WINTER SQUASHES FROM LANCASTER FARM FRESH CO-OP

October 17, 2023

Story and illustrations by Valeria Trucchia

Choosing a squash and knowing how to cook it can be intimidating. So many shapes and flavors are available nowadays. Here is a little help with the varieties from Lancaster Farm Farm Fresh Co-op we can see now on display at the Food Coop.

ROBIN’S KOGINUT SQUASH

FLAVOR A sweet mix between butternut and kabocha squash.

ABOUT A “star” squash, born from a collaboration between the renowned Chef Dan Barber of Blue Hill at Stone Barns, vegetable breeder Michael Mazourek and organic seedsman Matthew Goldfarb.

SERVE Absolutely delicious roasted, turns tender, buttery and slightly citrusy.

GREEN ACORN SQUASH

FLAVOR Mild, subtly sweet and nutty flavor.

ABOUT About the size of a large grapefruit.

SERVE Versatile, cook in chunks baked, roasted, steamed, sautéed or even in the microwave.

DELICATA SQUASH

FLAVOR A creamy flesh with a mild flavor similar to sweet potatoes.

ABOUT Smaller than most winter squash, so they’re pretty easy to prepare and cook.

SERVE Slightly sweet, best to slice and roast or to scoop out and stuff.

HONEYNUT SQUASH

FLAVOR Smaller, darker and far sweeter than a butternut squash.

ABOUT A new Cornell University hybrid inspired by the chef Dan Barber of the Blue Hill restaurants.

SERVE Use it the same way you would butternut or buttercup squash; ideal for stuffing, roasting and, of course, for desserts.

SPAGHETTI SQUASH

FLAVOR A mild flavor and stringy texture.

ABOUT Gets its name from the way its flesh forms pasta-like strings.

SERVE Roast or steam it, remove the seeds and eat it as you would spaghetti.

CARNIVAL SQUASH

FLAVOR A flavorsome squash, nutty, with hints of maple, it takes on a buttery texture when cooked.

ABOUT A cross between sweet dumpling and acorn squashes.

SERVE Roasting and baking bring out its natural sweetness; it can also be steamed or mashed.

A list of two detailed articles with great recipes, in case you want to read

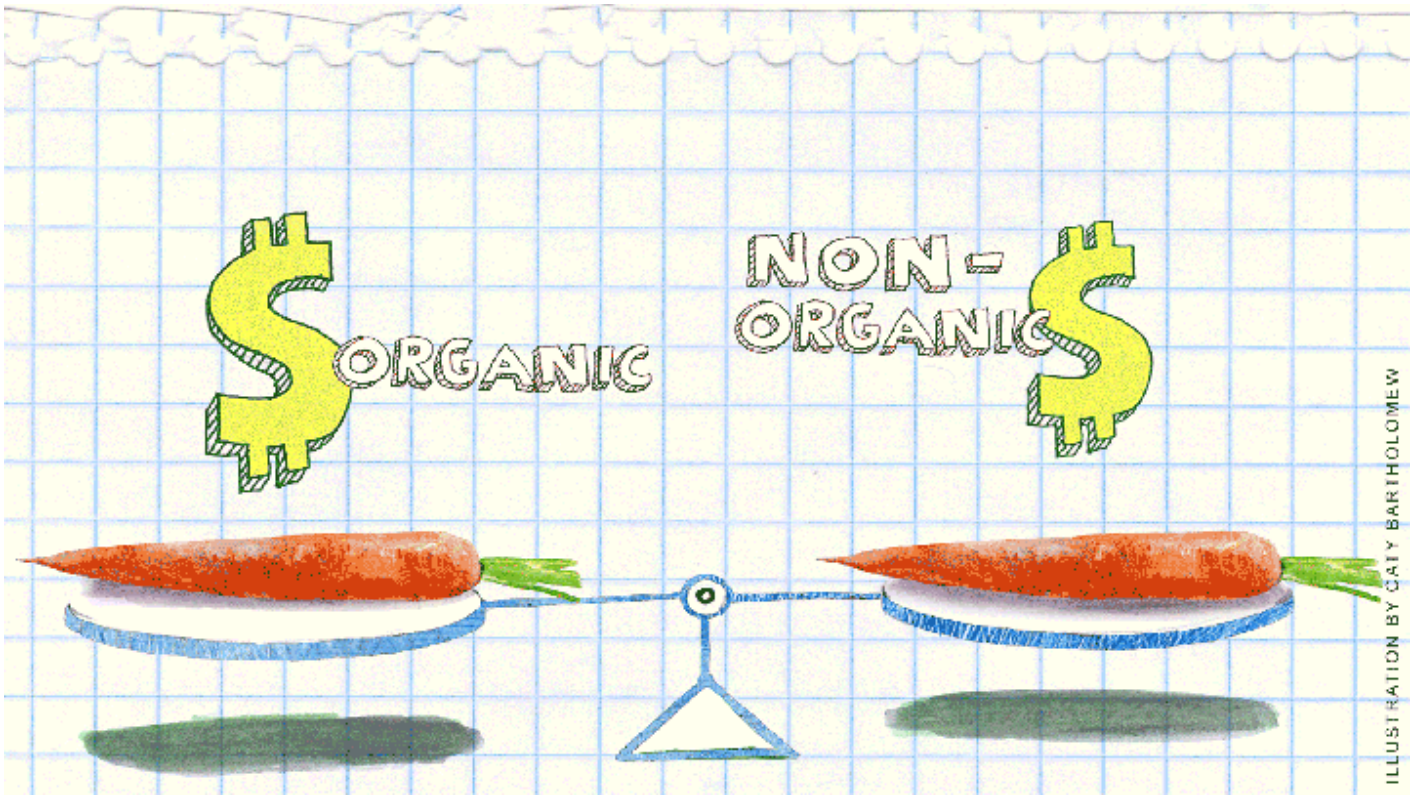
more about winter squashes:

- “Know Your Squashes: How They Look, How They Cook” By Florence Fabricant, The New York Times, Nov 2, 2018
- The 16 varieties of Winter Squash You Need To Know by Kelli Foster and Emily Saladino, The Kitchn, Oct 11, 2022

*Valeria Trucchia is a visual artist, illustrator, photographer, designer, and educator**.** She grew up in Paris in an Italian family and has been calling Brooklyn, NY, home for over 20 years.*

WHY ARE SOME ORGANIC PRODUCTS SO MUCH MORE EXPENSIVE?

October 17, 2023



By Walecia Konrad

A recent stroll through the Park Slope Food Coop's produce section showed the beginning of summer's bounty and the usual wide variety of organically grown items, including locally grown strawberries, rhubarbaand greens.

There's also the dizzying array of produce prices, posted each day on the shelf labels, often showing organic and conventionally grown produce side by side. Invariably, organic costs more than conventionally grown—sometimes a lot more.

> "I SHOP PRICE A LOT IN THE PRODUCE AISLE AND I OFTEN WONDER WHY THERE CAN BE SUCH A BIG DIFFERENCE IN ORGANIC AND REGULAR. IF IT'S SIGNIFICANT, I'LL BUY REGULAR OR SKIP IT ALL TOGETHER."
>
> *COOP MEMBER DEBORAH NOCELLA*

Coop members, of course, are accustomed to higher prices for organics. They're also appreciative of the fact that organic produce is almost always less expensive at the Coop than other grocery stores, thanks to the PSFC's low markup.

But the price differential does make one wonder why organically grown is more expensive than conventionally grown produce. Even more mysterious, why is there such a dramatic difference for some items? On a recent shopping day, for example, organic red peppers were selling for $4.73 a pound compared to $1.87 for non-organic. And organic fennel bulbs were selling for $4.30 each compared to $2.20 for non-organic.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Organic red bell peppers at $4.73 per lb and non-organic at $1.87 per lb.

“I shop price a lot in the produce aisle,” said Coop member Deborah Nocella. “And I often wonder why there can be such a big difference in organic and regular. If it’s significant, I’ll buy regular or skip it all together.”

To get a better understanding of just how organic produce pricing works in general and at the Coop, the Gazette contacted PSFC’s produce-buying team, John Horsman and Cecelia Rembert. The pair are in charge of sourcing all of the Coop’s produce—organic and otherwise.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Coop produce buyer Cecelia Rembert.

Pricing is a big part of their process. Prices for both organic and conventionally grown products can vary based on season, how far away the supplier is, the size of the supplier, the Coop's relationship with the supplier and growing conditions at each of the farms. The team strives to provide a huge variety of produce at as many price points as possible, to make sure high-quality fruits and vegetable are accessible to all members. Produce prices are a moving target, changing virtually daily.

WHY ARE SOME ITEMS SO MUCH MORE EXPENSIVE THAN THEIR CONVENTIONAL COUNTERPARTS? THE ANSWER IS SUPPLY, SAID COOP PRODUCE BUYER JOHN HORSMAN.

GROWING ORGANICS COSTS MORE

To understand produce pricing at the Coop, it's important to start at the farm.

The reason organic produce costs more than conventionally grown boils down to one important factor: It costs farmers more to grow organic produce. Here's why.

- **More labor.** Because organic farms don't use pesticides or synthetic fertilizers, more labor is required to manage the more complicated and time-consuming organic farming practices, such as crop rotation, weeding, and alternate pest management techniques, explained Horsman.
- **Smaller scale**. In general, organic farms are small, making them naturally less cost efficient than the giant agricultural complexes that can focus acres and acres on one or two crops. "Small farms have to juggle the needs of harvesting many different crops, cooling and packing them and then shipping them in small quantities through regional distributors," said Rembert. By contrast, conventional agriculture is often engineered extensively towards lowering costs and boosting profit margins.
- **Regulation**. Organic farms, both large and small, incur the extra costs associated with becoming certified organic by the U.S. Department of Agriculture and then maintaining that certification. To sport the certified-organic label, a product must meet USDA standards that maximize soil health, conserve water and reduce air pollution. Organic farms cannot use synthetic fertilizers, pesticides or hormones. Organic certification and compliance can add thousands of dollars to a farm's overhead.

> "IF I KNOW I WILL BE EATING SOMETHING RAW OR BARELY COOKED—BERRIES, APPLES, PEACHES, PLUMS, BROCCOLI, CARROTS, CELERY, HERBS—I ALWAYS GO WITH ORGANIC, EVEN IF IT'S EXPENSIVE."
>
> *COOP MEMBER LISA BRANCACCIO*

HOW SUPPLY AND DEMAND IMPACTS PRICING

All of this explains why organic produce is more expensive in general. But why are some items so much more expensive than their conventional counterparts?

“With organics, there is inherently less supply,” said Horsman. Organic farms account for less than 1% of the 911 million acres of total U.S. farmland, according to USDA statistics.

As mentioned, giant conventional farms have far higher crop yields, so they generate much more supply than smaller organic producers. They can often sell for far lower prices and still make a profit on the volume of sales.

That said, it’s not uncommon for organic farms to have bumper crops too— especially large operations in California, Arizona and Mexico. What’s more, smaller local farms can have a huge bounty in the heart of the growing season. That translates into prices that are closer to conventional. Zucchini in late summer is a good example. “Now is the best time to be a produce buyer,” said Horsman, who pointed out that he and Rembert strongly prefer sourcing from local suppliers whenever possible.

> SOMETIMES PRICES ARE SO CLOSE, IT DOESN’T MAKE SENSE TO STOCK BOTH. FOR EXAMPLE, AT ONE POINT ORGANIC GARLIC WAS SELLING FOR ONLY 2 CENTS MORE A POUND THAN CONVENTIONAL.

The buying team is constantly managing shifting supplies and prices with each produce order. In the winter, for example, the Coop buys organic broccoli from Four Seasons, a large organic producer in California, Horsman said. Because Four Seasons is big enough, it can focus a lot of acres on broccoli, so prices are usually relatively close to conventionally grown broccoli from California.

Sometimes prices are so close, it doesn't make sense to stock both types. For example, at one point organic garlic was selling for only 2 cents more a pound than conventional. So, the buyers decided to stop selling conventional and only stock organic until there was a bigger price differential.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Scallions: red twisties or plu $.48bu; organic $1.57bu.

Sometimes the buyers encounter organic and conventional prices that are so high they decide not to stock the product at all. This doesn't happen often, Horsman said, but he does remember having trouble finding decently priced broccoli rabe this past winter.

Offering Integrated Pest Management (IPM) produce is another strategy that keeps some prices lower. IPM farmers do not use pesticides, though they may use other farming techniques that are not considered organic, Horsman explained. Prices are usually somewhere in between organic and conventionally grown.

The Coop often stocks IPM apples, pears, peaches, strawberries, cherries and blueberries. Pest conditions in the Northeast make it difficult to grow these fruits organically and not lose a lot of the crop, the team explained.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Blueberries: pint little buck organic $4.85ea; pint $2.70ea.

GAUGING MEMBERS' PRICE TOLERANCE

Horsman and Rembert keep a close eye on what sells quickly and try to provide a variety of prices that will accommodate all shoppers' needs. The $9 per quart local IPM strawberries that were recently in the aisle "sold like hotcakes," said Horsman. "They do not last long." Even so, the team was sure to provide lower-priced California organic strawberries at the same time for people who want less expensive berries.

How much members will pay for organic sometimes depends on the type of fruit or vegetable.

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Carrots: bags regular $1.69ea; bags organic $1.24ea.

“If I know I will be eating something raw or barely cooked—berries, apples, peaches, plums, broccoli, carrots, celery, herbs—I always go with organic, even if it’s expensive,” said Coop member Lisa Brancaccio. “Although if it’s too expensive, I may not buy it that week,” she added.

> “I FIGURE THE COOP SOURCING TEAM IS THOROUGH ABOUT THE KINDS OF GROWERS WE BUY FROM, SO I TYPICALLY ASSUME THAT THE NON-ORGANIC PRODUCE MEETS MY STANDARDS”
>
> *COOP MEMBER JULIA KONRAD*

Coop member Susan Buchsbaum follows the same rule, adding that if organic isn’t

available or too expensive, she won't buy conventional on some foods she knows have higher pesticide loads, such as green beans and berries. "And I know non-organic produce with thick peels such as citrus, bananas or avocados tend to be safer for the consumer, although not better for earth health."

PHOTO BY MICHAEL BERMAN

Lemons: organic $2.31lb; 4958 or blank / #3 label $1.31lb.

Member Julia Konrad (no relation to this reporter) said she rarely buys organic produce when it's more expensive. "I figure the Coop sourcing team is thorough about the kinds of growers we buy from, so I typically assume that the non-organic produce meets my standards for quality well enough," she explains.

Horsman and Rembert know they have the luxury—and challenge—of buying for a well-educated and organic-hungry shopper. Members have a high tolerance for the constantly changing landscape in the produce aisle, they noted.

Horsman also pointed to another great part of his job: "One of the best perks of being

a produce buyer is sampling the amazing items that we purchase to insure we are buying the best produce for the members," said Horsman.

Walecia Konrad is a freelance writer, editor and content producer specializing in personal finance. She has been a PSFC member since 2001 and on-and-off contributor to the Gazette *for almost as long.*

INSIDE THE WINTER WONDERLAND OF THE COOP'S PRODUCE AISLE

October 17, 2023

by John B. Thomas

Winter in the Northeastern United States is not typically a season associated with fresh produce. It's not synonymous with the tomatoes, lettuces, and berries that fill the Coop produce aisle in spring, summer, and fall. Yet many fruits and vegetables are harvested in the fall and store well for winter consumption. Vegetables like pump-

kins, Brussels sprouts, and rutabaga and fruits like grapefruits can add a rich diversity to our diets.

At the same time, keeping the Coop shelves stocked with year-round favorites like tomatoes and avocados means that our produce buyers sometimes have to look further afield than our region to source produce that satisfies member needs while also meeting the environmental and social responsibility ethos of the Coop.

To understand more about what considerations go into sourcing produce in the winter, the *Linewaiters Gazette* interviewed Produce Coordinator and Buyer Cecelia Rembert. A lightly edited transcript of the interview is below.

What is typically considered "winter" produce?

Our local winter produce is mostly storage items grown locally in the fall—winter squashes, sweet potatoes and potatoes, onions, root vegetables like rutabaga, kohlrabi, turnips, celeriac, and fruits like apples. We are at this time still able to get some local green vegetables—like broccoli, spinach, chard, dandelions, tatsoi, chicory, and radicchio—the dark and bitter greens are the cold-hardiest. We also still have a little bit of local greenhouse grown loose and head lettuce (e.g. loose Asian mix, Queen's greens winter gem loose salad mix, local little gem heads), but many of our lettuces are now coming out of California or the Southeast. For fruits, only the apples are still local. Everything else comes from further afield.

> LOOK FOR MANDARINQUATS AND ALGERIAN TANGERINES, BOTH OF WHICH ARE ON THE SHELVES NOW!

What are some of the winter produce items in stock at the Coop now?

Many people also associate winter with the citrus season in Florida, California, and

Texas, and we do have many citruses beginning to arrive from those locations, including delicious Texas grapefruit, Kishu mandarins, markut and sweet limes, Meyer lemons, limequat, satsumas, clementines and pummelos, and more new citrus arriving every week. Winter is also a time of some tropical fruits, like passionfruit, feijoa, sapodilla and eggfruit (canistel), coming from both California and Florida. We also have a relationship with a family vineyard in Moldova and enjoy their sustainably--grown loose seeded black grapes from December to March.

Are there some items that we continue to source throughout the winter that have to come from farther away?

Avocados are grown year-round in Mexico (except a few months where we can source the organic avocados from California) so really they don't experience much change. During the local season (May to November) we are able to source many local tomatoes, and indeed we are now sourcing some Mexico tomatoes (mostly plum and cluster) alongside greenhouse-grown tomatoes from the United States. Berries are com-

ing from far away right now—our blackberries and raspberries are out of Mexico, but blueberries are mostly out of Peru right now. We don't offer strawberries at this time because the quality-cost axis inverts. What that means is that the cost exceeds the quality during the winter and so we pass. Bell peppers are sourced from some far-flung locations, including Israel, Mexico and the Netherlands. Cucumbers are sometimes sourced from Mexico right now, as are bagged sweet peppers. Lady Moon is a reliable and high-quality grower out of Florida and Georgia and we are able to source eggplant, some peppers and some kales, head lettuces and other greens through the early winter; likewise we are able to source other squashes and greens from New Sprout Growers, a cooperative of organic farms in the Carolinas.

WE HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH A FAMILY VINEYARD IN MOLDOVA AND ENJOY THEIR SUSTAINABLY-GROWN LOOSE SEEDED BLACK GRAPES FROM DECEMBER TO MARCH.

What items do we explicitly choose not to buy during the winter, for sustainability (or other) reasons, that might be in stock at a normal grocery store?

Strawberries do not make the cut in the winter, although we usually bring them back for a week in February for those members who desire them for Valentine's Day. We are also very selective with our grape options over the winter. Grapes are imported from Peru and South Africa over the winter and we will get these in small quantities, but generally the quality is not as high as the California season, although the pricing can be shockingly high. We wait for Mexican grapes in April and May and then California follows in June. We move out of early-season apples as the quality declines and shift our apple program to late-season and storage apple varieties.

Are there any other seasonal goods you'd recommend Coop members try this winter?

My favorite winter produce? Terrific local broccoli; local radicchios of all varieties, local root vegetables like sunchokes, rutabaga and black radish, buck brand satsumas, pink lady apples, feijoa, and winter squashes like sweet dumpling, acorn and kabocha. And look for mandarinquats and Algerian tangerines, both of which are on the shelves now! We also have really delicious small-farm organic turmeric from Florida. It just arrived and will run for a few months. It's incomparably better than the turmeric we are usually able to get (from Hawaii or Fiji). And then finally, my number one favorite fruit of all the year is the Melogold grapefruit from Buck Brand Citrus. It's a cross between a pomelo and a grapefruit and it's absolutely delicious.

John B. Thomas works in sustainability and social impact for a performance apparel company.

HEIRLOOM APPLE VARIETIES FROM THE SCOTT FARM ORCHARD IN DUMMERSTON, VERMONT

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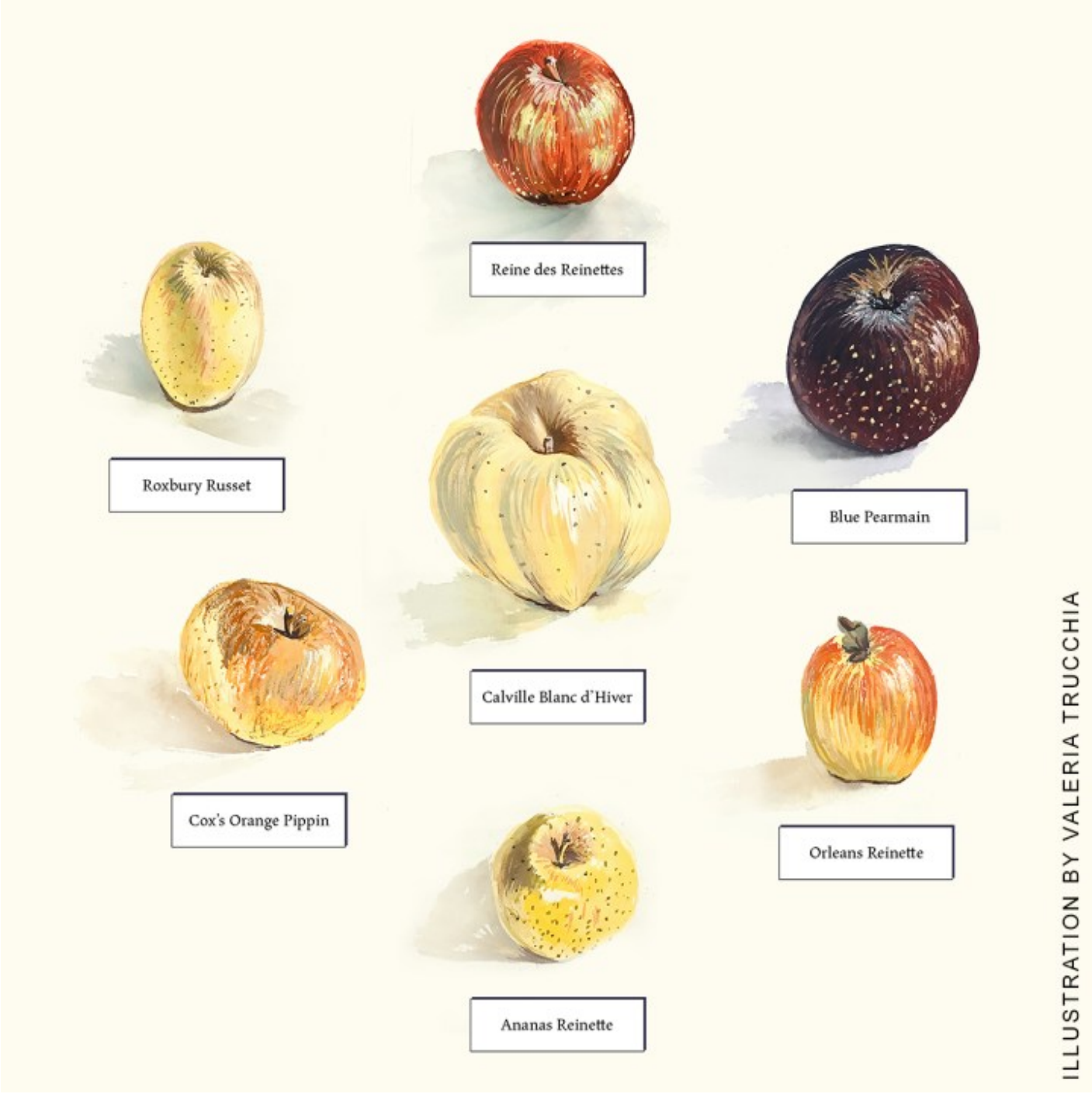

Illustrations by Valeria Trucchia

Roxbury Russet

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Roxbury Russet

This is the oldest American apple variety. Some folks say the flavor is similar to guava and the texture like a coconut. It has a very high sugar content, though you may not notice it due to the other complex flavors. Cider made from this apple is like nectar, it is so thick and sweet. A medium-sized apple with russeted skin, it is also known as a leather-coat apple. The Roxbury Russet is generally available from

mid-October to late November.

Cox’s Orange Pippin

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Cox’s Orange Pippin

The most popular of English apples, it has been awarded the highest honors by the Royal Horticultural Society. It was originally grown from seed (hence the name Pippin) in 1825 by Richard Cox, an amateur horticulturist. According to Roald Dahl, the popular children’s author,

one can tell a Cox is ripe for eating if the seeds rattle when you shake it. Its tart citrus flavor is exquisitely tempered by notes of sweet pear. It is excellent for eating and cooking, and makes a fabulous apple jelly. Cox is parent to Holstein and Karmijn de Sonnaville. A small round apple with orange skin, sometimes with some russeting. Harvest begins in mid-September.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Reine des Reinettes

A French apple from the 1700s which has a high sugar content that’s balanced with acidity. It’s a juicy apple, good for eating out of hand. It is also good for cooking and in Normandy it is considered the best apple for making hard cider. One of our favorite apples and a top favorite at the tastings here on the farm; there is good reason it’s called the King of the Pippins. A large, beautiful apple, red blush with russeting. Look for this longtime favorite mid-to-late-September.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Calville Blanc d'Hiver

A French apple dating to 1598 with a champagne-like flavor and a wonderful texture when cooked. Of all the French apples, this one is considered the best to cook with because of its flavor and texture and ability to hold its shape. It makes an excellent Tarte Tatin. Calville has a yellow skin with a red blush. Its shape is deeply lobed, often resembling a crown. Harvest in early October.

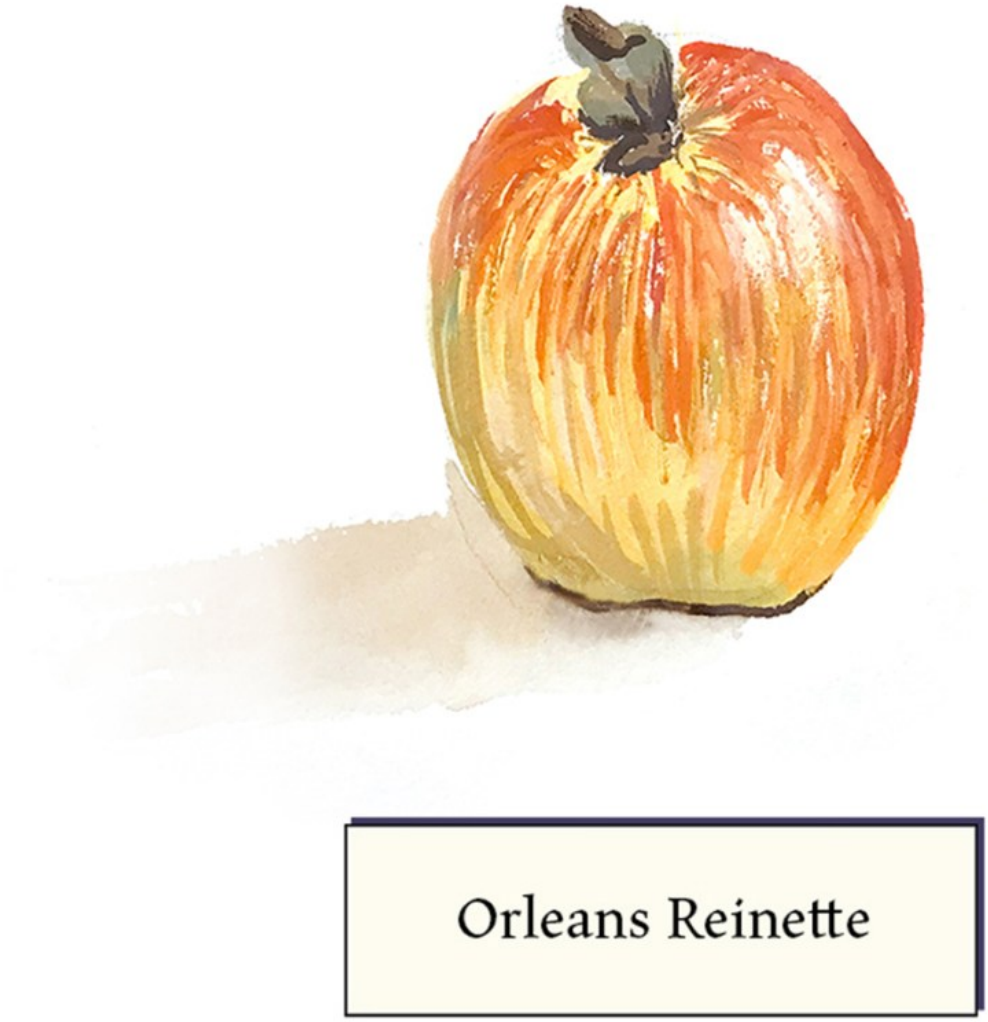

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Orleans Reinette

According to Zeke Goodband, our former orchard manager, this is “one of the most handsome apples on the planet.” Grown in France for hundreds of years, it has a flattened shape with a russeted, rosy cheek. It has a combination of citrus and nutty flavors, and makes for a good cooking apple as well as for eating out of hand. Yellow, fine textured flesh. The famous English food writer, Edward Bunyard,

enjoyed his Orleans Reinettes with port wine. Later harvest variety, usually mid-October.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Blue Pearmain

A New England apple dating back to the early 1700’s. Henry David Thoreau wrote in his journal about his preference for Blue Pearmain. The crisp, rich flavor makes it a good apple for fresh eating and

baking, though its thick skin might prove unfavorable for some in eating out of hand. Large with purple-blue skin with light russeting. Sometimes marked with handsome green stripes and often with a dusty, waxy bloom. Harvest in late September.

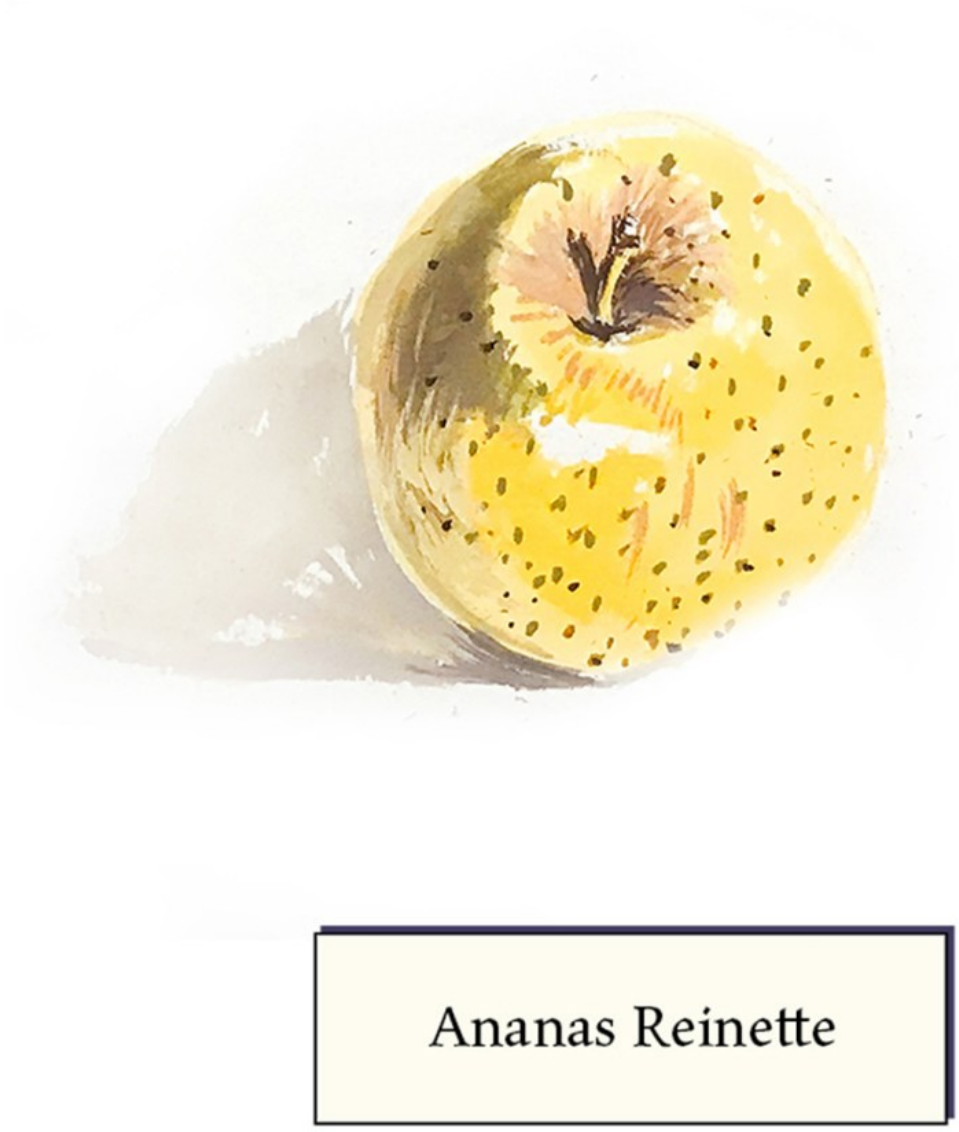

ILLUSTRATION BY VALERIA TRUCCHIA

Ananas Reinette

Or Royal Pineapple, this small yellow skinned apple was grown in

France and Belgium in the 1850s and is named for its flavor after it mellows from the tree. Some sources note it from the 1500s, though it soared in popularity in Germany in the mid-nineteenth century, and remains popular all along central-northern Europe today. Its zesty citrus flavor compliments its crisp fine-grain texture. Used mostly for eating out of hand, it is also a fine cooking apple and makes a robust juice or cider. It is a small to medium apple and aptly suited for the home garden. Harvest begins in mid-September through October.