into containers that are already full. That's like drinking without peeing.

There's always going to be some cider spilling out of something at some point. You gotta watch out for that.

Approximately how many apples are in one half gallon of cider?

I don't have that number in my head but if I had to guess I'd say 25 apples.

Do you have any memories of pressing cider?

I get all sorts of interesting volunteers with this job. It used to be you had to pay people to work in a factory, but now people act like it's a vacation. My best volunteers bring me hard cider that they fermented from our cider, or some bourbon for cocktails after we're done.

photo courtesy of rebecca groisser

photo courtesy of anna newcomb

Recently Delicious: Apple Cider

by Oscar Ruth

There's one obvious thing to do with a gallon of apple cider… drink it! Maybe you pour it cold into a glass, or ladle it warm from a pot on the stove into a favorite mug, or drink it straight from the jug after a long day working at the farmers market like me. Though the tipping point of "I simply cannot drink any more apple cider this year" is still a few weeks out, I've started to wonder: what else is possible with this delicious beverage? Here's a short list of kitchen magic I've tried and would enthusiastically repeat.

1. Apple cider stirred into buckwheat oat pancake batter.
2. Apple cider simmered in a pot until the liquid is reduced by half and makes a syrup. Thanks to Chef Alan Bergo for this idea.
3. Sliced delicata squash tossed in apple cider syrup, oil, salt and ginger powder and roasted until soft and sticky.

(1) The historic cider manifold for filling jugs. (2) Volunteers such as Gordon and Judy are the life force of our cider making, especially for labeling and bottling. (3) Apple mash comes down, hydraulic press squeezes up, with Jon at the helm. (4) Scooping the apples out of the bin may be the most work of all. (5) When we purchase the cider blankets, they are a brilliant white but they get dyed a lovely cider brown, as seen in Michael's hands.

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a cold space, and having crops out in the field all the way to Christmas. We did not ever imagine climate change.

This is the next big adaptation, learning to work with extreme everything -- brutal, wet heat in the summers and walloping amounts of rain and long droughts and warm winters. We are trying to figure it out, along with everyone else. Once upon a time, frost was our biggest worry. Without a doubt, fall is now the best time of the whole year, and we are loving every moment.

Eat your greens and sweet potatoes, and drink your cider in good health!

Meet Our Neighbor: Green Hill Apple Farm

by Hal Moses

Green Hill Apple Farm was established in 2018 when Hal Moses began his retirement after a 40 year career in the US Government Services industry. After spending so much time seeing the sunshine through an office window, he had the desire to switch gears and spend retirement among the rolling hills of his scenic 10-acre lot in Lovettsville, VA. Turning the open pasture into an apple orchard was only possible with the guidance and assistance of area experts at the county extension offices, the kind folks at the Alson H. Smith Jr. Agricultural Research Center, and of course members of the tree fruit and row crop farming community who are always willing to share their expertise and provide guidance. Soon Hal had 1,700 trees consisting of three varieties – Ambrosia, Crimson Crisp, and Ever Crisp – across three acres. As the orchard began to bear fruit, Hana and the PVF Wheatland crew jumped in and significantly became an instrumental part of the daily operations including fruit thinning, pruning, harvesting, and packing house tasks like sorting and cleaning. The orchard began as a way to stay active physically and mentally during retirement, however the most rewarding and notable part of the experience has been fostering relationships with the folks in the farm and agriculture industry.

The pristine level of care Hal puts into his orchard really shines when he delivers crates of beautiful, large, juicy fruit to the local produce markets. Customers rave about their flavor and size and have been known to dive into them in the short time it takes to go from the register to their car! A great topping on the golden years!

Marcos (top) and Sam (middle) pick apples; Hal Moses (bottom) shows off his selection; Blaze (left) drives the trailer full of apples with Hal aboard.