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Notes from a Rogue entomologist

Introducing the Paragon, a pear born and bred in southern Oregon

BY RICHARD J. HILTON

I have now been working with pears for more than a quarter of a century, and I will be the first to say that pears can be a tough sell. There’s an old French saying, “You eat an apple when you are ready. You eat a pear when it is ready.” Or, as Ralph Waldo Emerson put it, “There are ten minutes in the life of a pear when it is perfect to eat.” Needless to say, in a world where the demand for instant gratification becomes ever more resounding, the elusive secrets of the pear seem further and further removed.

In order to open a European pear correctly, you must store freshly picked fruit in a cool place for an extended period of time. The exact length of time varies with the cultivar and the storage temperature. For instance, a Bartlett can be held for as little as a week while an Anjou must be stored for over a month. After this period of cooling, the pear must be placed at room temperature for up to a week. You know that a pear is ripe when the flesh near the stem yields to gentle pressure. Some cultivars, like Bartlett, will ripen on the tree, while others, like the Anjou, ripen off the tree. If the fruit has not been cooled for long enough then it may never ripen. But a perfectly ripe pear is a wonder, sweet and juicy, with a bit of a tangy texture. The pear cultivar that is universally acknowledged as the premier eating pear is the Doyenné du Comice, better known locally as Harry and David’s Royal Riviera.

But the difficulty in ripening pears has led to the development of some newer varieties that can be eaten unripe or crisp and crunchy. One such pear, called Gem, is what I have sampled, for being developed by the US Department of Agriculture and is being tested in Hood River. Being partial to fully ripened pears, I was quite prepared to dislike Gem, but it was very nice with a good pear taste.

There are those (one of my sons among them) who prefer their pears crunchy, however, so I do not think the pear can beat the apple at its own game. So in order to promote pears, we need to educate folks on how to ripen pears properly. I have found that kids love sweet ripened pears when they are provided. We also need to develop good quality pear cultivars. The Southern Oregon Experiment Station (now part of the Southern Oregon Research and Extension Center or SOREC) conducted an extensive pear-breeding program during the 1960s that focused on two key factors: good taste and red skin color. Many crosses were made, almost always with Comice as one parent and often with a red Bartlett as the other. Three red pear cultivars were released from this program: the Reimer Red in 1961, Rogue Red in 1969, and Cascade in 1985. While these pears were planted locally to some extent and the Cascade was patented and planted more widely, they never really caught on.

But from the breeding program southern Oregon, two cultivars were selected not for their appearance, as they had no red color, but for their eating quality. One was planted by Mike Thornley, a local orchardist, and he dubbed it BestEver. It is now grown and marketed by Meyer Orchards in Talent and has been such a good seller that more acreage has been planted.

And this brings me to the final selection from the breeding program to be released. We call it the Paragon, and it lives up to its name. It is a rather unassuming pear—its looks much like its Bartlett parent, but like its Comice parent, it is a glorious eating experience. Unlike Comice, the skin is thin and very palatable. When ripened it will melt in your mouth and the flavor washes over you like a wave at the Oregon coast.

At SOREC, a pear tasting has been held annually since 2008. In recent years participants have rated the cultivars they taste, with Paragon consistently receiving the highest overall rating (see chart). This cultivar was overlooked for so many years because its appearance is so ordinary, but it is no ordinary pear. With the release of this cultivar our hope is that some grower will champion it. But if that does not happen, at least it will be available to the public and enjoy. To quote Thomas Jefferson, “The greatest service which can be rendered any country is to add a useful plant to its culture.”

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AGRICULTURE FROM PAGE 1

The earliest record of 4-H activity in Jackson County comes in 1913 under the name of the Industrial Club. Members took part in local projects, the state fair, and the Panama Pacific International Exposition in San Francisco. Two of Oregon’s ten delegates to the Exposition came from Jackson County.

In 1914, Congress passed the Smith-Lever Act, expanding agricultural, and home demonstration programs in rural America through land-grant universities. By 1916 the program was being called 4-H and had extended into Josephine County. In 1921, 4-H exhibited for the first time at the Josephine County Fair. (The 4-H emblem, patented in 1924, is a green four-leaf clover with a white “H” on each leaflet, symbolizing Head, Heart, Hands, and Health.)

The agricultural language during the lean-decade years of the early 1930s, but in 1935 club work picked up. In 1939 a new organizational plan led to increased activities including, in Jackson County, a ski festival, a community picnic, and the first annual leaders’ banquet. Energy slowed during World War II, when the shortage of tires and gasoline meant fewer meetings. After the war, activities picked up again.

Today the 4-H mission is the same as it was when 4-H started: youth development. The most significant thing 4-H does, says Sue Hunt, a leader of 4-H in Josephine County, is “assist youth in finding their passion and equip them to become healthy, caring, contributing, and career-minded members of their family, community, and society.”

Aad Laughter, 4-H Club

The Paragon, a cross between Comice and red Bartlett, is literally a Comice in the skin of a Bartlett.

Peter Salant raises cattle on the old Kleinhammer Ranch.

*Sue and Derek Owen grow fields of lavender on their English Lavender Farm.

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4-H: Youth development for 100 years

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