“Apples to Apples”
By Riccardo Racicot

My long two-pointed ladder's sticking through a tree
Toward heaven still,
And there's a barrel that I didn't fill
Beside it, and there may be two or three
Apples I didn't pick upon some bough.
But I am done with apple-picking now.

-Robert Frost

“After Apple Picking”
1914

Massachusetts has a rich history when it comes to apples. Robert Frost, once a professor at Amherst College, wrote the above poem 100 years ago while living in New England and it was published in his second poetry volume titled *North of Boston*. In 1780 Johnny Appleseed moved to Longmeadow, MA. It was here, in the Pioneer Valley in which he made his home until the early 1800’s. Johnny Appleseed’s legacy lives on throughout the United States through the millions of apple trees he planted from seed. The Westfield-Seek-No-Further apple is a variety that bears the name of the Pioneer Valley town from which it was first cultivated. Despite its rich history, Massachusetts produces less than 1% of the apples grown in the United States. Washington is the major apple producing state and who produces over 50% of apples grown in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2010 apple production (million pounds)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Massachusetts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*USDA U.S. apple production and utilization, by State, 1980-2010*

Are there any reasons to pick our native apple over its brother from Washington? Right now you can most likely walk into a grocery store or dining hall and pick up a Washington apple but not one from Massachusetts. Why? Because Washington uses a technology called *Cold Atmospheric Storage*. This
technology allows producers to ship apples year-round. Due to the low number of apples produced in Massachusetts, this technology is not economically viable and apples are only sold in-season and throughout the winter. Washington apples are treated with methyl-bromide and coated with either carnauba wax or shellac, then stored in rooms with decreased amounts of oxygen to prevent ripening and shipped year-round. This availability makes the Washington apple the obvious choice for the majority of the year. But what about when Massachusetts apples are in season?

Nothing evokes thoughts of autumn in New England like crisp air, stunning foliage and apples. As of 2007 there are over 350 farms in Massachusetts growing apples. Many of these orchards offer pick-your-own apples. The Massachusetts Department of Agriculture lists 80 locations across the Bay State to pick your own apples (http://www.mass.gov/agr/massgrown/map.htm). Picking your own apples in Massachusetts allows you to be a part of a long-storied history. While you’re in the orchard it’s you, the apples, and a basket. Apple picking truly is an intimate experience that invokes thoughts of the interconnection between man and nature. Gathering your own food could not be a more natural activity for human beings, yet at the same time we are reminded that man helped shape the apple from its wild ancestor to the 7,500 varieties grown worldwide today.

UMass Amherst’s own Cold Spring Orchard offers pick-your-own apples from the beginning of September until the beginning of November. Cold Spring Orchard grows over 100 varieties of apples, many of which cannot be found elsewhere in the area. Pest management is handled in the most eco-friendly way possible and uses as little chemical pesticides as they can to ensure the safety of their fruit, and reducing your exposure to pesticides. Buying apples from Cold Spring Orchard also supports ongoing research at their education facilities. You can even like Cold Spring Orchard on Facebook and find out when your favorite varieties are available (https://www.facebook.com/pages/UMASS-Cold-Spring-Orchard/192589037457352).

Along with apples comes another fall-time-favorite, apple cider. Apple cider is only seasonally available due to minimal processing and the remainder of apple particles that limit shelf-life. Unlike apple juice, which is ambiguous of any variation, apple cider differs greatly depending on variety of apple used and can range from sweet to tangy and sour. Unpasteurized fresh cider can also be used to make hard cider or applejack at home for an old-time treat that can be enjoyed responsibly (Resources here: http://www.newenglandapples.org/CiderPies-id-86.html). All things cider can be enjoyed at the annual Franklin County CiderDays, a two-day celebration of cider, apples and other apple products grown right here in Franklin County. The celebration includes cider competitions, workshops, breakfast, dinner,
talks, tastings, and cooking demos. CiderDays will be celebrating their 20th anniversary this fall and I would not recommend missing this event. For more information check out http://www.ciderdays.org/

Choosing local food is a topic that has already been addressed on the UMass dining blog (http://www.umassdining.com/blog/permaculture/go-local). Unfortunately data is not available on nutrient loss when transporting apples and the world authority on food, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations states there are no accepted methods for evaluating nutrient loss in fresh produce and can only be applied to the situation in which they are studied. Nutrient differences between apples grown in Massachusetts and Washington are negligible when they are fresh, negating arguments that one apple is innately better than the other. So while I cannot offer a concrete, scientific reason to choose a Massachusetts apple over a Washington apple, I think it is important to consider the history of apple in Massachusetts. Choosing a Massachusetts apple gives you an opportunity to be a part of a rich history and connect with the past through food.

References

