

METRO MONEY

Could Two Newcomers Replace Honeycrisp as Apple Sensations?

Crist Bros Orchards is practically betting the New York farm on the SnapDragon and the RubyFrost



By

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Jeff and Joy Crist and their grown children Joel Crist and Jenny Crist Kohn have bet the family farm on an apple. Make that two apples. They're hoping one or both of the new, locally bred varieties they have planted in their orchard—the SnapDragon and the RubyFrost—will be the next Honeycrisp. A monster apple sensation.

“It’s the greatest New York story and they are great apples,” says Joy Crist.

“We’ve invested heavily because we’re firm believers.”

I recently took the trip 90 minutes north of New York City to visit Crist Bros Orchards in Walden, N.Y. The 700-acre spread produces roughly 75 million apples a year, making it one of the state's larger wholesale orchards. And the Crists have converted 20% of their acreage to the new varieties—more than any other orchard in the state, they say.

It is an expensive, long-term bet on consumer preferences, says 32-year-old Joel Crist, who represents his family's fifth generation on the farm. Orchards cost about \$20,000 an acre to plant, and take about five years to produce a commercial crop. "It can be darn near catastrophic if you make the wrong bet," he says.



Joel Crist explains the apple-growing process at his New York orchard.

PHOTO: SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Why take the risk on two little-known varieties? It comes down to economics, Mr. Crist says.

Core varieties such as Red Delicious that were bred mainly to look good and ship unscathed have fallen from favor in recent years. They often fetch less on the

wholesale market than they cost to produce—roughly \$18 for a 40-pound box.

The newer, wildly popular Honeycrisp, which the Crists also grow, can fetch \$50 a box or more. But it's fussy, delicate and expensive to produce. SnapDragon and RubyFrost avoid the production risks associated with Honeycrisp, while earning a decent profit. At least in theory.

“We're betting that five years from now, everyone wants SnapDragon and RubyFrost, not Red Delicious,” says Mr. Crist, who trucks around the orchard listening to NPR podcasts and samples up to 200 apples a day at harvest time.



Snapdragon apples at Crist Bros Orchards in Walden, New York on Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2020. An employee at the Crist Bros Orchards picks Pink Lady apples in Walden, New York on Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2020. Pink Lady apples are picked at the Crist Bros Orchards in Walden, New York on Tuesday, Oct. 20, 2020. PHOTOS: SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL(3)

While sales of SnapDragon and RubyFrost are just gaining momentum, the story goes back more than a decade, when Cornell University's apple-breeding program announced that the new varieties—then known as NY1 and NY2—were up for grabs.

A band of 147 New York farmers bought exclusive rights to grow the apples, which allows them to control quality and avoid overproduction. Their organization, Crunch Time Apple Growers, operates like a coop. Members pay a licensing fee for each tree, plus a percentage of sales.

Proceeds support both Cornell's breeding program and Crunch Time's marketing efforts. Like minor celebrities, SnapDragon and RubyFrost have their own websites, Facebook pages, Instagram feeds, hashtags (#seekthesnap, #getyourchompon) and YouTube hubs.

It's a nice story about local empowerment. But if the apples are lousy, who cares? Last week, in the parking lot outside the Crist Bros packing plant, I tried both.



SnapDragon apples are packaged at Crist Bros Orchards.

PHOTO: SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The RubyFrost, a cross between a Braeburn and an Autumn Crisp, was disappointing. While it's got a great crunch and a lovely, deep, red color, the flavor didn't wow.

But the SnapDragon—yippee! A cross between the Honeycrisp and an unnamed Cornell apple-breeding selection known as NY752, it's even crispier and juicier than a Honeycrisp, and has a sweet, tangy flavor that is super satisfying. It's my new favorite apple.

Susan Brown, the Cornell University apple breeder who co-created both the SnapDragon and the RubyFrost, says the two varieties were developed to accomplish different aims. The RubyFrost is great for baking, resists browning and has the tart flavor profile appealing to about 30% of consumers.

I asked which she prefers. “I will not answer that!” she said. “I learned with my children that you have no favorites.”

So how are these varieties performing? During the past three years, nationwide sales of RubyFrost grew 192%, to \$2.4 million, while SnapDragon sales grew 154%, to \$4.3 million, according to Nielsen.



SnapDragon apples are stored in a facility to stay fresh for several months at Crist Bros Orchards.

PHOTO: SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Together, however, they still account for less than 1% of the \$4 billion annual U.S. apple market, compared with 26% for Honeycrisp.

The problem? RubyFrost and SnapDragon are just two of several dozen “club” varieties hitting supermarkets these days, each with their own marketing campaigns. It’s hard to get noticed.

“I’m disappointed in the lack of grocery-store shelf space, without a doubt, and dismayed that they don’t give it to local apples that are this good,” Joy Crist says.

Still, local farmers have high hopes. Scott Hill, owner of the Orchards of Concklin in Pomona, N.Y., which sells produce at its own stand and at New York City farmers markets, says that while he offers 20 apple varieties, he’s been blown away by the reaction to SnapDragon. “It’s the only apple I’ve seen that takes sales away from Honeycrisp,” he says.



The 700-acre Crist Bros Orchards produces roughly 75 million apples a year, making it one of New York’s larger wholesale orchards.

PHOTO: SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

And like Honeycrisp, SnapDragon can fetch \$2.99 a pound retail—a dollar more than all other varieties, he says.

If RubyFrost and SnapDragon sputter out, the Crists are in trouble. An orchard just down the road that failed to replace its older varieties with more popular

options was abandoned last year after production costs exceeded sales. “The apples are still out there, hanging on the trees,” Mr. Crist says.

But so far so good. He says his farmer cousin, who also has a road stand, reports that “Snaps” are outselling Honeycrisp two-to-one among regular customers.

“It just proves it’s going to work,” says Mr. Crist. “We just need to get it out there.”



SnapDragon apples can fetch \$2.99 a pound retail.

PHOTO: SARA HYLTON FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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