

THE GROWER

Grocers Hungry for winter-season pear

By Karen Davidson

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After 20 years in Canadian breeding trials, the Cold Snap pear is ready for its consumer debut in 2015. Anticipating significant volumes, Oleen Smethurst, (L) Costco's general merchandise manager for produce, visited the Niagara peninsula last summer to learn more about the fruit. John Thwaites (behind her) gave a tour of his Niagara-on-the-Lake, high-density orchard along with Mike Ecker, president, Vineland Growers' Cooperative Ltd. Photos by Glenn Lowson.

The Cold Snap pear is now on the stage, and it deserves to blush with all the fanfare. After 20 years of painstaking study, these bred-in-Canada, grown-in-Canada pears are set for their consumer debut at the Royal Agricultural Winter Fair, November 6-12.

John Thwaites, a peach and nectarine grower, first fell for the pear more than a decade ago when it was still a numbered variety at the Agriculture Canada Research Station. As the pear was planted in test orchards in the Niagara peninsula under the name AC Harovin Sundown, he followed their progress.

“I was amazed at how resilient this pear variety was to fire blight,” he recalls, referring to the contagious, orchard-destroying disease. “This was a variety that appealed to me because I was trying to add diversity to my crop mix as well as lengthen the marketing season. This winter-storing pear fits with the growth of our business.”

While the first rootstock was planted on his Niagara-on-the-Lake farm in 2007, it was not without considerable research and debate. A fellow fruit grower in Australia convinced Thwaites to plant the new pear variety in a high-density orchard at spacing of 3 ½ feet times 12. To plant 1,000 trees to the acre was an eyebrow-raising move, but one backed by tours to Washington State’s pome tree orchards and New York State’s Cornell University. That’s where Terence Robinson had staked his fame with trellis systems and taught a new generation how to use them.

Today, Thwaites is satisfied with his high-density decision. In the fourth year of production, Cold Snap was yielding 10 tons per acre and more is expected as the trees mature.

“This is a very tasty pear that stores well,” says Thwaites, who adds that ethylene-reducing technology extends storage life. “We’ve kept this pear until Christmas. Bring it to room temperature for several days and it will mellow nicely and not go mushy like other varieties. It’s sweet but not crunchy.”

The high-density trellis system allows for more sunshine-kissed pears with a red blush, a very marketable trait. That visual characteristic was noted in consumer focus groups conducted by Amy Bowen, research program leader, consumer insights, Vineland Research and Innovation centre (Vineland). Bowen says that visual appearance is important to consumers for whom pears are not top-of-mind purchase. The Cold Snap pear differs from its Bosc and Bartlett competitors in that it’s slightly larger in size. The texture is pleasing to the palate as is the balance of sweetness and acidity. When introduced to the Cold Snap pear,

consumers' interest perks up. They enjoy the breadth of apple varieties, so why not in pears?

"We now have a wealth of understanding of consumer perceptions of the entire pear category," says Bowen.



The Cold Snap pear was bred by Dr. David Hunter, an Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada Researcher, now retired. Because of the long Juvenile phase in pears, seedling orchards need to be grown and evaluated for at least 10 years. Further testing is required to introduce new cultivars which explains the 20-year time frame from cross-breeding to consumer launch. Unlike Bosc or Bartlett pears, this fire blight-resistant variety is characterised by a rosy blush and a welcome balance between sweetness and acidity.

For a research institution to have this depth of consumer insight is now part and parcel of bringing new fruit varieties to market. When the genetics of the pear were transferred from Agriculture and AgriFood Canada to Vineland in 2009, a new business model was born. The agreement was that Vineland would have the global rights to the variety. Vineland then sub-licensed the growing and marketing right for Canada to the Vineland growers' Co-operative in Jordan Station, Ontario. In return, the growers' co-operative pays a tree royalty and a per-acre, production fee to Vineland which then is reinvested for more varietal, sensory and consumer research.

To date, Vineland has sub-licensed the Cold Snap pear to Star Fruits in France and to the Association of International Group of Nurseries based in Washington state. In the fine print, these sub-licensees cannot market Cold Snap fruit into Canada during the production season.

"We are employing an exclusive model that is relatively new to Canadian growers," says Lana Culley, Vineland's director of business development. "The idea is to enable licensees like the Co-op to develop a brand and carve out

a place in the retail market, generating added value. While not all varieties are right for this model, we feel that these pears present great value and present and opportunity to expand pear options for consumers. Cold Snap represents the first

of several varieties in the pipeline. We are currently finalizing the terms of the next variety with the Co-op.”

For its part, Vineland growers’ Cooperative has contracted farmers in both Ontario and Nova Scotia to produce Cold Snap pears in quantities that will fill retailer orders. About 7,000 to 8,000 bushels are expected this year and almost double that volume in 2016. That’s also reassuring new for wholesalers such as Costco.

“Canadian are looking for new flavourful produce items,” says Oleen Smethurst, Costco’s produce general merchandise manager for the last decade. “The fact there’s a Canadian story makes the pear completely perfect.”

For Vineland Growers’ Cooperative, 2015 will represent its fifth year of delivering tree fruit to Costco. The relationship started with a test season of peaches, then has bloomed to include seven different items.

“Niagara peninsula growers do a spectacular job of delivering quality under strict specifications,” says Smethurst. “These specs are not easy to hit. Product can be refused at depots if the product doesn’t meet the specification. I can say that their product is comparable to California.”

With global markets in constant flux, not to mention currency rates, Smethurst underlines the importance of local fruit to Costco. “There’s not enough Ontario fruit to buy,” she says. “There weren’t enough Early Golden plums and blue plums to buy in 2014. I couldn’t get enough product.”

This is encouraging news for Niagara-area growers who are betting that the Cold Snap pear will not only add another items to their sales list but refresh the pear category.



The Cold Snap pear will be available December through March according to the Vineland Growers’ Cooperative. The long-store characteristics of this pear extend the availability of local pear varieties from late summer right through to spring thaw.