

New Washington apple gains momentum, faces challenges

By SIERRA DAWN McCLAIN
Capital Press



Sierra Dawn McClain/Capital Press

Cosmic Crisp boxes at McDougall & Sons Inc.

WENATCHEE, Wash. — Cosmic Crisp apple growers hope the third time's the charm.

Cosmic Crisp, Washington's new state apple, achieved celebrity status its first year on the market, in 2019. Its sophomore year, 2020, was bumpy — and for many growers, disappointing. Now, as the industry looks toward the third year, optimism is on the rise, but challenges remain.

From the start, Cosmic Crisp was a big gamble: 22 years of breeding and development by Washington State University, \$500 million spent by growers planting 13 million trees.

So, when freight-on-board prices plunged from \$71.86 per 40-pound box in December to \$43.83 per box in February, the 39% drop led many growers to panic.

"I've been super disappointed with where pricing was this year," said Andy Handley, a grower in east Wenatchee.

Industry leaders say the 2020-21 season was rough for several reasons.

Historically, the industry's No. 1 promotional tool for new varieties has been in-store sampling.

"With COVID, sampling fell apart," said Rebecca Lyons, Washington Apple Commission's international marketing director.

Growers say the presidential election, racial tensions, supply chain disruptions, canceled trade shows and overwhelmed retailers trying to keep staples in stock also hurt sales last year.

But experts say Cosmic Crisp appears to be turning the corner this spring.

In March, the indus-

try was shipping about 40,000 boxes weekly. Now, Tim Kovis, spokesman for Washington State Tree Fruit Association, estimates the industry ships 48,000 boxes weekly. That's good progress, though still short of the ideal 80,000-boxes-per-week mark.

"Movement has been steady for the past several weeks," said Jill Burbery, project manager for Proprietary Variety Management, a Yakima company on contract with Washington State to manage commercialization.

Burbery said she expects the remaining 174,000 boxes in storage will run out by mid-June. March 1, there had been 892,000 boxes in storage.

Some growers have already sold out.

"We had great interest," said West Mathison, president and CEO of Stemilt Growers. "We ran out. I wish we had more."

But prices have remained about static.

Freight-on-board prices are about the same as in February, said Brian Focht, manager of the Washington Apple Growers Marketing Association. And the average national retail price for Cosmic Crisp, according to

Nielsen data, was \$2.47 in April and \$2.46 in May.

Growers are looking to this coming season with both boosted optimism and concerned realism.

They're optimistic because retailers are less distracted, some stores plan to resume taste tests, the industry will expand in Canada, and as trees mature, fruit quality will become consistent.

Expected challenges include continued COVID protocols, choosing ideal harvest and market release dates and dealing with wax problems in the warehouse because the variety's skin is naturally waxy.

"There's no way around the learning curve," said Kate Evans, Washington State apple breeder.

Perhaps the biggest challenge — or opportunity, depending on who you ask — will be getting demand to match the biggest-ever crop. 2019's crop was 360,000 boxes. That jumped to 1.6 million boxes in 2020. 2021's crop will likely be 4.99 million boxes.

"Next year will be the real interesting year with the volume that's coming on," Focht said. "We'll need to generate some momentum from the start."

Pierce: 'Once you've sung together, you're family'

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delighting in being a student again.

Now, with students back in school buildings for limited hours, he is leading far fewer students than normal through songs in the gym, a place where they can spread out and safely sing together.

Astoria High School is under renovation, but Pierce will never teach students in the brand new choir room being built.

These have been among the strangest months of Pierce's teaching career, and he's not leaving on the note he'd prefer.

"I really think the closure I want is to be able to stand on that stage with my kids behind me, raise my hands and say, 'Thank you very

much,'" Pierce said. "And I won't get that."

His students haven't performed on any stage since December 2019. They had a spring concert planned in 2020, but schools — and everything else, it seemed — shut down abruptly right before the event. With students back in school buildings for a limited amount of time this spring, no one is singing at their full strength anymore. They're out of that kind of practice.

Schools are expected to return to more normal operations in September. One of the challenges for Pierce will be to work with his Bend students to sing fully without fear and hesitation. To remind them: Remember how much we loved doing this?

Pierce was introduced to choirs and music in the sixth grade. His father had died before he'd entered the fifth grade and music and musical performance became a way to process difficult, heavy emotions — or to escape them for a while.

For Pierce, the voice is intensely personal. Any mistakes or mishaps can't be blamed on an instrument's mechanical failure or poor tuning. It's just you. And this personal experience translates beyond the singer. It weaves through a choir. It stretches out until an audience gets a hint of it, too.

"You can meet and have a meal and part as friends," Pierce said, trying to explain it. "But once you've sung together, you're family."

Homeless: 'It's a soul-killing feeling'

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At a City Council goal-setting session in January, homelessness, addiction and mental health issues were listed among the city's top priorities. In the months since, the topic has intensified in urgency.

Homelessness "will never, ever go away completely," said City Councilor Tita Montero, an organizer of the forum. "But there's a way we can make things better for everybody."

Fears of Seaside turning into Portland — with its influx of homeless and public safety concerns — motivated Tom Schwenzer, a resident, to look to the courts for greater enforcement. "I can't say I walked up here with an absolute solution, but I'm telling you if I look the other way, if you've decided that you can't do something about it it's going to bring us to the point that Portland is — and it's scary," he said.

Martin LeTourneau, the founder of Love on the Streets, a volunteer group to help the homeless, called for permanent housing, shelters and camp areas. "Keeping them moving isn't going to make them go away unless they have someplace to go to," he said. "What we do need is for the city of Seaside to have a vision that we can build on and that we can work toward supporting."



R.J. Marx/The Astorian

Seaside City Councilor Tita Montero and Mayor Jay Barber co-hosted a homeless forum on Thursday at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center.

Being shooed around doesn't change things. Rather, it makes it more difficult for people to get off the streets, Seamus McVey said. "Having somewhere to go would definitely make things a lot easier," he said.

Pamela Cromwell, a resident, described a period in her own life when she was living in her car.

"The depression is unbelievable, the sense of displacement is debilitating," Cromwell, now a business owner, said. "If I didn't have the limited support that I did have, I could easily have seen giving up. You'll never be part of that beautifulness: the people who own the beautiful homes in Seaside. The people who have the magnificent businesses in Seaside. You'll never be part of that. You'll never be welcomed into that. Because you don't have an address," she said.

"And you don't have a place to make food for your-

self and you don't have a place to simply be, you have no right to just be anywhere, everywhere that you go. You have no right to be there. And it's a soul-killing feeling."

Detective William Barnes said he sought a focus on the local population. "I would like to see some resources to help these people before they become homeless," he said. "I don't know how many times you see someone in the spiral. We have to wait until we hit that rock bottom before the resources kick in. And to me, that doesn't make any sense."

Montero called for a regional approach. "We need to be working with the other towns," she said. "We need to shine more light on the South County and on Seaside. We need to be working toward the county commission, paying more attention to homelessness. We want to keep the communication and the conversation going. If you don't keep it going, it just dies."

Birth center: 'Continuity of care'

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For the birth center, it is important to be able to offer "continuity of care."

"That means being able to take care of the families who come to us, even after their babies are born," stated an email sent to people in the community last week.

Nygaard believes the merger and addition of Stephenson will provide much-needed options for parents seeking medical care for their children. In Astoria, Columbia Memorial Hospital provides a lot of the options for pediatric care, she said.

"Which is great," she said, "but I think we're getting to a point in our community where we have more people who need physicians than doctor slots available."

Nygaard is one of a handful of naturopathic doctors practicing in the area — a small number compared to the many available in Portland, she noted.

For Nygaard, the merger with the birth center will mean a chance to spend more time with patients and the ability to take on new patients.

Nygaard, who has had a practice in Astoria for six years and another in Portland for 10 years, said she was beginning to have to choose between providing patient care and running the business



Hailey Hoffman/The Astorian

The Astoria Birth Center opened last summer.

side of things.

"I was having to turn patients away who wanted to see me, just because of time," she said.

The coronavirus pandemic exacerbated the situation. With two young children of her own and school and day care closures, Nygaard had to condense her practice hours and rely more heavily on telemedicine. She was able to take on new babies and children as patients, but had to close her practice to new adult patients for a while.

Now, with birth center taking on administrative responsibilities and the additional options for patients with Stephenson, Nygaard said she is excited to be able to spend more time with patients and see more children.

The birth center is housed

in a building at the base of 14th Street off Marine Drive. Nygaard's practice will remain in its current location nearby on 15th Street and Commercial Street. Stephenson will practice out of extra rooms available at the birth center. Family medical services are set to begin July 1 with Stephenson.

Despite the growth, the birth center is not interested in becoming a hospital, Orton said.

"It was always intended to be a small clinic, a family clinic," she said.

"From the very beginning the questions were: Does this benefit women? Does this benefit the community? And does it benefit families?" she explained. "If the answer to those things is 'yes,' then I'll find a way to do it."

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