

Reconnecting with our Tradition: What Can we Learn from the Past to Sustain our Future?

Since starting in Irish Seed Savers, I have had the opportunity to get to experience the diversity of flavours and tastes of the unique apple collection. Getting to know apple varieties is a continuous process of learning through tasting, observation, documentation, research, and applying apple identification techniques. Throughout this process, I feel it is very valuable to document the apples, as they will always reveal surprises.

Through tasting a succession of apple varieties ripening from July through to November, I have noticed that each apple variety is as unique in its flavour and appearance as it is in its DNA and story. As many visitors have experienced on the tasting tours, you can encounter every flavour imaginable, from the berry notes of the early apples to the melon and pear flavour of Farrell, and from the almond flavour of Eight Square to the delicate nuttiness of russets. Connecting with the history, it is nice to think that we are sharing the same taste of an Irish Peach that a person in the mid-1800s may have experienced. In that sense, it is a timeless connection.



Lough Tree of Wexford



Egain Queen apple with pink flesh.

I believe that it is important to preserve traditions as well as the apple varieties themselves. We may grow a variety, but we also need to get to know its character and use. Across a season I have come to know a lot of the apple varieties here intimately, and in the process have learnt when an apple tastes its best, how long to store it, and sometimes how long it is best stored for before you eat it. It has been a pleasure to share this experience with our visitors on tasting tours as well as to hear people's individual stories.

At the moment, the Loughtree of Wexford fruits are tasting of berries and looking like red jewels in the autumn sun. One of these apples looks like a polished, red piece of mahogany, reminding you of conkers on an autumn day. The fruit is crisp, refreshing and juicy, and hangs on the tree, but just a few weeks ago it was very tough and wouldn't have been ready to pick. The past few days I've been observing the Egain Queen apple, waiting for it to ripen enough to be picked. It is hard-skinned and juicy at the moment, but has already started to develop light berry flavours and has the potential to taste great if stored until it is palatable. It is developing a nice bit of russet and has no disease at all. It is a variety that was collected by Pat Malone in West Limerick and has DNA connections to a variety in Wales. It will need to be stored and notes taken on how the flavour changes. By chance I noticed that the apple turns pink a couple of hours after cutting, though the flesh is white when fresh, and that there are burr knots on the tree as well. Varieties never fail to surprise.

Recently I've been fortunate to become acquainted with a man who holds a link to our local apple-growing tradition in East Clare, Tom Holland of Williamstown, Whitegate. Tom got in touch with Irish Seed Savers after hearing me on Jim Collins' program on Scariff Bay Community Radio. Tom was interested in identifying the last apple tree remaining on his family farm. I visited Tom in early October - here's his story.....



The apple loft at Nutgrove House.

Tom recounted with great detail how his family had a business in supplying the East Clare region with apples for more than a hundred years. His family owned an old traditional style farmhouse, situated across the road from Williamstown pier, near Whitegate.

Tom's homeplace, Nutgrove House, was built in the early 1700s and had an adjoining apple shed where

apples were stored in the loft. He had a vivid memory of the skills and tradition of apple growing, including grafting techniques, storing apples in wheaten straw in the apple loft, and of transporting apples to the market in Limerick.

Tom's family had a vibrant business until the proliferation of supermarkets brought an end to apple growing in the region. The family couldn't compete with modernity as consumer needs and demands changed. Golden Delicious apples came into prominence, and that variety became what everyone wanted. Tom recalls that the last apples were sold in 1965 and that they had found it difficult to sell apples for a number of years up until then.

As modernisation took effect, Nutgrove House, along with the apple barn, was demolished as it was a historic house and it had become unsafe over the years.

Tom described the techniques and skills they used to use, such as grafting onto root suckers and wild crab apple roots that had been unearthed. For grafting, they dug clay from land close to the shore, which they called 'daub bui' or 'marl'.

The method of storing apples in shed was as follows. A plank was placed parallel to the wall about a foot out, and after another three feet or so a



The last remaining tree at Tom Holland's



Tom Holland

second plank was placed parallel to the first. Newspaper was then laid on the ground, and rows of apples were made from one end of the shed to the next. Once the rows were created, wheaten straw was placed on top of that first layer. Once the apples were covered in straw, a second layer of rows was created, and so on.

With each layer, planks were stacked so as to create a structure which had apples between them in rows. Tom said that Bramleys, Blenheim Orange, Allington Pippin and James Grieve were stored with this method and that Bramleys stored the longest. Tom became excited as he described the lovely smell from the apple loft, it was as if he could still smell the scent. Tom remembered that the oldest apple tree on the farm in his childhood was a yellow snout apple with a distinctive taste - he says he could identify the apple by its taste if he ever came across it again.

I identified the last remaining apple tree as Ellison's Orange, a delicious, juicy variety. Next to the apple tree is a huge handkerchief tree that is well over one hundred and twenty years old. Tom recounted how Colonel Cooper Sampson of Williamstadt house planted the tree years previously, the Colonel is supposed to have travelled as far as China.

The tree maintenance was very much of its time, with black tar oil sprayed onto the trees in winter and coating trunks with burnt lime from Askeaton. Fires were lit to keep frost away from blossom in springtime. A humorous piseóg Tom recalled was that some apples weren't eaten off the tree after November because the "púca would pee on the apples".

The methods of transport also changed over the years, from a canal boat at the pier canal to a lorry that brought them to Limerick market. On the canal boats, apples were transported in tea chests with straw.

As modernisation took hold, the apple orchard was removed due to the trees being old, and the trees weren't grafted. Tom explained that people were practical and moved with the times, and that conserving the varieties wouldn't have been to the forefront of people's minds. I was delighted to bring an Allington Pippin to Tom as he hadn't tasted one since the 1960s. Other anecdotes Tom shared include bringing a swarm of bees all the way from Flagmount in a Morris Minor.

Tom's story is one example of how modernisation had impacted the traditions of Ireland. It is well known that tariffs were lifted from imported apples when Ireland joined the E.U. From my conversation with Tom, I realised how he was imparting his inherited knowledge: through storytelling and reliving his memories. To have a conversation is to link past tradition with the knowledge acquired to carry it on in the future. It is unwritten oral history.

In today's context, our local shops and supermarkets transport apples from South Africa or Italy to Scariff and the larger towns, supplying apples such as Pink Lady, Gala and Golden Delicious. How do we balance this out in terms of food miles - a Bardsey apple from one mile away or a Gala from 1,000 miles away? Why not eat apples ten months of the year, enjoying Margaret Juneating in July and Allen's Everlasting in June? Why aren't there enough local growers to supply apples in our locality and even our county? We can learn a lot from people in our community such as Tom Holland who have the knowledge that is needed.



Cillian Boyd

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