

# Picked to Perfection



Cirone Farms specializes in unique and tasty fruit varieties that have become legendary in California.

**BY TITO MORALES/PHOTOS BY SHARON FIBELKORN**

Consider the apple. Mike Cirone has been doing so for a long time now. And what Cirone, of Cirone Farms in See Canyon, Calif., has witnessed over two decades of farming is that the apple—once regarded as unexceptional—is finally beginning to gain some long-overdue respect.

## Making a Passion Viable

Cirone has lived in San Luis Obispo County, the heart of California's central coast, his entire life. A nature lover from early on, he spent much of his youth exploring the outdoors. In high school he set his sights on studying botany, but by the time he reached nearby California Polytechnic State University, his focus had shifted to fruit sciences.

"I needed something more practical," he explains. "They had some student orchards there at the school and they turned them over to you. I had a plum and a peach orchard for a couple of years. I thought it was great."

For Cirone, pursuing farming was a way to combine his love of nature and his fascination with botanical science. Farming, he says, "is a practical way of putting your interest in plants to use."

The timing of Cirone's graduation from Cal-Poly, and his segue into the real world of agriculture, was fortuitous. Farming, at the time, was just about on the endangered species list. Luckily, just a few years earlier, former Governor Jerry Brown signed legislation that allowed California farmers to direct market their produce.

"I found a couple of orchards out there for lease," Cirone says. "At the same time, farmers' markets were taking off. I got in on the ground floor."

See Canyon, he knew from growing up in the area, had historically been an apple-bearing region. He was more than content to continue the tradition.

"These were old orchards that were established before I came along," he says. "They'd been moving into a state of neglect because there was no market for the fruit."

During his second year of full-time farming, Cirone stumbled across an abandoned apricot orchard. The specimens were far from visually perfect. Yes, the midday sun was apt to give the fruit a nice, vibrant blush, but the skin was often dappled, and on the whole, the apricots ran on the smallish side.



*Cirone admits that it has been no small feat trying to resurrect interest in nearly extinct varieties of heirloom apples.*



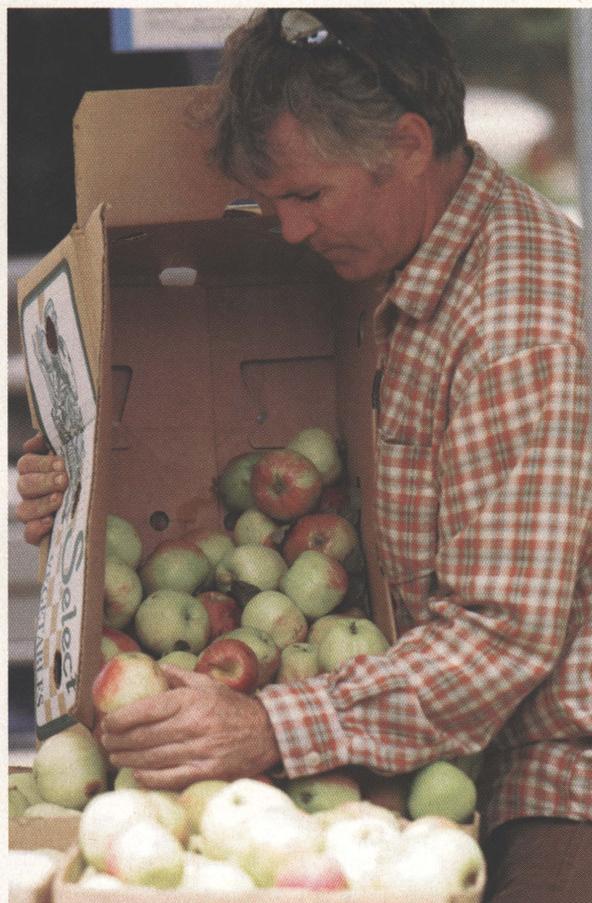
*Mike attributes his farmers' market success to an educated customer base. His Southern California clientele have been willing to sample a broad range of produce.*

But when he bit into the quirky looking apricots, which were succulent and explosive with sweetness, Cirone figured he might just be on to something.

Cirone tracked down the owner of the property and convinced the skeptical man to give him a crack at bringing the raggedy collection of trees back to life. The ambitious plan would require countless hours of foliage clearing and tree pruning, and there were no guarantees that any of the hard work would amount to anything. But Cirone was determined to follow his hunch—and his taste buds.

Cirone's instincts proved to be correct.

"It was an instant goldmine," Cirone says of the unbelievable reception his fruit received. "People really went whacko over the Blenheim apricot. They started calling



*Many of Cirone's regular customers make special trips to the market specifically for his apples.*

me the 'Apricot King' because I'd found this fruit that they just couldn't live without. Even to this day, I still have that pent-up demand."

The most important thing Cirone learned was that there was a burgeoning subculture of consumers who were desperate to find fresh produce in which flavor, not merely grocery-store display aesthetics, was prized above all else.

## **"A" is For Apple, "C" is For Canyon**

"Three years ago, someone out in the canyon told me, 'Here, you can have this big piece of ground,'" Cirone says. "Plant whatever you want. I don't care. I hate to see it go to waste."

Though his evolution and success as a farmer had by then included peaches, avocados, pears, tangerines and even white sapotes on approximately 70 acres of land, Cirone, when afforded the opportunity, decided to plant more apple trees.

"Ultimately, See Canyon is an apple canyon," he says, describing how the topography of the area, and specifically the Irish Hills, sheer mountains which separate the Pacific Ocean from the inland basin, creates an ideal microclimate for growing the fruit.

"The canyon mimics a more northern latitude locale,"



*Cirone's apples run the gamut from classic varieties to obscure heirlooms like the Spitzenburg, a wonderful pie apple that dates back to 1800 New York.*

Cirone says. "We have shorter days in the wintertime and that correlates to colder temperatures. Apples need a certain amount of time—generally 400 hours—below 45 degrees Fahrenheit during their resting state. It's called their 'chill requirement.' Then they're capable of emerging from their dormancy in a state in which they'll produce flowers."

According to Cirone, it is not merely the weather which makes the 15-mile squiggly sliver of valley perfect for cultivating apples.

"The soil is extremely fertile, deep and well-drained," he says. "It's highly unusual. Generally you would find a more clay-type soil in this region, but apple trees like the soil in See Canyon because it's deep and the trees like to penetrate deep soil."

It is the area's unique features, in fact, which enable Cirone to not only farm organically, but also to dry farm. The occasional use of drip lines to help young trees acclimate to their new home is about the extent of the farm's watering system.

"I don't irrigate," he says. "We do get a lot of rain out here. The canyon absorbs a lot of moisture and the trees are able to live on their own by tapping the underground moisture."

Less than 15 miles further inland, summer temperatures will frequently soar into the 100s. But See Canyon, even at the peak of a heat wave, is generally in the 80s. The canyon is frequently tempered by cool evenings that bring 30-degree temperature drops.

Part of Cirone's success is due to the fact that he's been able to keep the cost of his labor under control. He has designed his farm and the sequential timing of his crops to keep just a small handful of workers around full-time.

"I don't want to have a huge labor force," he says. "I want to keep just a few guys year-round. We can really do a good job with that."



*The occasional use of drip lines to help young trees acclimate to their new home is about the extent of the farm's watering system.*

## Breathing New Life Into Heirlooms

Today, Cirone's market stands attract crowds not just because of the quality of his produce, but also because of the diversity of his fruit.

His apple offerings run the gamut from classic varieties to more obscure ones, from tongue-quivering, super-sweet to cheek-puckering tart. Among the many different apples he currently grows are Jonagold, Braeburn, Gala, Jonalicious, Red Fuji, Empire, Spitzenberg, Criterion, Gold Rush, Pink Lady, Honeycrisp and Arkansas Black.

In the United States, a handful of varieties continue to account for the bulk of apple production. At the top of the list is Red Delicious, which has dominated the marketplace for over five decades. Over time, this apple has virtually become synonymous with the fruit; not because it has to-die-for taste, but because its shipping, storage and bin life are almost unparalleled.

Cirone would be the first to admit that trying to resurrect interest in nearly extinct varieties of heirloom apples has been no small feat.

"The variety thing is a good way to remain unique and to stay ahead of the curve," he says, "but a lot of times the unusual and the premium are harder to grow. That's why they're no longer grown. There were issues with them."

Certain varieties, Cirone explains, have a tendency of dropping before they're ready. Others are more suscepti-

## Tips of the Trade

**1** "Keep your debt low," Cirone suggests to the new farmer preparing to break ground for the very first time. "It's just like anything else. If you get in to too much debt, you'll never get out of it."

**2** "Be careful about getting too heavy on certain commodities that are easily found in your grocery stores. In other words, try to have something unique."

**3** "Be diversified. Tap into farmers' markets, roadside stands—any way you can direct market. Have a lot of control over your product. Don't rely on grocery store chains. You want to deal with them, but don't overdo it because they'll get you over a barrel."

**4** "Be a little more aggressive in your planting so that you get volume. In this day and age, you need to have volume. One of the bigger mistakes I've made is that I planted some great varieties, but I didn't plant enough. And with trees you lose time."

**5** "Be fair [with your pricing], but get what you need because you're going to need more than you realize—and you're going to have to take a lot of what you just made and plow it back into the crop for next year."

le to insect damage or are prone to alternate bearing," where each heavy crop is followed by a meager one.

Much of Cirone's success and ability to experiment with different apple varieties, he concedes, can be attributed to being in the right place at the right time—specifically, his access to customers such as those at the venerable Wednesday Santa Monica farmers' Market.

"In large part, that customer base is an educated customer base," he says. "They're quality oriented and they're highly evolved in the procurement of food."

The regulars who frequent farmers' markets in Southern California are generally affluent, well-traveled and willing to sample a broad range of produce. They



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*Cox's Orange Pippin dates back to 1825 England and is regarded as the finest of English apples.*

understand, too, the challenges that face the small farmer; they become loyal customers, in part, because they want to do whatever they can to help keep the tradition of niche growing alive.

As Cirone continued to spread the gospel about the wide selection of choices available in the apple family, his customers began to respond. They learned to appreciate the subtleties of one variety versus another and they now eagerly anticipate the arrival of each new crop. Many customers make special trips to the market specifically for the apples.

"I sell a lot of apples," Cirone says. "I wasn't always able to sell like this."

## A Student of His Craft

Cirone's passion for farming is contagious. A true student of his craft—he actually owns an impressive collection of rare books about farming history and methodology, some of which date back to the 18th and 19th century—his has been an uphill battle against conventional wisdom ever since he decided to devote his life to agriculture.

"The first seven or eight years I was sort of figuring it out," Cirone says. "We revamped a lot of See Canyon. We tore out a lot of trees and put in new trees. We opened up new sections that were unplanted. I had to negotiate with people and convince them that it was a good thing to do."

Reconfiguring orchards is not like planting tomatoes or cucumbers. The rewards, if there are any to be had, won't be realized until several years down the road. Just as Cirone's instincts proved correct with the Blenheim apricot, so they did with his other decisions.

"We've evolved," he says. "We've taken See Canyon from strictly an apple-growing canyon to a stone fruit-growing canyon with killer apple varieties. We have a lot more heirlooms, but we have a lot of modern apples, too."

A Renaissance man of sorts, Cirone is well versed in history, politics and economics, among other things. It is farming, though, and the challenges that confront the



*The Wolf River apple is a hardy heirloom variety noted for its tremendous size that is crunchy and tart.*

agricultural industry, which occupy his thoughts most.

"In the produce section [of the grocery store], they have it down to a science with regards to how much shelf space they'll devote to each item," he says. "If an item doesn't cut it, they don't give it any more space. It's really a shame."

Cirone laments how the centralization of warehouses and the distribution of fruit has led to a homogenization of varieties.

"We're feeding people, for lack of a better word, facsimile fruit," Cirone says. "It's cardboard fruit. A lot of people don't have any interest in it. They taste it and their taste buds don't get ignited. The industry suffers because of it."

An unfortunate byproduct of such desensitization is that it has not been easy for farmers such as Cirone to convince customers that apples warrant more attention and more respect than they've been receiving.

"My apricots are getting \$2.40 to \$2.50 a pound," Cirone says, comparing this to the \$1.80 to \$2.00 he commands for his apples. "Apples should be the same price. They're harder to grow. They're on the tree longer, and they require a lot more hand thinning and more detailed pruning. People have a perceived notion of what an apple should cost."

Not to mention a perceived notion of how they should taste...

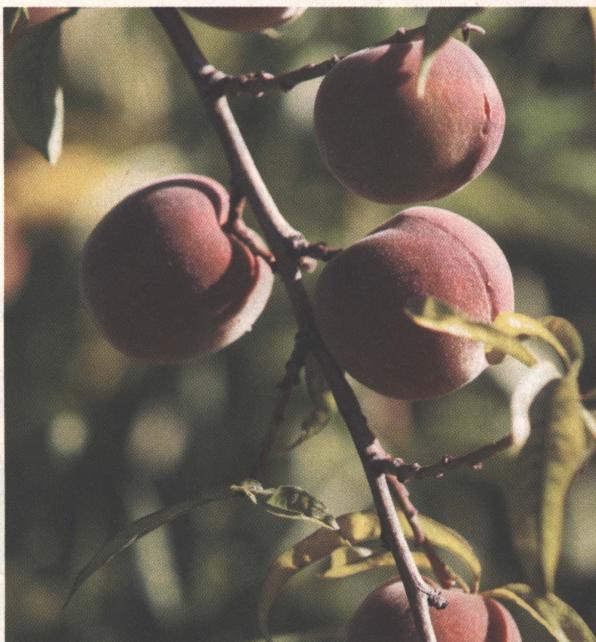
## Changing Perceptions, One Bite at a Time

For far too long, apples have been regarded as, well, apples. They are arguably the stodgiest of fruits. It seems as if they've been around forever. They're available 365 days a year. They're regarded as a healthy snack. They make nice lunchbox stuffers or school teacher sweeteners. That's pretty much been the extent of it.

The apple has not lost popularity in the United States



*The Belle de Boskoop dates to 1850s Holland and is a dual-purpose apple suitable for both dessert and culinary use. It is large, lumpy and dull red, often with extensive russeting.*



*Cirone's orchard also consists of several varieties of peaches, including the late-season Last Chance variety.*

during the reign of the Red Delicious. According to the latest statistics, in fact, the average American eats roughly 16 pounds of fresh apples a year and only bananas rank higher on the national fresh fruit consumption chart.

But generations of consumers have grown accustomed to expecting very little from an apple. A large portion of Cirone's time over the past 20 years has been devoted to addressing this precise issue.

"There are a lot of people who are still mired in the Red Delicious, which is hard for me to understand," says Cirone. "But, in a sense, it's a lack of education. People don't understand. They just don't get it until you talk to them—and many times repetitively."

New visitors to Cirone's market stands invariably eye his offerings with suspicion. They are convinced, perhaps, that once they've tasted one apple, they've tasted them all. Yes, the vibrant colors of some varieties may be somewhat intriguing. The shapes, too, can border on the unapple-like. And the names, like Jonalicious, can be somewhat enticing. It's only after they've been coaxed into sampling

their first ever Gold Rush or Honeycrisp that their eyebrows arch and their preconceptions literally drain from their faces.

"If you give a person something that tastes good, there's no reason why the light won't click on and they'll start to break out of their mold," says Cirone.

There was a time when Cirone and his crew were traveled to eight farmers' markets a week. Now, however, he has it streamlined to five.

"Five is a good number if they're all strong," he says. "It would be hard to expand because a lot of our success is on varieties. To do it really well, you have to be a smallish grower."

In addition to the farmers' markets, Cirone also sells to a few local stores and a good chunk of his business goes to restaurants. He also supplies L.A. Specialty, one of the largest wholesale produce distributors in the country.

## A Passion Fulfilled

For Cirone, the last 20 years have been a great adventure into the unknown.

There's been nothing more rewarding for him than to witness his customers get impassioned by heirloom apples so much that they return week after week wanting to try more varieties. Not only does it justify all Cirone's hard work, but it validates his intuitions.

"I have to say agriculture is more of an art, ultimately, than it is a science," Cirone says. "I have a lot of instinct. You get a lot of gut feelings about where something is going. Yeah, you use what you learned in the scientific world to make your gut-level decisions, but you can't really make it just on numbers."

When he reflects back upon the journey, he is surprised at how the seasons have added up. The outdoors and farming still stir awe and excitement in Cirone as they did when he took his first fruit studies course.

"The passion hasn't gone away," says Cirone. "I really like what I do. I think I've taken this thing exactly to where it should be and I'm hoping I can keep doing it for at least the next 10 years." **bf**

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