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BUSINESS

Honeybear is hoping to shake up the apple scene with Pazazz

After years of development, Honeybear is positioning its new apple on national scene.

By Nicole Norfleet Star Tribune | DECEMBER 26, 2015 — 1:02PM



DAVID JOLIS, STAR TRIBUNE

Honeybear leaders Fred Wescott, left, and Don Roper aim to shake up the apple scene with Pazazz, a cross between Honeycrisp and another variety.

Minnesota-based tree fruit company Honeybear Brands hopes it has a new star with a late harvest apple variety called Pazazz.

After eight years of development, the apples harvested this fall will be sold in more than 300 retail stores nationwide.

Pazazz, a cross between the Honeycrisp and another variety, is harvested late in October but holds its flavor longer than many apples. It reaches its peak in January and February because it is harvested with higher starches that turn to a blend of sugars and starches — and Honeybear hopes that fresh taste in the winter will give it an edge.

“The flavor profile actually improves in storage,” said Fred Wescott, president and owner of Honeybear Brands and Wescott Agri Products.

Introducing a new apple variety can be an uphill battle and take a considerable amount of time and money to develop and introduce to the market.

Pazazz was initially developed by Wisconsin grower Doug Shefelbine. Honeybear is now trying to scale production of the apple to match demand, Wescott said.



The apple, which is designed to hold its flavor longer, was long in the making, Wescott said.

Four years ago, the company started its first testing of Pazazz in retail markets across the country. Don Roper, Honeybear’s vice president of marketing and sales, is on the road a lot helping with tastings in grocery stores and demonstrations and meeting with consumers and produce buyers. Retailers have also done their own special marketing of Pazazz.

“The best way to get conversion is to have that person taste that piece of fruit,” Roper said.

Apple flavors and varieties are as diverse as wines, Wescott said.

“The apple is one of the most dynamic fruits on the planet,” he said. “If anybody ever says they do not like apples, it is because they have not eaten an apple that is for their palate.”

The Pazazz is an open-pollinated Honeycrisp cross with texture similar to Honeycrisp’s and a mix of sweetness and tartness that gives it “more zang,” Wescott said.

Wescott’s company grew out of a hobby orchard in Elgin, Minn., started in the 1970s by his father, veterinarian Robert “Doc” Wescott. After graduating from the University of Minnesota with a degree in political science, Fred Wescott joined his father and helped turn the hobby into a business.

Around the year 2000, Wescott said, his company helped scale the regional apple industry and consolidate several orchards in Minnesota and Wisconsin under the Mississippi Valley Fruit Co. brand to serve the retail industry. Wescott’s company still provides packing facilities as well as distribution services for a sizable portion of local orchards.

As the company’s national and international arm, Honeybear Brands has partner growers in locations such as Nova Scotia, Washington state and Chile.

Wescott credits the University of Minnesota’s apple breeding program as being a major contributor to the regional and national apple industry. Honeycrisp, which was released in 1991, was a “game changer” for the industry and raised the bar for how flavorful an apple should be, Wescott said.

Now, companies are starting their own programs to come out with new varieties. But developing a new variety is a massive undertaking, Wescott said. New varieties can take years to develop and most don’t make it to national status. A grower may find one good variety out of 100,000 selections or variations.

“In order to take a variety, develop it, test it, select it, acquire the proprietary rights to it and then launch it and make it successful, it is a huge financial outlay,” Wescott said.

Consumers normally learn about new apple varieties by word-of-mouth, said David Bedford, who’s been an apple breeder at the University of Minnesota for decades. “Certainly, the difficulty is breaking into the market,” he said.

It can also be difficult to control quality of the product that consumers end up getting at the grocery store because of factors from how it was stored to how it was placed or sometimes tossed into the display case, Bedford said.

Pazazz is being introduced as a “club apple,” meaning that only select farmers can grow them and the production, distribution and marketing of the Pazazz apple is controlled “in order to optimize the potential” and hopefully limit some of those quality control issues, Wescott said.

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