



Up the apples and pears

In the final part of her series on taste, **Christine McFadden** savours the flavours of autumn's harvest of fragrant, flavoursome top fruit. Photography by **Tim Sandall**



Pear 'Calebasse Bosc'

EARLY AUTUMN tree fruits, with their warm colours and intense flavours, have an innate beauty and freshness that are most welcome as the days get shorter. The crisp crunch of a fresh apple, the succulent softness of a meltingly ripe pear, are an essential part of the season's bounty. For the home fruit-grower, to whom shelf-life and shipping suitability are not vital concerns, there is an impressively wide choice of cultivars, many with marvellous flavours, textures and shapes, yet only a handful ever appear in the shops.

Pears, and most apples, ripen best after harvesting. They produce ethylene gas which initiates the conversion of starch to sugars, helping to develop flavour. Under the right conditions, apples can be stored for long periods; pears are more tricky.

In the UK, the earliest apples ripen on the tree around early August. Most dessert apples are picked in October to ripen

between November and January, according to cultivar; some keep until March or later. Dessert pear cultivars span a picking season from July to late October and should be stored in a cool room until ripe; the earliest ripen quickly, while some late cultivars will store until March or April. With such a long season, the trick is to predict when the fruits will be best to eat; a day or two either way can make a great difference.

Intensity of flavour is also influenced by climate: 'Cox's Orange Pippin' apples grown in warm parts of Europe can be bland, lacking the essential balance of sweetness and acidity for which they are famed. Similarly, cultivars that do well in Scotland may not achieve the same intensity of flavour in southern England.

Early last November I took part in a tasting panel led by Raymond Blanc, Chef Patron of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons,



Apple 'Cox's Orange Pippin'

MELLOW FRUITFULNESS Apples and pears (left) embody autumn's bounty. Last year, a tasting panel (far left) including (from left to right) Will Sibley, Raymond Blanc, Anne Marie Owens and Christine McFadden, sampled a wide range of mid-season cultivars of apple (*Malus domestica*), pear (*Pyrus communis*) and Japanese pear (*P. pyrifolia*) in search of rich autumnal flavours

Oxfordshire (see tasting panel, p681). We sampled a fascinating selection of dessert apples and pears brought from the National Fruit Collection at Brogdale Horticultural Trust, Kent, by professional fruit grower Will Sibley.

Apple assessment

In tasting the apples we were seeking a cultivar with juicy flesh, good 'crunch' and a rich, complex apple flavour. Will recommended three of the 10 cultivars as good croppers for garden use. Of these, two late-Victorian cultivars, 'Claygate Pearmain' and 'Christmas Pearmain', both scored well, though Raymond felt that 'Christmas Pearmain' was not quite fully ripe. Will enthused over 'Rubens', a fairly new cultivar with attractive pink-tinged flesh and natural resistance to scab. We all felt it had 'lots of sparkle on the tongue' but not quite enough full-bodied flavour to back up the initial impact.

Another scab-resistant cultivar, 'Ingrid Marie', impressed us with its attractive appearance, punchy flavour and crisp crunch. 'A lovely eating experience,' said Raymond. By contrast, 'Pomme Noire' ►

WHICH FRUIT FARED THE BEST?

The tasting panel's order of preference

APPLES

BEST: 'Cox's Orange Pippin' **1 2** Crisp, juicy flesh with rich perfumed flavour. Superb sweetness/acidity balance.

RUNNERS-UP: 'Claygate Pearmain' **1**

2 3 Juicy, firm flesh with subtle almond-like flavour. Excellent sweetness/acidity balance.

'Ingrid Marie' **1 2** Firm, fine-textured flesh, fairly juicy, with rich full flavour. Good sweetness/acidity.

'Christmas Pearmain' **1 2 3** Crisp, juicy flesh with perfumed flavour. Reasonable sweetness/acidity balance.

'Golden Harvey' **1 2** Firm, juicy flesh, sharp flavour. Highly acidic; not sweet enough.

'Merton Reinette' **1** Pleasant flavour but lacked fruitiness. Reasonable balance of sweetness/acidity.

'Rubens' **1 2** Sharp at first but no lasting flavour. Average sweetness/acidity balance.

'Gloucester Royal' **1 2 3** Insipid; overly sweet. Soft, dry flesh. Poor balance.

'King of the Pippins' **1 2** Little flavour. Hard flesh, lacking in juice. Overly acidic.

'Pomme Noire' **1** Dry, grainy flesh with insipid flavour. Lacking sweetness and acidity.

PEARS

BEST: Norman No. 1 (un-named seedling from a European breeding programme) **1**

Smooth, succulent flesh with outstanding buttery flavour. Excellent sweetness/acidity.

RUNNERS-UP: 'Calebasse Bosc' (syn. 'Beurré Bosc') **1 2** Smooth, juicy flesh; superb sweet flavour. Good sweetness/acidity balance.

'Président Heron' **1** Soft, melting flesh; strong pear flavour. Slightly low sweetness/acidity.

'Nectarine' **1** Strongly perfumed, dry grainy flesh. Mild sweetness, low acidity.

'Suffolk Thorn' **1** Dry grainy flesh with little flavour. Low sweetness, medium acidity.

'Mère Perrier' **1** Soft grainy flesh, lacking in flavour. Poor acidity/sweetness.

'Niitaka' **1** Crisp grainy flesh, fairly juicy. Flat flavour. High acidity, low sweetness.

1 Suppliers: **1** Brogdale Horticultural Trust, Kent. 01795 858140; www.brogdale.org. If trees are not in stock, Brogdale can propagate to order

2 Keepers Nursery, Kent. 01622 726465; www.keepers-nursery.co.uk

3 Thornhayes Nursery, Devon. 01884 266746; www.thornhayes-nursery.co.uk



MIKE SLIGH

'A FABULOUS APPLE EXPERIENCE,' SAID RAYMOND, '...BRITISH APPLE-GROWING AT ITS BEST'

BILLOWING BLOSSOM

Orchards of old, traditional pear cultivars, such as these at RHS Garden Wisley (above), are an increasingly rare sight today, but many good, if lesser-known, cultivars are still available to home gardeners

was low in sweetness and acidity, and even lacked a characteristic apple aroma. Anne Marie Owens, Head Gardener at Le Manoir, described it as 'a piece of wood, not an apple'. Also woody and 'unyielding', as Raymond put it, 'King of the Pippins' was highly acidic, with dry flesh and a 'rustic harsh texture'.

We found the candyfloss sweetness of 'Gloucester Royal' overwhelming; at the opposite end of the spectrum, 'Golden Harvey' made our lips pucker with its strident acidity. 'Merton Reinette' was better balanced, having equal amounts of sweetness and acidity; Raymond, however, thought it needed a little more fruitiness to round out the flavour.

By now we were more than ready for the quintessential apple experience. Predictably, 'Cox's Orange Pippin' scored full marks though, as Will pointed out, it is not easy to grow, being prone to disease. Nevertheless, the tasters were ecstatic: the full-bodied flavour, the snap and crunch of the juicy flesh, the thin tender skin with its rich mottle of colours satisfied all the senses. 'A fabulous apple experience, big flavour, great looks,' said Raymond. 'It brilliantly supports British apple-growing at its best.'

For interest, Will had brought along

'Queen Cox', favoured by supermarkets because of its brighter colour. It was not part of the tasting, but those of us who tried it agreed it was a pale reflection of the true 'Cox's Orange Pippin', proving once more that looks are not everything.

Comparing pears

Will recommended peeling the pears before tasting them, since their skins can be bitter. We were looking for fruit with the quintessential pear flavour, a good balance of sweetness and acidity and plenty of juice. Will had brought us an intriguing range of seven lesser-known cultivars, to explore the full spectrum of dessert-pear flavours, shapes, colours and flesh textures. Four had grainy flesh; the rest were lusciously smooth and buttery.

In the grainy pear category, 'Nectarine' did best with its perfumed, long-lasting flavour. Raymond enjoyed the 'unexpected peachy finish' while Anne Marie loved the soft, gritty texture.

Next was 'Suffolk Thorn'. Dry-fleshed with only a hint of sweetness, it was disappointing, though Raymond charitably said it had a 'nice finish', reminding him of the wild pears he picked as a child.

'Mère Perrier' was soft and decidedly gritty, with a slightly odd flavour, reminiscent of apple or potato. With low sugar levels, it was 'not a real pear experience' in Raymond's opinion.

Pyrus pyrifolia 'Niitaka', a Japanese pear (also known as Nashi or Asian pear),

fared least well. Though reasonably juicy, it was completely devoid of flavour. 'It tastes like a glass of water' was one dismissive comment. The gritty flesh was so astringent that Raymond complained that his mouth had dried up.

With some relief we moved on to the smooth-fleshed pears. Of these, succulent 'Président Heron' had the typical pear-drop flavour that we were looking for, though sweetness and acidity levels were on the low side. 'Calebasse Bosc' brought cries of euphoria, though to Raymond's fine palate its sugar and acidity could have been a touch more intense. Neil Wingfield, Head Vegetable Gardener at Le Manoir, liked its 'lovely clean flavour'; Will considered it 'perfect in every way'.

For Raymond, however, the 'complete pear experience' was a seedling, known by Brogdale as Norman No. 1, raised as part of a European fruit-breeding programme. Meltingly soft and buttery, it was so juicy that Will described it as 'ideal for eating in the bath.' The team unanimously gave it top marks.

Choosing cultivars

The level and type of flavour that can be achieved in apples and pears has more to do with the cultivar chosen than any special cultivation techniques, although harvesting has a significant effect (see box, right). It pays to choose those noted for disease resistance as well as flavour.

During the tasting, Will stressed the problem of choosing the best time for a taste comparison, stressing that a day or two's variance in harvesting or storage can have a noticeable effect on flavour. He also pointed out that small apples tend to have most flavour, while the opposite is true of pears. Ultimately, of course, taste is a matter of personal preference, but fortunately nowadays there are many autumn fruit-tasting events up and down the country, so why not visit one and find your own favourites? ■

Christine McFadden is a food writer and a fruit and vegetable enthusiast

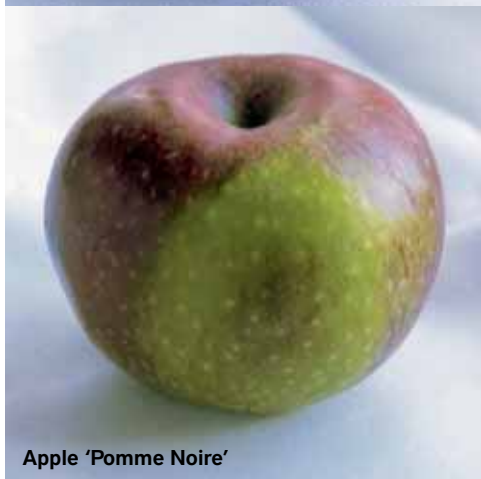
? What is your favourite apple or pear? Write to: The Garden, 4th Floor, Churchgate, New Road, Peterborough PE1 1TT. Email: thegarden@rhs.org.uk; please include a postal address



Apple 'Gloucester Royal'



Pear Norman No. 1



Apple 'Pomme Noire'



Apple 'Claygate Pearmain'

THE TASTING PANEL

- Raymond Blanc Chef Patron of Le Manoir aux Quat'Saisons
- Will Sibley professional fruit grower
- Anne Marie Owens Head Gardener at Le Manoir
- Neil Wingfield Head Vegetable Gardener at Le Manoir
- Adam Johnson Raymond Blanc's Development Chef
- Christine McFadden Food writer and fruit enthusiast



TASTY TIPS

French apple tarts are usually made with dessert apples (above) rather than cooking apples.

Raymond recommends macerating peeled, sliced pears in lemon juice or rice vinegar and a sprinkling of sugar to bring out the flavour.

FRUIT-TASTING EVENTS

National Apple Day 2007 is on Sunday 21 October. Fruit-tasting events will be held all over the country. See *Gardens to Visit*, pp698-701.

● **A Taste of Autumn:** RHS Gardens Wisley (19-22 Oct), Harlow Carr (20-28 Oct) and Hyde Hall (20-21 Oct) are holding events in October that feature fruit and veg activities. Rosemoor is holding an Apple Day on 14 Oct. For more information, visit RHS Online: www.rhs.org.uk/gardenevents

GROWING TOP FRUIT FOR TOP FLAVOUR

Location

For the best flavour and maximum fruit production, choose a sunny sheltered site. Morning sun is important for quick drying of dew and thus reduced risk of disease.

Maintenance

Judicious pruning lets in more light, which, in turn, improves colour and possibly flavour. Pears tend to over-fruit, which prevents them reaching full size and achieving sufficiently high sugar levels. Thin them out to allow about one fruit every 15cm along the branch. Heavy apple crops should also be thinned, otherwise the tree may not flower well the following spring.

Established apples should not be fed and watered excessively: this is unlikely to improve flavour and might even dilute it. If a boost to growth is needed, sparingly apply balanced fertiliser round the perimeter of the tree in late winter. Excess nitrogen produces lush growth and sparse fruit that do not store well, but a lack of fertiliser will also lead to poor crops.

Pears need plenty of water and will benefit from an autumn mulch of wool (or even hair clippings) which releases nitrogen gradually.

Harvesting and storage

Most apples and pears should be harvested when mature but not yet ripe.

Pick pears when the first windfalls appear. The stem end of the fruit should yield to gentle pressure and the fruits break from the tree when twisted upwards. If left unpicked, the centre of the fruit will become mushy before the outer flesh is ready to eat. Store in a cool room or refrigerator (from a day to three months or more, depending on cultivar) to ripen evenly.

Apples, too, are ready to pick when they part fairly easily from the tree and the flesh has softened slightly. They can, however, be left longer on the tree without loss of quality, though late apples have to be ripened in store to avoid damage by adverse weather.

i Further reading

● *The New Book of Apples: The definitive guide to over 2000 varieties*, by Joan Morgan and Alison Richards, Ebury Press, 2002, ISBN 9780091883980

● *Pears*, by Jim Arbury and Sally Pinhey, Wells & Winter, 1998 ISBN 9780953213603