

## The best apples you've never heard of

**Ann Belmont**  
BSP Reporter

Nestled in a dreamy spot at the end of Baker Road in one of the farther reaches of the Kerhonkson ZIP code is the Wightman orchard. Apple trees march up a long hill past the Wightmans' house and straggle down the road below it. Every tree seems to sport a different color fruit, like some orchard in a fairy tale. This might just be because on just 4 or 5 acres of land there are 92 varieties of apples!

This is owner John Wightman's eclectic collection of apple varieties, gathered over the last 30 or so years. If you are lucky enough to find the place, you will end up wanting to collect apples, too, by stuffing as many as you can your bag. Wightman is usually available to tell you where to find your favorites, or maybe discover something you've never tasted before.

Wightman is a student of local history. He can tell you that around the time of the Civil War his land was owned by a George Osterhoudt.

"He used to run a team of oxen, bringing firewood off the mountain," said Wightman. The Osterhoudt family lived there perhaps as far back as Colonial times. Wightman's grandfather, a New York City fireman, bought the place in 1958 as a summer hideaway; but grandson John liked to grow things, and went into farming. He majored in agriculture at Texas A&M University; only after graduating did he come home and start what he called his "rootstock nursery," which you have to establish before even thinking about what kind of apples you're going to grow. It then takes three years to get fruit from a graft, according to Wightman, and "five before you have a marketable apple."

That is a big commitment to make, but as mentioned, Wightman loves growing apples. If you want to set him going, just ask him about his collection. Some are familiar - he has Macs, Macoons, Golden Delicious - but "I have apples here I've never eaten," he revealed. "I don't even know where you could buy 'em." Because of his association with Cornell University - he has been on the board of the Cornell Agricultural Extension multiple times - he has access to some very rare genetic varieties kept in storage at the university. These are not easy to get ahold of. It sounds a bit cloak-and-dagger ... you have to "go through the right channels," Wightman said, sounding like a man in pursuit of rare jewels - which in a way he is.

Like any collector, he's always on the lookout for an opportunity to add to his treasure. He related how, one day, "on an old farm on the banks of the Hudson River, a gentleman saw me wondering about an apple I'd never seen before, and he said, 'That's Eve's Delight.' Intrigued by the name, Wightman talked the man into giving him "the wood," a branch of the desired variety to use for grafting. He's also gotten ideas while perusing books, including a tome called "The Book of Apples."

Sometimes Wightman will decide a certain type apple is no longer worth producing. These are pungently referred to as "spitters" and serve as rootstocks for grafts of new varieties.

"Glockenapfel sits on top of a spitter," said Wightman. "The Glockenapfel is from 1560-something in Switzerland, and it's the original apple they made strudel with. How cool is that?" So does Hubbardson's Nonesuch. "They used to name 'em great!"

There's the Belle de Boskoop, the Ashmeads Kernel, the Esopus Spitzenberg - and so on, up to Variety 92. Some of these are only one tree, or even one branch, but Wightman can tell you the story of every apple on the place.

"See that Jon-a-mac over there? It was given to me by Art Mosca, an apple grower in Milton who passed away. So every time I walk past that tree I think of Art ... and the Cherrytown Special over here, that was George Griner's



John and Lori Wightman in front of a Colville Blanc D'Hiver apple tree in their orchard. Photo by Ann Belmont

tree." Way up on top of the hill is a tree called Eighty-Eight.

"Eighty-Eight is a chance seedling," he explained, the "child" of two random trees. "It's our 88th variety." He had decided that it was a "spitter," but his son objected. "Zachary goes, 'This is my favorite apple!'" He was trying to think of a name for it, when a lady visitor of Chinese origin said, "What's wrong with Eighty-Eight? It's a very fortunate number."

Wightman has a full-time job as a certified crop adviser (CCA). In that capacity, "I go on people's farms and look at their crops. I have people I've been working with for 30 years." The title of CCA is conferred by the American Society of Agronomy. It is a licensed position requiring Wightman to keep taking courses. He listens to plant pathologists and entomologists talk about apple issues for hours at a time. As far as he knows, he's the only CCA in the Hudson Valley. Does he get a lot of requests? "From March to September," he answered, "I do 30,000 miles" driving from farm to farm on consultations.

The spring freeze of 2016 was a catastrophic on the Wightman farm. The entire crop was wiped out. "I've never seen that happen here," John said. "We're protected because we have good air drainage. But it was cold from the ground to the sky ... you have a perennial crop that you put hundreds of hours into, and in one day, it's all over." He paused for a beat. "But you can't let it ruin your life. Tomorrow is another day."

As all farmers know, heartbreak is a risk you take when you go into the profession. Wightman would like the non-farming public to appreciate how hard it can be. "Think about how long it took somebody [to grow a crop] so you could have an hour or two picking it. It's very labor-intensive. Hundreds of hours go into it. It's W-O-R-K!"

Somehow, all this w-o-r-k seems to have agreed with his son Zachary, who is majoring in plant science at SUNY Cobleskill. "It used to be that farming was the last thing someone would want to do with their life. Now - I think farmers are becoming like rock stars." Unconsciously describing himself, Wightman went on, "They're highly-educated people who are good at what they do and want to have a consistent, high-quality product." In a trend we can see happening in the Hudson Valley, he said, "I think a lot of young people would be very surprised at how many jobs are available in agriculture, and how few people to fill the spots."

Since John and his wife, Lori, both have full-time jobs (she's the treasurer of Ulster BOCES), they don't have the time for marketing the orchard, so it has remained a hidden treasure till now. They sell to the High Falls Food Co-op, to a couple of farmers markets and local small businesses. They enjoy meeting the people who do discover the orchard, and seeing the familiar faces of those who return every year [full disclosure: the author is one!]. But they would like to become better known. "Cable just came up the road, so now I'm going to have high-speed internet at my house," said John. Lori plans to make a Facebook page to let the public know what's available to pick. Like the large growers, they have a barn with a special climate-controlled room that preserves the fresh fruit so they can sell apples all the way into March, which they do by appointment after November. They also have a fair number of Concord and Niagara grapevines for picking. The grapes will be ready around the beginning of October; there are many ripe apples already. The pick-your-own is open Saturdays and Sundays from 10 a.m.-5 p.m., September into mid-November. Other days, the Wightmans request that you call ahead.

John would like to say one more thing. "I encourage people, wherever they are, to go on a pick-your-own, to go on a farm-to-table. Wherever you may be, meet your local farmer, the person that's making the food. It's a great thing just to be on a farm and experience harvesting." *Wightman Farm, 130 Baker Rd, Kerhonkson 626-5319 BSP*

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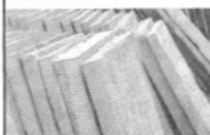
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