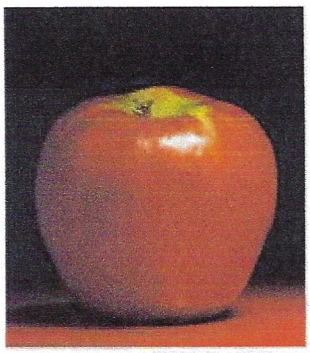
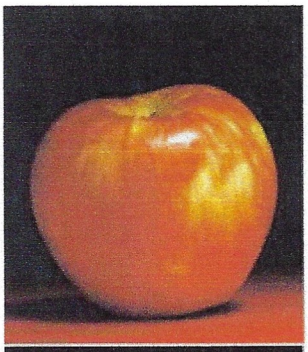
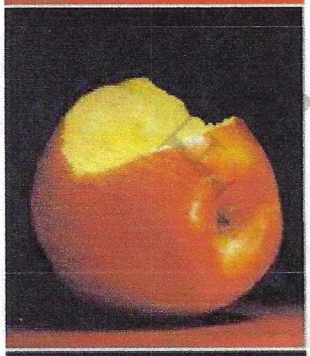
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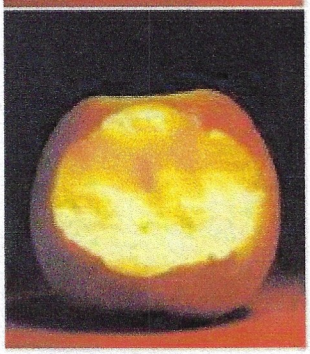
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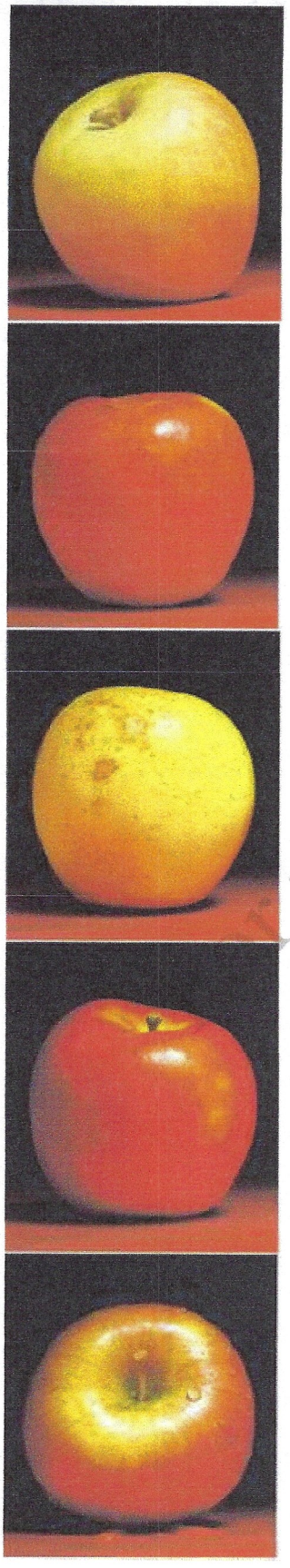






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My Quest to Find the Crispest Apple in America

In the hunt for a more satisfying bite, I quizzed researchers, grocers and friends—and tried about 50 varieties

For two weeks, I chomped my way across New York City, like a greedy pony.

BY JAMIE WATERS

When I moved from London to New York four years ago, I did my best to be an American. I figured out tipping culture. I began smiling at strangers. And I started eating Honeycrisp apples.

Of the roughly 100 varieties sold here, Honeycrisp has long been the stand-in for the perfect apple—a crisp, juicy specimen to atone for the sins of the Red Delicious. But among researchers and farmers, a battle is on to crown its successor, with truckloads of newfangled alternatives hitting shelves.

After hearing a friend rhapsodize about the virtues of trendy varieties with names recalling tween mall brands, like SugarBee and SweeTango, I wondered what I was missing out on. I resolved to find an apple with an even *more* satisfying bite than the Honeycrisp. One that would deliver a gloriously loud *"crack!"* while sending my incisors— and a wave of juice—flying.

For two weeks, I chomped my way across New York City, like a greedy pony. One morning, I ate six apples for breakfast; another night, I did a blindfolded taste test of 25. I tried about 50 varieties in total. By my lights, a few outshone the Honeycrisp—and one stole the show.

'WELCOME DOWN the rabbit hole," David Bedford said, grinning through the screen on our video call. He has spent 40-plus years developing "explosively crisp" apples as the senior research fellow at the University of Minnesota's fruit breeding program. He helped create the Honeycrisp, which introduced shoppers to new levels of snap in the 1990s. Now, he's very excited about two new apples he's developing called Super-Snap and Big Flirt.

Of the roughly 20 different characteristics breeders try to control, Bedford said, "crisp texture has generated the most enthusiastic response from consumers."

When you bite into a crisp apple, the "pop" is the sound of your teeth splitting apart its cells, said Matt Clark, Bedford's colleague and the director of the fruit breeding program. The rush of juice comes from rupturing the vacuole, a compartment within the cells that Clark likened to a water balloon. In a mealy apple, he said, "instead of those cells rupturing, they kind of just shear apart from one another, and that gets left on your tongue as that grainy texture."

In addition to being firm and juicy, a crisp apple fractures off in pieces when bitten, Bedford said. Crispness depends on factors including freshness and storage conditions—but the apple's variety matters most.

The Honeycrisp has been extremely promiscuous in the past 20 or so years: Like a prize racehorse stud, it has been bred with basically every other apple in a bid to birth a new star. But breeding results are complex and unpredictable, Bedford said.

When deciding which new apples to develop further, the researchers use a range of methods, including a rudesounding tool called a penetrometer that tests the fruits' firmness. But the ultimate assessment is eating them. Members of Bedford's team each sink their teeth into some 200 samples a week. They'll "swallow the juice, but the pulp gets spit out," he said.

He added, almost as an afterthought, that he calls picked apples "dead bodies."

ONE SUNNY FALL morning, I visited Union Square Greenmarket, New York City's biggest farmers market, in search of delicious corpses. I asked Dolma Tse--gen, who runs the stall of Samascott Orchards, a renowned producer in upstate New York, if any apples outcrisp the Honeycrisp.

"Oh, yeah, there's so many," she replied breezily, gesturing to a list of about 15 names on her clipboard. "Among all of these, Honeycrisp probably goes on the bottom."

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She weaved about the packed stall, carving slices and handing them to me to eat, like I was her pet donkey. I stopped to savor the crunchy, rosy flesh of a Pink-a-Boo, to admire the nail-polish-red gloss of a RubyFrost and to pity a sucker beside me filling his tote bag with Honeycrisps.

The name on everyone's lips was the EverCrisp, a large, supersweet love child of a Honeycrisp and a Fuji. "A lot of people, if they don't see EverCrisp, they don't buy [anything]," said Tse--gen. At another stand, a vendor rapped on an EverCrisp with a loud knock to prove its firmness. Into my bag it went—along with a Ludacrisp, which I have now rechristened Sortacrisp.

Next, I headed to Brooklyn to visit the Park Slope Food Coop, where I'd been told I would find an enviable selection of heirloom apples—historic varieties typically farmed in small numbers.

"This is from Maine from 1790," Cecelia Rembert, the Coop's fruit buyer, told me as she sliced off a chunk of a small, dark cricket-ball of an apple called the Black Oxford. Hard and dense, it felt a bit like chewing on a chair leg, but I couldn't stop eating it. Stayman Winesap, a giant orb that could be used for tenpin bowling, delivered a moreish snap.

The Coop stocks mainstream apples, too: Honeycrisp is their top seller. Rembert said that in nine years, she could recall one apple being *too crunchy* to sell: the Jazz, a New Zealand invention. "I remember we were all like, 'Oof, that's kind of making my jaw hurt,' " she said.

I vowed to track one down.

WHEN I ENVISIONED this quest, I saw myself embarking on a romantic road trip through orchard country, perhaps picking apples with a farmhand, really getting back to nature. In the end, I didn't so much as touch a blade of grass. Instead, I DoorDash'd an apple. I was gathering a bounty for a blindfolded taste test, and the only place I could find a Jazz apple was on the apps. I added a tub of yogurt to the order, because the thought of a single apple in a delivery bag was too Marie Antoinette for my taste. Not an hour later, I opened the bag to find a small red apple with a sticker of a slightly deranged-looking grinning bee. Presumably to punish me for ordering an apple on DoorDash, I'd been sent not a Jazz but a SugarBee, The progeny of a Honeycrisp and an unknown lover, it was the very variety that my appleholic friend had raved about. The only thing worse than ordering an apple on DoorDash is complaining that you were sent *the wrong type of apple on DoorDash* , so this one would have to do.

It was crunchtime. I pulled on an airplane sleep mask and sampled 25 different apples, assigning each a crispness score. Nine beat the Honeycrisp, including the wonderfully snappy Pixie Crunch and EverCrisp, and the extrasour GoldRush.

But one stood out as sweet, succulent and ear-poppingly crisp. I held it aloft, declaring it the winner. When I removed my mask, I found the Sugar-Bee's carcass in my hands.

Some of the 50 apple varieties our writer tried in his search for America's crispiest.

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