



Redwood Empire Chapter Newsletter

October 2008

THE 2008 PLANT SALE

By Linda Robertson

On July 26, RECRFG held its annual plant sale at a new location: the Santa Rosa Farmer's Market near the fairgrounds. The move from the Sebastopol flea market worked out well; the stand, near the entrance to the market, got a lot of visitors, and we had many interesting conversations and sold a lot of trees.

CRFG members who volunteered to work at the sale brought fruit for tasting, and at the table we set out samples of babaco, Catharine Bunnell plums, Saturn peaches, and Geo Pride pluots. For sale we had a lot of Fort Ross Gravenstein trees and a large variety of others, most donated by chapter members: apple, pear, and plum trees; exotics, including babaco, banana, cherimoya, white sapote, and Budda's hand; and pots of raspberries, peppers, artichokes, and other plants, edible and ornamental.



Plants for sale

Phil Pieri, David Ulmer, and Mike Lee answered questions from potential buyers about how and where to plant the trees we were selling, what kind of climate they need, and how large they were likely to grow.

Tropicals were the hit of the day, and almost all the plants we brought were sold. Phil Pieri's babaco samples caught the attention of passers-by. Many people stopped to look at the giant papaya-like fruit and try a slice. As Phil observed, almost everyone who tastes a babaco for the first time says the same thing: "Interesting!" The

babaco's melon-like texture and lemonade tang weren't for everyone, but enough people liked them that the →

APPLE TASTING, 2008

By Mike Lee

Our annual apple tasting was graciously hosted by Wendy Ward in Napa on Sunday October 5. Wendy lives in a thermal belt near the top of a hill several hundred feet above the town. She has 55 trees with favorites of apples and figs that she has been planting since her arrival 6 years ago. Many trees were fenced from deer above ground and with wire baskets for gophers below.

This year's apple tasting was ample even by our generous standards. Apples were provided by many of our members but Ted Richardson's apples from Occidental and David Ulmer's apples from Sebastopol figured prominently. In all there were 40 identified varieties and 5 unknowns. Many had been put in cold storage, some picked that day, and some lamentably picked before their true prime. This year there were 3 Japanese varieties, 5 Albert Etter varieties, and a whole passel of antique varieties (before 1900)

The twelve of us diligently sampled slices from all 45. Some, like Terry Harrison, declined to eat the skins. Others munched and spat (or at least I did) But most of the tasters behaved themselves and swallowed their apple slices politely. After recording our highly developed opinions on a 0-5 scale, David Ulmer walked us through the history of all the varieties: where they originated, what person or research facility developed them, and who the parents were or might have been. Some had some particular fame for such traits as late-bearing, colored flesh, cooking, or disease resistance. Carolyn and Terry Harrison shared their rather encyclopedic knowledge of varieties to the group's consensus delight.

And then we shared our votes and Jana Ulmer kindly tabulated them for us. This year's favorites in order of votes received- more or less... Northern Spy, Shizuka (a previous winner), Ashmead's Kernel, Belle de Boskoop, Tydeman's Late Orange, Golden Russet, and Esopus Spitzenburg.

→ plants sold out by mid-morning. The farmer's market closed early that day because the space was needed for parking for the state fair, but by noon, when we took down our tables and tents, we had taken in well over a thousand dollars. After expenses, the sale made a profit of \$1,100 for the chapter treasury.

SLOW FOOD NATION

by Linda Robertson

Slow Food Nation, the big festival of artisan food organized by Slow Food USA, filled Labor Day weekend with lectures, hikes, restaurant trips, live music, and a pavilion at Fort Mason where, for a \$58.00 ticket, a visitor could sample artisan food and wine from around the United States and watch demonstrations of cooking and cheesemaking.

Because I didn't feel like spending that much money, driving forty miles into San Francisco, and spewing hydrocarbons into the air for an hour looking for a parking space, I opted for the greener, and cheaper, alternative, one of the free events on Friday when I was in the city anyway at work. At the Civic Center, in July, Slow Food had taken over part of the plaza above the Brooks Hall parking garage and planted a block-long array of vegetable beds. On that Friday, they set up a farmer's market around the garden.

It was one of those rare days during a heat wave when it was shirt-sleeve weather even in San Francisco. The plaza was crowded with office workers on their lunch hours, festive in pastel cotton and sleeveless tops, and tourists who had no idea of their luck with the weather. A band played background music to what sounded like a poetry slam of people reciting home-grown free verse about sustainable agriculture. Under the blue and gold sky, the rows of white peaked tents set up for the market stalls looked like pavilions in a medieval painting.

The tents selling ice cream and prepared meals – red-eye ham sandwiches, biscuits, roast chicken, tomato salads – had long lines of customers. Knots of interested people crowded around the stands selling everything else: melons, peaches, berries, cucumbers, pluots, bread, pies, oils, lavender, honey, yoghurt, cheese. Some of the pavilions were occupied by growers whose names I knew from farmer's markets and local stores -- Frog Hollow Farms, Cowgirl Creamery, Yerena Farms, Bodega Goat Cheese, Far West Fungi – and I was reminded how much fun it is to live practically at the epicenter of such a great artisan food community. Other stalls held growers I didn't know, some from the Central Valley, some from the Peninsula, and some, surprisingly, close to home. A few tents were devoted to information about Slow Food, composting, and organic gardening.

Before loading up with purchases, I took a walk through the garden. The beds were ingeniously made from those straw-filled burlap tubes often used like sandbags at roadsides and construction sites. Inside them, soil and mulch was mounded into meticulously weeded beds holding plantings of dark Asian greens, multicolored

lettuces, chards, kales, and teepees of flowering bean plants, in arrangements as handsome as any flower garden.

Then I walked along the rows of tent stalls, looking and trying to decide what to buy from all the choices. I bought Cal Red peaches from the Frog Hollow stand; ghee made with Straus butter from another; organically grown heirloom rice, white and brown, and wheat berries, from two different growers; chevre and goat ricotta from Harley Goat Ranch in Pescadero; a Peruvian caramel sauce called Natilla and made with goat milk, from a farm somewhere in Lake County; and a small box of biodynamically grown raisins. Many of the stands offered samples, and at all of them, the people who worked there talked enthusiastically about the food they were selling and answered questions from curious customers.

At a stand selling goat cheese, I overheard a lecture – almost a sermon – to another customer on the health benefits of goat milk. The woman at another stall who sold me a pound of white sushi rice explained that by washing it until the water ran clear, as I was used to doing, I was washing off most of the vitamins the federal government requires growers to add to white rice. The man from whom I bought brown rice and wheat berries gave me a sheet of recipes and told me they had more on their web site.

After an hour of looking and tasting, I left the market for BART and my office with a tote bag heavy with new and promising produce, feeling a little awestruck at how much great food is being grown and created here in northern California.

FIGS AND GRAPES AT WOLFSKILL RANCH

By Linda Robertson

In the fall of 2007, I went to my first fruit tastings at Wolfskill Ranch, near Winters. They were revelations, both of them, a chance not only to learn about figs, grapes and pomegranates, but to taste varieties of them I'd never seen anywhere else. But just as I found Wolfskill, it seemed that my chance to visit there was about to be taken away. Because of state budget cuts, it wasn't clear that Wolfskill would be able to continue to hold events like these in the future.

Luckily for us, the problem seems to have been solved, and Wolfskill held its annual fig and grape tasting after all, on September 6.

The event featured not only a long table of dishes heaped with a banquet of figs and grapes, but also talks from staff members Dan Kluepfel, Malli Aradhya, Howard Garrison, and Jenny Hansen about the fruit and Wolfskill's work.

Wolfskill is one of ten National Clonal Germ Plasm Repositories located in various parts of the United States.

The mission of the NCGRs is to preserve and study fruit and nut tree varieties and make them available to growers and researchers. The NCGR at Wolfskill is funded by the United States Department of Agriculture, through the Agricultural Research Service (ARS), in cooperation with U.C. Davis. Wolfskill keeps and grows about 200 species of fruit and nuts and some grains.

Grapes:

Wolfskill maintains about 1,000 varieties of grapes. We learned that genetic testing has shown that the Old World grape species, *Vitis vinifera*, falls into three broad categories: *occidentalis*, the European grapes; *orientalis*, Middle-Eastern grapes; and *pontica*, central Asian grapes. The *Pontica* strain is ancestral to the European and Middle Eastern varieties. Wine grapes predominate among the European *occidentalis* varieties, while the *orientalis* tend more to table grapes because of the Islamic religion's prohibition against drinking alcohol.



Grapes native to the New World are another species entirely, *V. labrusca*.

The grape varieties the staff had picked for us to sample included a range of wine and table varieties:

- Alicante Bouschat: an old-fashioned dark grape used to give color to wine
- Pirobelle: a grape variety developed in South Africa, in the 1970s
- Sultanina Marble: a green-albino sport of Thompson Seedless
- Woodruff: a red *V. labrusca* grape, with a slip skin
- Muscat Angel: a *vinifera-labrusca* hybrid, with a muscat flavor
- Chasselas Rouge: an old European grape, used to make white wine
- Longyan: a grape from China, with a flavor like lichi fruit
- Autumn Black: a black, seeded grape, recently developed in South Africa.

Figs:

Howard Garrison explained that there are four basic types of figs: Smyrna figs, which need to be pollinated by tiny fig wasps in order to produce fruit; common and San Pedro figs, which are self-pollinating; and caprifigs, small figs which provide habitat for the fig wasps.

Caprifigs are small, dry, and tasteless, at least to humans, though goats apparently like them a lot; the name of the variety, “capri,” is from the Latin word for goat. The first growers who introduced figs to the United States weren't aware of the role of the fig wasp and didn't import caprifigs, and couldn't figure out why their trees didn't produce. It wasn't until the early 20th century that they figured out the role of the wasp and the caprifig and began to grow Smyrna figs commercially in California.

Genetically, figs derive from two main areas, the Mediterranean and the Caucasus. There is no systematic breeding program for figs, probably because they aren't a big enough commercial crop.

Some of the figs set out for tasting were Desert King, Kadota, Brown Turkey, Zidi, Violette de Bordeaux, Santa Cruz Dark, and Ischia Black. The Zidi and the Violette de Bordeaux seemed to be the popular favorites, judging by the emptiness of the trays at the end of the morning.

Howard Garrison also treated us to grilled figs prepared in two delicious ways: sweet black figs with honey and pine nuts, and big Brown Turkey figs stuffed with fresh goat cheese, wrapped in prosciutto, and skewered on rosemary twigs.

After our fig brunch, we carpoled for a drive to the fig orchard, passing by groves of walnuts, pistachios, almonds, peaches, plums, apricots, olives, mulberries, pomegranates and persimmons. In the fig orchard, each tree is identified by variety with a large metal tag. Many had ripe figs within reach, and we walked through the long rows of trees, tasting. By the time we had to leave for the trip back to the parking lot, I was wondering if Wolfskill might have room for another intern, at least through the fig season.



Recipes

Dried Persimmons:

Since persimmon season is beginning, here is David Ulmer's recipe for drying whole persimmons, from the spring, 2007 newsletter:

Use persimmons that have turned color but are still firm. Astringent types are traditional (they lose their astringency when they dry), but fuyu types can also be used.

Peel them, but don't remove their crowns and stems; then hang them by their stems in a warm, dry place for about six weeks. You can string them on a string or hang them individually using Christmas ornament hangers or bent paper clips; just make sure they don't touch each other.

As they dry, they sometimes get a white speckling which may look like mold, but is actually sugar.

A word to the wise: it is really important to hang the persimmons someplace where the air is warm and dry; otherwise they are likely to spoil. Kalia says she hangs them from a clothes drying rack and puts the rack near her heating stove. Last year I got good results hanging them from a ceiling beam in my living room, not far from my wood stove.

Apple clafouti:

I got this from the Food Network web site on the Internet and brought one to a meeting. Several people asked for the recipe, so here it is.

Batter:

1/2 cup unbleached all-purpose flour
1/3 cup plus 2 tablespoons sugar
1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
Pinch salt
3 eggs plus 1 egg yolk
1 cup whole milk

Apples:

1/4 vanilla bean, split lengthwise
2 tablespoons unsalted butter
Pinch salt
1 1/2 cups peeled and diced tart apples
2 tablespoons sugar
1 teaspoon grappa, Calvados, or other fruit brandy
Confectioners' sugar for dusting
1/3 cup creme fraiche (optional)

Preheat the oven to 400 degrees F.

Make the batter: Sift the flour, sugar, cinnamon and salt into a bowl. In a separate bowl, whisk the eggs, egg yolk, and milk until well blended. Add about 1/3 of the egg mixture to the flour mixture and whisk until smooth, then gradually incorporate the remaining egg mixture. Whisk until well blended. Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate while you prepare the apples

Cook the apples: With the tip of a knife, scrape the vanilla bean seeds from the pod into an ovenproof 10-inch cast iron or stainless steel skillet. Add the pod and the butter and cook over moderately high heat until the butter turns nut brown. Add a pinch of salt. Add the apples and cook, stirring often, until slightly softened, about 2 minutes. Remove the vanilla bean pod and discard. Sprinkle the apples with the sugar, reduce the heat to moderately low, and cook until the apples are almost cooked through and the sugar has melted and is coating the apples in a light syrup. Add the grappa or other brandy off the fire while pouring, place back on the fire, wait for flame to die down, then swirl the pan briefly. Spread the fruit evenly in the skillet.

Working quickly, pour batter evenly over the fruit. Bake until the edges of the clafouti are puffed and browned and the center is set, about 15 minutes.

Put some confectioners' sugar in a sieve and generously dust the surface of the clafouti. Serve warm directly from the pan with a dollop of creme fraiche.



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time flies like an arrow - fruit flies like a banana