



The Standard

EATING NIAGARA: Big plans afoot for the lowly pear

By Tiffany Mayer
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June DenBak, marketing co-ordinator with the Vineland Growers' Co-operative, will be spending this fall getting consumers to warm up to the Cold Snap pear that will hit store shelves with in November.

A pear with a cool name will hit store shelves this fall, and growers have their fingers crossed consumers will warm up to it.

It's called the Cold Snap, a new moniker for a fruit that was originally expected to make its debut in grocery stores last year, were it not for the chilly reception given to its original handle, the ho-hum AC Harovin Sundown.

"Sundown was an OK name but it wasn't going to grab people's attention," said Matt Ecker, sales and business development manager for the Vineland Growers' Co-operative, which will market the Cold Snap. "We didn't want it to be a boring pear name."

Yet that's what it had for nearly eight years.

The AC stood for Agriculture Canada, which bred the pear by crossing different varieties to produce a fruit that tasted good, had the looks to catch consumers' eyes and would be resistant to diseases known to raze orchards filled with old standards like the Bosc or Bartlett.

Harovin was a nod to where it was developed: the agricultural research stations at Harrow and Vineland.

And Sundown? That was the name chosen from a shortlist of options given to pear fans at the 2007 Royal Agricultural Winter Fair in Toronto where the pear's breeder, David Hunter, offered up samples and a naming contest ballot to those who stopped by his booth.

"When you give consumers four names, they only have four names to choose from," Ecker noted.

Yet there was a lot more riding on this pear than bragging rights that come with picking the winning name.

Of all the fruits we grow in the region, the pear doesn't generate the excitement a peach, cherry or grape does. After all, the Bosc and Bartlett have been around since the 1800s, and more than a century on, have a bit of a reputation for being dullards.

The pressure was on to come up with something that would be the apple of consumers' eyes, because as Vineland Growers' president Mike Ecker told me last fall when I checked in on the fruit, you only get one chance to wow consumers.

This pear had been in the works for decades, and no one wanted to risk a debut short of peachy.

“The whole industry in Canada is relying on these new pears and this one is the best of the bunch,” Ecker said at the time. “This is our chance to have a thriving pear industry.”

A marketing firm was hired. Focus groups were struck to determine changes in consumer perspectives since the 2007 naming campaign.

So began a year-long makeover of the Sundown, a squat pear with yellow-green skin and a striking red cheek.

Marketers and researchers at the Vineland Research and Innovation Centre honed in on the pear’s attributes. It was ready to harvest later than other pears, which farmers appreciated. As trees matured and crop sizes grew, the pear would be available throughout the winter — the cold — when other local varieties are replaced by imports.

There was also its crunch — a snap, really — when sinking one’s teeth into it.

The Cold Snap was born.

Next came the packaging. Unlike other pears sold in bulk in the grocery store, the Cold Snap will be sold in clam shells and bags with eye-catching ice blue labels adorned with stylized pears and its name in whimsical cursive.

It’s a label meant to convey fun, the antithesis of some of the Cold Snap’s cousins; femininity, given it’s not uncommon for the matriarchs of families to do the shopping; and foodie, to appeal to those with a more intense interest in what they eat.

In July, June DenBak arrived at Vineland Growers’ as the co-op’s marketing co-ordinator tasked with getting the Cold Snap in consumers’ hands.

DenBak will lead the campaign to launch the Cold Snap at the Royal in November and have it hit store shelves at the same time.

She’ll offer samples and recipe cards to demonstrate the pear’s taste and versatility.

The Cold Snap will take to Twitter and Instagram, too, in a quest to generate buzz.

The goal isn’t just to get people excited about the Cold Snap: “It’s getting people more interested in pears,” DenBak said.

Meanwhile, no one seems sad to see the sun set on AC Harovin Sundown.

John Fedorkow, the first of 25 growers in Canada to plant Cold Snap trees on his Niagara-on-the-Lake farm, still refers to the pear by the number it was given by scientists in its early days of development. It's a sign of his own resistance to the clunky AC Harovin Sundown tag.

"I don't even want Sundown to be out there," Fedorkow said. "It's a whole new pear. It's not the Sundown. It's the Cold Snap. This is a fresh new beginning. It's a great pear, and to me that's much more important."

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