

Canada's own hybrid pear could feed a growing appetite for the fruit and local produce

By Hollie Shaw
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The Cold Snap pear was developed to be more temperature tolerant.

Chefs love pears. Poached in Amarone and served with marscapone, crème fraiche or couverture chocolate, they remain a dessert staple on many a five-star menu.

Canadians love pears, too. Their consumption of the fruit continues to grow even though homegrown pear production has steadily declined for 40 years despite grocery retailers' recent acceleration of "buy local" produce campaigns.

Jim Brandle, chief executive of Ontario's Vineland Research and Innovation Centre, said pears such as Bartlett and Bosc are trickier and far less profitable for Canadian farmers to grow than, for example, the grapes used to make the country's internationally celebrated icewines.

But Brandle hopes that will change with the advent of Cold Snap pears, a hybrid Canadian fruit more than four decades in the making. The disease-resistant fruit has a much longer life in cold storage than other pear varieties do, so it can stay on supermarket shelves until March. More critically, farmers who grow Cold Snaps can bring in about five times more in annual revenue than they can by selling Bartletts, because of their increased yield and premium price point.

"In 1970, Canada was importing 15.75 thousand tons of pears, and local production was 37.6 thousand," Brandle said in an interview from Niagara-based Vineland, a not-for-profit food science research facility. "In 2014, imports were at about 73.85 thousand tons, and local production was 7.44 thousand tons. The pear crops in Niagara switched out to grapes."

Historically, most pears grown in Canada have been Bartlett or Bosc. Constraints on growing them as well as their short shelf and storage lives means the summer-grown local produce disappears from grocery store shelves by October or November, when they cede space to imports from the U.S., South America and New Zealand.

Nowadays, Canadian farmers produce less than 10 per cent of the pears consumed annually in Canada from almost 70 per cent in 1970. "There is only so much land," Brandle said. "Farmers are going to make decisions based on what grows best and gets the best revenues. It's a business decision."

The older varieties of pears are also fussier to grow than apples, since they are susceptible to fire blight, a disease that can cripple production. Planting trees further apart can curb the disease, but Brandle notes that is not a cost-effective solution for farmers.



Chief Executive Officer Jim Brandle walks through a test planting of pear trees. There is an appetite for locally grown pears, Brandle says.

Cold Snap's origins long predate the superfruit craze of the past decade and the more recent push to eat locally grown produce instead of foreign-grown imports.

A cross between the Bartlett and a fire-blight-resistant pear known as "US56112-146," Cold Snap was first developed in 1972 by Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. Scientists continued to test and tweak it for another 30 years.

"It got trapped in the hamster wheel of research and took 20 years longer than it should have taken (to get the pears to market)," said Brandle, a food scientist who has made promoting Vineland's specialized produce to farmers, backed by a solid business case, one of its key mandates. "We are not successful until that pear is out in the field."

Vineland acquired the rights for Cold Snap from Agriculture Canada in 2009, and launched the pear in Ontario grocery stores in 2015. Much hardier than other

pears, researchers hope it will be grown in multiple regions across Canada over the next few years.

Cold Snap trees are less broad than standard pear trees and denser with fruit, which gives them a significantly higher yield: farmers can plant 1,000 Cold Snap trees per acre where only 200 Bartlett trees could fit. The pear is also adaptable to the country's varied climate zones, even those with tough winters.

Another upside is an improved texture. Other pears go mushy quickly, and feature cell structures called sclerids that can result in a gritty texture in the flesh of even fresh fruit. These issues do not arise with Cold Snap, which drew praise among consumer focus groups for its sweet flavour, even texture and the red blush on its yellow skin.

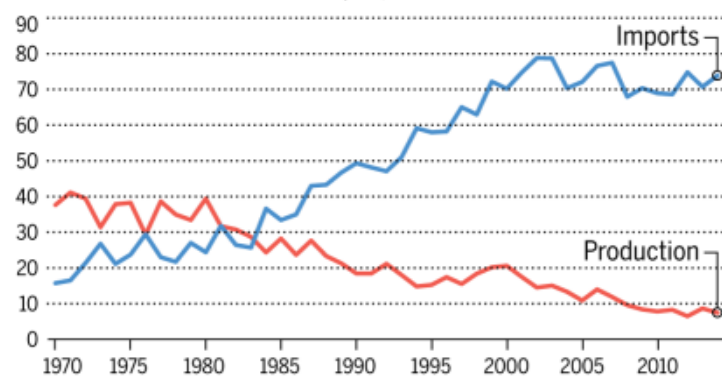
Perhaps most important is the enhanced profit motive for farmers. Sylvain Charlebois, dean of management at Dalhousie University in Halifax, said a critical factor in promoting Canadian agricultural products is backing them up with a solid business case that includes evidence consumers want to buy what is being grown.

“It’s about understanding demand-chain management,” he said, applauding Vineland’s efforts to develop and promote produce more amenable to the Canadian climate.

“If we can get our act together around capital, and the accounting we have around intellectual property in agriculture, I think we will see more of this,” Charlebois said. “Cold Snap does have potential to become a true Canadian pear, which is exciting. Canadian oil, Canola, is grown all over the world. When I go to China, people talk to me about canola. There is some pride to that.”

PEAR PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

CANADIAN PRODUCTION AND IMPORTS OF PEARS, IN THOUSANDS OF TONNES, 1970 – 2014



SOURCE: VINELAND RESEARCH & INNOVATION CENTRE

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Cold Snap, which has been selling in limited quantities at grocery stores in Ontario, Quebec and Nova Scotia, could also fit well into retailers' efforts to stock local produce in order to compete with the increasing popularity of seasonal farmers' markets.

A 2015 survey by loyalty marketing company LoyaltyOne Co. found that about 48 per cent of consumers are willing to pay a 15-per-cent premium for locally sourced fruit, vegetables and meat, while 87 per cent of that group said they would willingly pay more each month for groceries if local alternatives were more readily available.

According to Ontario's Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs, 52 per cent of principal grocery shoppers in the province include locally grown food in at least one meal per day, while 78 per cent eat local food at least once per week.

Loblaws Cos. Ltd., one of the Canadian grocers promoting locally grown produce, makes more than 30 per cent of its annual produce purchases from Canadian growers.

After 45 years in development, it appears that Cold Snap, which retails for about \$3 per bag at grocery stores, could be having an early influence of the market.

In 2015, after decades of decline and coinciding with the hybrid pear's introduction, there was a significant production increase in Canadian pears. Sales of imports still dominated the market, at \$120.4 million in 2015, but sales of Canadian-grown pears were \$9.2 million, up 21 per cent from \$7.6 million in 2014.

<http://business.financialpost.com/news/retail-marketing/canadas-own-hybrid-pear-could-feed-a-growing-appetite-for-the-fruit-and-local-produce>