



# News & Notes of the UCSC Farm & Garden

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## Learning to Know & Appreciate Russeted Apples

– Orin Martin

The purpose of writing this article on russeted apples is threefold:

- To consolidate my own thinking, reflections, appreciation and passion for russets.
- To nudge folks to break out of the Fuji, Honeycrisp, Jonagold and especially Gala rut. It's not that these varieties aren't good, but it's time to open a new "door of perception," to quote Aldous Huxley.
- To describe some russeted varieties, list tree sources and encourage, nay, urge people to buy, plant, grow, and eat their own russets.

### *Russeted Apples—A Classic "Keeper"*

Russeted apples harken back to colonial times when apple varieties were regional, that is, had a reputation and cult-like following in an arc that extended only a few hundred miles or less, giving true meaning to the much-championed "Buy Fresh, Buy Local" marketing slogan of the present. Generally, these apples had a short fresh market season. Back then, russets were renowned as "keepers." Put them in a box and store them in a cool room (<40°F) or a root cellar; under such conditions, they would keep in reasonable shape for 3–6 months.

Today's apples tend to be red, round and smooth-skinned. And they better follow suit with the superlatives: sweet, sweeter and sweetest. And they better be big and oblong to conical in size and shape, à la Golden and Red Delicious.

Russets are anything but. Variety to variety and even apple to apple on the same tree, almost everything about the look of russets—their size, shape, coloring, and skin—is uneven or anomalous (an=not, homalos=even). Both the texture and the color of the flesh are variable. However, the taste and aroma are somewhat uniform, combining both "green" and sugary backed by acidity and a touch of nuttiness. Russets often drift toward subtropicality with hints of citrus, guava and even pineapple. In the aggregate, they are a cut above—sublime.

### *Shape and Size*

Most russets are small to medium in size and have a shape that is classified as round-flat or oblate. Often they are as wide or wider than tall. Two notable exceptions regarding shape are: Hudson's Golden Gem and Hoople's Antique Gold. Both are either bud mutations or seedlings of Golden Delicious. As such they tend to be oblong-conical with 5 distinct knobs at the base, much like their parent. Both varieties vary in shape apple to apple; this is especially true of Hudson's, which is more than occasionally lopsided.

### *Skin and Color*

Russets tend to either look or be rough to the touch. The skin can even be corky, bumpy or warted. The variety Knobbed Russet takes this to an extreme—with its frog-like skin, it's positively amphibian. They often look like they have a bad case of apple scab (a fungal disease). The topography of the skin even has its peaks and valleys. Some varieties exhibit heavy and rough russetting much like a baking potato or a Bosc pear. Still others have only an irregular light webbed russetting and can actually be smooth skinned. These varieties (Ashmead's Kernel, Roxbury Russet, American Golden Russet) usually display a flushed cheek of copper, bronze or orangeish-red coloration at full maturation.

In one sense, russets have a drab appearance, and yet they have a quiet, strong beauty. They are as they look, apples with both a story and a history, personality and depth of character—an apple lover's apple. Russets are definitely not Galas, with all due respect, Gala being an inoffensively sweet apple suited to the school lunch box

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crowd. Russets are truly beautiful as well as utilitarian, and eating a russet is a long, layered, thought-provoking experience. Sometimes, after first admiring and then consuming a Roxbury Russet (and not just because I'm from Boston) or an American Golden Russet, my conclusion: best darn apple I ever ate, or could ever eat.

### Taste

While not all russets taste alike, they do share some taste characteristics. They usually start out sugary, followed by balancing acidity. Volatile aromatic oils usually factor in. The russet experience can make the eater feel they have taken a temperate zone, deciduous fruit and sailed off to subtropical latitudes where the evergreen fruits rule supreme: citrus (especially lemon), guava, banana, pineapple, etc. At the same time (in sequence) you are experiencing the sugar, texture and cell grit of a pear. The latter sensation is most pronounced with Hudson's Golden Gem.

### Uses

Utilitarian is definitely the byword with russets. They are equally good fresh off the tree or stored for up to six months, dried, baked or made into crisps or pies and rendered to cider—sweet and hard.

### Varietal Descriptions of Some Favorite Russet Apples

*Hudson's Golden Gem* (a found hedgerow seedling from Hudson's Nursery in Tangent, Oregon, 1931, probably an escaped seedling of Golden Delicious). Similar to its parent in shape: long, oblong-conical. Arguably the largest and definitely the sweetest of the russets, with an uncanny knack for throwing variable lopsided fruit. The skin is dry and rough to the touch. The color is a dull, soft faint yellow background with mottled, dotted russetting in the foreground. Sugary and juicy with a similar taste and texture (pear cell grit) as pears and a little nuttiness for good measure.

*American Golden Russet* (1700s, New York). Possibly the second-oldest American variety; likely a seedling of English Golden Russet, which is far sweeter, more lively and complex in flavor. A small round-flat apple with rough-looking, streaked uneven russetting and corkiness around the stem basket. The skin has bronzy hues with a copper splotch on the sunny side and a golden-green background color. Flesh color is creamy yellow with a tinge of green at the core. The flesh is dense and fine textured, which is an exception among russets. The taste is intense and sugary at the outset, followed by a balanced but pronounced kick. A slight oily, volatile aromatic aspect to the latter part of the taste sensation. Mature fruit hangs on the tree as late as leaf drop.

*English Golden Russet* (1600s, England). Far superior to the American Golden Russet. I once had a highly productive tree on dwarfing M9 rootstock (7–8' tree) that cropped beautifully and abundantly for 15 years. One dark December day, I yanked it out and have rued the

day. It is almost impossible to source in this country. A smooth-skinned, medium-sized, uniformly round apple with, as the books say, "light fawn colored" russetting that tends to gold. The skin gets bronzy with a flush of coppery-orange at full maturation. The flesh is fine grained; as such, it tends to dissolve in the mouth. It has a yellow tinge to it and is crisp, exceedingly juicy and off the charts sugary. Aromatic qualities balanced with a following acidity beget a lively taste on the tongue.

*Egremont Russet* (1870s, origin unknown but probably England). A medium-sized apple with a flat-round shape, sometimes almost blocky-rectangular. Very rough russetting of the skin with a good deal of checking or cracking, especially in the stem basket; the dark russetting can appear almost black with a gold/bronze background. The skin is tough and chewy (best discarded), giving way to a greenish-yellow, densely textured flesh that is nutty, sweet and aromatic. It has a distinctive sweet/tart taste with some smoky overtones thrown in for good measure.

*Russet Beauty* (thought to be a chance seedling of a cross between Cox's Orange Pippin and Golden Delicious). An early September russet that is atypically large fruited, round-oblate in shape. A uniform bronzy-golden fawn with many small bumps. The flesh is crumbly-coarse and the taste is decidedly sweeter than Golden Delicious with a nice Cox's nutty acidic aftertaste. Doesn't hold long on the tree before going soft and mushy (10–14 days).

*Roxbury Russet* (out of the Roxbury district of Boston, early 1600s, thought to be the first US bred apple variety). Looks and tastes like a smaller version of Hudson's Golden Gem. This variety features a creamy white flesh and a thin non-chewy skin. The flavor is very sugary, with translucent sugar swirls (it's actually a precursor to a storage disorder called water core) in the flesh. A slight lemon scent and a following acidity and greenness that balances the initial sugary sensation. For a refined smoother eating experience, couple with sliced extra-sharp Cheddar (of New England origin). But then, that recipe works for all the russets.

*Ashmead's Kernel* (Gloucester, England, 1700). An asymmetrical small apple with a flat-round shape. The color is golden brown with a reddish-orange, sometimes bronze flush on the cheek; the flesh is crisp, coarse, yellowish-green. The taste is sugary enough, but with an assertive, aromatic acidity. Not an apple for the faint of heart. Late harvest, mid-October to mid-November. Good in cider blends

*Gold Rush*. Although it looks old, it is of recent vintage (1992), introduced from the low/no-spray (disease-resistant and immune) collaborative breeding programs of Purdue, Rutgers and Illinois Universities. An outstanding tart/sweet fresh off the tree, and sugary/tart after 1–2 months in cold storage. Although it is generally assertively tart fresh picked, more than occasionally you can find a sweet one. The sugar in its taste can be credited to

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### *Russet Apples (from page 2)*

the Golden Delicious in its parentage. Size-wise, it rivals Golden. Thinning to 6-8" between apples jumps the size. The coloring is green-yellow, turning to a soft gold at full maturation. It has some light russeting in the stem basket area, and pronounced lenticel dotting. The skin is a bit tough and chewy. The flesh is both green and yellow.

Where this apple excels is in the boldness and complexity of the tasting experience. With the first bite you become aware that you're on to something strong, long and definitive. Initially the breaking, crisp, coarse flesh is palpable, then comes a strong bite of acidity coupled with and then extended by big sugar.

*St. Edmund's Pippin* (a.k.a St. Edmunds Russet, England, 1875). About the earliest ripening of russets. It is usually on the last week of August to mid-September, which rivals Fall Russet for early cropping. An annual and heavy cropper. The fruit is medium sized, flat-round and wider than tall. The skin color is uniformly golden-fawn russeted. The flesh is a pale creamy yellow, crisp, juicy, fine textured and dense. The taste runs to pear, even pear nectar, rich, sugary, subacid and aromatic. An impressive apple.

*Hoople's Antique Gold*. A meritorious apple from Mr. Harry Hoople of Hoople's Fruit Farm in Otway, Ohio. A weak scion and small apple with a big taste. Probably a bud mutation of Golden Delicious. In shape, Hoople's resembles its alleged parent. The Antique refers not to its age, but the beauty and richness of its antique gold skin color. The flesh is coarse textured and chunky. The taste is almost as sugary as Hudson's Golden Gem. Sweetness is the major chord with crispness and acidity as the minor chord.

Russets—make their acquaintance, and it'll be (as the female junior high crowd intones) BFF: best friends forever.

### *Mail Order Sources*

Although it is difficult to source trees of many of the finer russeted varieties, some sources include:

- Dave Wilson Nursery: American Golden Russet, Ashmead's Kernel, Hudson's Golden Gem
- Raintree Nursery: Ashmead's Kernel, Egremont Russet, Hudson's Golden Gem
- Rocky Meadow Nursery: Gold Russet, Razor Russet, Russet Beauty
- Southmeadow Fruit Gardens: Ashmead's Kernel, English Golden Russet, Fall Russet, Hoople's Antique Gold, Pitmaston Pineapple, Wheeler's Golden Russet, Zaubergau Reinette
- Trees of Antiquity: American Golden Russet, Ashmead's Kernel, Hudson's Golden Gem, Pitmaston Pineapple, Ribston Pippin, St. Edmund's Pippin

### *Pepper Varieties (from p. 6)*

meshed with minimal size and variable coloring. (Remember a mature Jalapeño is all red with some stretch marks or cracking.) El Jefe, however, tends to smooth skin even at full maturity. High yielding, good size, full flavor, with all the Jalapeño bite and way earlier than the previous best Jalapeño – Biker Billy (Burpee).

Read more about growing peppers and pepper varieties in our "For the Gardener" series, online at [casfs.ucsc.edu/publications/gardenideas/index.html](http://casfs.ucsc.edu/publications/gardenideas/index.html)