

# A Few Good Apples

written by Guest Contributor | August 10, 2020



Had the stairwell been crowded like it usually is, I might not have noticed. But the afternoon before campus closed for Thanksgiving most of the students had already gone, stricken by unpredictable cases of last minute mystery ailments like “my mom booked my ticket home too early”-itis. So I had plenty of time and space to stop and consider (and photograph, though not very well) a Granny Smith apple perched on a wooden rail smoothed and stained by decades of sliding hands, tipped slightly against the hard iron edge of a newel.

Had I spotted that apple elsewhere – stacked among kin on the auto-misted display of a market, on offer in the college dining hall from which it was probably taken, even in the striped Finnish fruit bowl in my own house – it’s unlikely I would have paused. Though long one of my favorite varieties and one of the nation’s according to the US Apple Association, the Granny Smith is familiar. Despite holding on at number three, its tartness no longer gives the same shock it once did. The dominant Red Delicious has already slipped down the rankings of American apples, outpaced by the Gala upstart, so any apple can fall from the tree. What’s one more Granny Smith to the crisp, fresh first-in-my-life Mutsu I ate at a farmer’s market a few years ago?

Perhaps Granny Smith apples have been made mild through commercial farming and long distance transport; perhaps my taste buds have simply grown bored. But imagine the thrill in 1868 when Maria Ann Smith found a chance seedling growing from her compost pile of crab apples in New South Wales. Imagine being there for the first bite, in the moment when she knew what she had and an apple became not just any apple. Smith cultivated that seedling like Australia’s John Chapman until decades later, in the 1930s long after she died, her eponymous apple arrived in the UK. Somehow, though it’s hard to believe, it took another forty years to reach the US. American travelers who had already tasted those tart, green explosions abroad in the preceding years must have been insufferable in their nostalgia. Their mouths wouldn’t have known what to make of it nor how to remake it later when telling their family and friends of that apple they’d eaten. That apple as bright and surprising as Paris, as sour and secretive as East Berlin, as sunny as Melbourne’s St. Kilda on a summer Sunday when everyone back home was still wrapped up in scarves and thick winter coats. That apple everyone they knew became tired of

hearing about.

I once saw some fellow travelers from the US rediscover—perhaps even discover?—the Granny Smith apple in an Australian market where my friend Bluey and I stopped outside Melbourne to stock up on food before driving into the bush. In the produce aisle two older women with midwestern accents stood before the apples in thick conversation, debating which kind to buy, when Bluey piped up, his own accent suddenly thicker.

“You want the Granny Smith, ladies. I’m Paul Smith. She’s m’granny!”

That clinched it, not just the personalized recommendation but the family connection—apocryphal though it was—and had there been smartphones in 1995 I’m sure they would have insisted on a selfie with Bluey to show their friends they’d met the grandson of *the* Granny Smith. We laughed about it on the road but considering the apple had only been in US stores for twenty years or so then, a recent arrival, and because all Americans know nothing exists until we have it at which point it becomes our invention, it wasn’t so far fetched that she might be his granny.

The last time a Granny Smith surprised me, before that encounter on the stairwell at work, came when an apple slicer broke as I pushed it through one at home. The tool’s round plastic handle snapped off of its star-shaped blade assembly and left sharp metal points extending in every direction out of the fruit. What had been a snack a few seconds before was a weapon. “The Danger Apple™” I called it on Twitter, where years later it still sends up occasional offshoots of resurging notice, especially around Halloween when thoughts turn to urban legends about razor blades hidden in treats. The strange, viral success of that tweet was as much of a shock as the apple itself; I’m not the only one looking to be surprised by known apples.

Other fruit, too. When everything’s available regardless of season, at least in some desiccated, diminished form, it’s hard to remember the rush. Imagine the sweet, citrus explosion of a nineteenth century orange at Christmas, an exotic, once-a-year imported orb of compacted Spanish or Italian sunlight brightening the doldrums of winter. The Christmas orange in our family served mostly to weigh down the toe of the stocking, without any flavor advantage over an orange eaten from the same plastic mesh supermarket bag in the same house the previous day. I use a chocolate orange to stuff stockings myself, the kind you can crack into segments with a firm whack on the table, but that too was once an import and now sits on the shelves of our local supermarket between peanut butter and jelly and the mundane exotic delight of Nutella.

What would it take to make an orange surprising again? Perhaps getting pelted at Ivrea, Italy’s Battle of the Oranges, where the fruit itself doesn’t come unexpected but taking one in the face might.

In Valencia, Spain it’s La Tomatina instead, an August street fight with tomatoes, though just as its celebrated fruit loses flavor when bred for long distance transport and mass consumption, the event has been watered down through imitation in an increasing number of cities and towns. Long before I knew there was an “official” tomato fight, my brothers and I—to the chagrin

of our father—fought a fall battle of our own with the remains of his garden, hurling half-red and rotten and green tomatoes from one end of the yard toward the other, covering ourselves and everything else in juice and in seeds. Had we known the tradition, had we seen it before, would it have been so much fun? Unlikely as the ninety-ninth Granny Smith apple grabbing hold of your tongue with as firm a grip as the first.

Our tomato fight tradition lasted exactly one year. My brothers and I thought it was so much fun that we would surely do it again but when the time came, when it wasn't so spur of the moment, blasting each other with too-hard or too-soft fruit seemed a bit silly. I've had several crabapple fights in my time, but those hurt a lot more and too often the windfallen fruit hides bees drunk and surly on fermented juice.

I found a similar though less violent thrill once on Boston Common while walking to work. Some crew of pre-dawn agricultural activists had lined up tomatoes on every raised surface: along the stone edges of planters and retaining walls, and following the rim of a fountain and statues' plinths. Hundreds of bright, red tomatoes stretched from the Park Street edge of the Common all the way along Tremont to the corner of Boylston Street. I watched the disseminators finish their work in the ripening light, placing the last of their crop and piling empty cardboard flats in the back of a truck, and I could have asked why. But in the red glow of so much wonder, with a long, unbroken line of tomatoes both ahead and behind, the question was superfluous. An answer would diminish the moment.

Though I did take and eat a tomato and my god, was it good. Perhaps that was the point: to remind city-dwellers, supermarket shoppers, speedy lunch on the go or at your desk eaters, what exactly a tomato still is. In my yard we get enough tomatoes from paltry vines to give the squirrels ammunition to hurl from above after taking a single, selfish bite (when they aren't tossing stale bread rolls a neighbor leaves whole in his yard), but this serendipitous bounty was the urban equivalent of turning a bend in a trail to find bushes laden with blackberries or Concord grapes on the vine after scenting them on your approach.

Or tiny gems of Alpine strawberry dotting trailsides and rock faces in the Dolomites, fruit I was so excited to see that the group of students I was leading at the time thought I'd succumbed to altitude sickness or, more tragically, being old and uncool; they'd already laughed at my "dad hat" for hiking. Those first Alpine strawberries I'd ever seen in the wild demanded slow walking and careful hunting as they took me back thirty-plus years to my father's garden again and to the wooden pyramid he built as a miniature Alp for his crop. He thought they'd failed, that no berries grew or had gone to the birds, but my brothers and I while out playing had snacked on one after another as soon as they ripened to red. I hadn't seen or tasted an Alpine strawberry since childhood and to pluck one then several then a few handfuls more up high in the actual Alps was as close as I've come to fructal nirvana.

You can't box up such a feeling to sell it but that hasn't stopped growers and promoters of the Cosmic Crisp apple, which arrived in supermarkets a few months ago with a \$10.5 million marketing budget. Part of their campaign was

the hashtag #imaginethepossibilities but if I could imagine them already before having a taste, if I could predict the apple's surprise, how exciting could it possibly be? I ate one a few weeks ago and it was fine. A good apple. But I don't recall enough to describe it. Maybe the next one will make an impression.

The fruits I remember—the apples, tomatoes, and strawberries, even the banana smashed on a sidewalk in Boston with a stain of red paint beside it like a crime scene photo by Weegee – have more than a flavor, they have a moment. Their surprise comes not through the promise of a hashtag but from stumbling upon them on stairwells and mountains or from being struck in the face so their juice stings my eyes and runs into my mouth, changing what I thought I already knew because I don't see it coming.

---



**Steve Himmer** is author of the novels *The Bee-Loud Glade*, *Fram*, and *Scratch*, and editor of the webjournal *Necessary Fiction*. He teaches at Emerson College and tweets at @SteveHimmer.