

NEWS RELEASE

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PEPIN HEIGHTS ORCHARDS CELEBRATES 20 YEARS SELLING MINNESOTA'S MOST FAMOUS APPLE

Lake City, Minn. – The University of Minnesota's Honeycrisp is widely considered to be the U.S. apple industry's overnight success story, having now risen to #6 in national apple production. Except that its success didn't happen overnight, and its story almost didn't happen at all, reports a Minnesota apple grower who was in on the ground floor.

Pepin Heights Orchards, Inc., is celebrating 20 years selling Honeycrisp this fall. And while owner Dennis Courtier is often credited by U.S. apple industry leaders with creating the Honeycrisp phenomenon, he is quick to point out that it is a uniquely Minnesota story with an ensemble cast.

"We were going broke trying to compete in an industry selling commodity apples in the late 1980s," says Courtier. "We looked to new variety innovation to save the company – and other small growers like us."

Courtier shifted his business to focus on finding undiscovered, high flavor varieties and taking them to market. He traveled the world looking for great tasting apples to bring back to his orchards overlooking Lake Pepin. As fate would have it, he found his biggest success story so far in his backyard, at the University of Minnesota's apple breeding program at the Horticultural Research Center in Excelsior. The "U's" fruit breeding project leader Dr. Jim Luby and apple breeder David Bedford introduced Courtier to a test variety, then known only by a number, that they thought had potential. Bedford had recently saved the test tree from being chopped down.

"Although this new test selection was still unproven it had an explosively crisp texture unlike anything I had tasted before. We felt that it needed to be evaluated in a commercial orchard setting as soon as possible," recalled Bedford.

Courtier wasn't instantly blown away, but he did decide to test it. And the rest, as the saying goes, is history. A long history, notes Courtier.

"Honeycrisp wasn't an overnight success, those first few years were an uphill slog – and then it took off like a rocket," says Courtier. While it offers a superior eating experience, especially compared to commodity apples that dominated the marketplace back then, the

apple is hard to grow and hard to pack. Courtier reports that it took a lot of convincing to get retailers to stock the unknown variety. "I am forever grateful to the retailers who ultimately gave us a chance, and saved our business and others like us."

Pepin Heights' first commercial sale of Honeycrisp in 1997 was to Minnesota retailer Lunds, now Lunds & Byerlys. Dierberg's in St. Louis and Central Markets were among the first Pepin Heights customers to see Honeycrisp's potential, says Courtier.

Today, Honeycrisp is grown coast to coast, and around the world as Honeycrunch. U.S. Honeycrisp production has grown from not being tracked by U.S. Apple Association in 2004, to the #12 variety in 2008 when 3.5 million cartons were packed, to the #6 variety with 16.7 million cartons forecast to be packed in 2017.

Dollar-wise, Honeycrisp is likely in the top three or four varieties based on sales revenue, because it commands a higher retail price than commodity varieties.

That said, all Honeycrisp are not created equal, says Courtier. "Honeycrisp were born and bred to grow best in Minnesota's northern geography and colder climate. That's why Honeycrisp grown in warm climates literally pale by comparison. Our state grows them best."

Pepin Heights isn't resting on its Honeycrisp laurels. The company is now repeating its success with another University of Minnesota variety, SweeTango®, for which the University of Minnesota awarded Pepin Heights the North American license in 2005. Courtier built Next Big Thing – A Growers' Cooperative, a network of top growers and packers across the United States and Canada, to take SweeTango to market. Currently available for a few months each fall while growers ramp up their production, SweeTango has already earned a fanatic consumer following. It has already risen to the #10 apple by sales volume, and fetches the third-highest average retail price, when it is in the market.

"The foremost goal of our breeding program is to develop outstanding new apple varieties. Honeycrisp has shown us that when we achieve that goal and introduce those varieties through like-minded industry partners, the result is a truly exceptional eating experience for the customer," said the University of Minnesota's Bedford.

About Pepin Heights Orchards, Inc.

Our company is motivated by one simple premise: Apples should be exciting. We grow great-tasting apples, here for a short time. We helped write the first chapter of the Honeycrisp story, and now we're doing it again with SweeTango®. To learn more, visit www.pepinheights.com.

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